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How can I ensure letter grades accurately reflect student performance?

Letter grades are intended only to communicate a student's level of achievement and understanding of Prescribed Learning Outcomes. In practice, however, there are other factors that are sometimes considered in determining them, including a student's behaviour and organizational skills. Students who are not deemed satisfactory in these areas have often had their letter grade lowered, perhaps most significantly by the assigning of a zero mark for a plethora of reasons unrelated to the learning outcomes. In this story, Danielle reflects on the effects of the zero mark and finds alternative ways to improve student accountability while eliminating the zero from her gradebook.

Things to look for

- fairness
- collecting evidence vs. collecting points
- generating a mark

AVOIDING ZEROS

The Story of Danielle

What is the purpose of giving a letter grade? I believe the purpose is to describe how well a student has demonstrated mastery of the outcomes of a course. If this is the purpose, then where do marks of zero fit in a gradebook?

I have been on a journey looking at what zeros do to grades. I have been asking myself: Are zeros fair? Are zeros accurate? Are zeros necessary? What alternatives are there to using zeros?

I have been on this journey since the first time I heard Ken O'Connor speak. He believes zeros are neither fair nor accurate in determining a student's grade. In his book *A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades* (Pearson, 2007), he talks about the effect of zeros. This book made me think about my own practice and I found myself re-evaluating how I handled assignments that were not handed in. In the past, I would typically assign a zero if a student failed to complete or turn in an assignment. In light of the questions around fairness, accuracy and purpose of grading, I needed to re-assess my response to unfinished work.

At the time, I was collecting numerous assignments and averaging the marks out to get a grade, (so giving a zero) didn't seem to me to be a fair way of getting at what students are actually capable of doing. I decided I needed to address this.

One issue about zeros is the immense impact they can have on an overall grade when averaged out with other marks. If you average a group of numbers, and one of them is zero, the mean is very skewed. The zero is an outlier which has a greater effect on the average than any other number. In other words, by virtue of the fact that a zero has such an impact on the overall average of a set of marks, that one assignment holds more weight than others, despite the fact that it isn't even completed! Being that I was, at the time, collecting numerous assignments and averaging the marks out to get a grade, it didn't seem to me to be a fair way of getting at what students are actually capable of doing. I decided I needed to address this.

There were a few choices available: The first option I tried was to give a mark other than zero. I tried assigning a failing mark which did not skew the results as much; for example, a student could be given a 4/10 instead of 0/10. This helped when I needed to generate a percent, rather than just a letter grade. Now that I only need letter grades as a middle school teacher, this option didn't seem to be the ideal.

I then had a realization: I don't have to have a huge list of tasks to generate a grade. In fact, the more reading I did, the more I believed that only summative assessments should be included in a grade. If a task was not handed in, a zero became unnecessary as long as I had evidence of the student's understanding from other tasks. It became quickly obvious that a zero was not an accurate representation of what a student did or didn't know.

I have been using this alternative more often. If a grade is truly to show what a student knows, then I find I can get a letter grade from one or two pieces of assessment for each unit or major outcome. (This could naturally lead to a portfolio style of generating a grade, but I haven't gone there yet.)

Another option I've been trying is to give an "incomplete" mark until the task is complete. I have used this option when I have no other information on an outcome to evaluate the student's understanding, or if my tests and assignments don't quite cover the same outcomes. An incomplete forces the student to complete the tasks before they get a grade. I found when I used zeros, students tended to accept the zero, and it indirectly gave the impression that outcomes were optional (i.e., if you want a zero, just don't do the work). I use incompletes only for summative tasks, not for practice work or learning activities as these aren't included in the letter grade anyway.

In exploring different ways to avoid zeros in my gradebook, I've come to a few realizations. First, grading shouldn't be intended to punish. Giving a zero to a student as punishment for not doing the work isn't improving work habits, nor is it ensuring that the student has learned what they need to learn. Second, there needs to be some alternative for not giving a zero, in order to avoid the problem of marks being inflated,

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or to avoid having students simply not turn work in. At the end of the day, it always comes back to the purpose of grading as an accurate tool to describe what a student is able to do in relation to the outcomes of a course.

One struggle I have is what happens in June if students still have not demonstrated understanding of some of the required outcomes. Often the final exam will cover the outcomes missed, so I can use this as evidence and generate an accurate letter grade. I am working on changing my gradebook to reflect outcomes, not tasks, so missing a particular task doesn't matter so much. In fact, the zero mark then becomes irrelevant. I look at how many outcomes they have demonstrated to generate a letter grade. My next steps may be to use portfolios for students to show their best understanding of each outcome.

Further Discussion

1. The title of this story is “Avoiding Zeros.” It seems like Danielle starts out trying to avoid zeros, but then shifts to working *towards* something. How would you describe her intentions?
2. Danielle mentions a number of different options for what to do about incomplete work. Which ones seem best to you? What other options might you suggest?
3. After all the discussion about zeros, Danielle makes a final comment that “zero becomes irrelevant” when she changes her gradebook to reflect learning outcomes instead of task types. Does this view grow naturally from the interventions she has already tried, or is it a different perspective altogether?
4. Danielle’s story fits into a larger discussion about how marks are a major motivator for students, as the purpose of assigning a zero in the past was to punish student behaviour by lowering their marks. In your classes, do you expect that removing the possibility of a zero mark would shift students’ motivation away from getting good marks to something else, or would it simply reduce their motivation entirely?

