

1

GRADING

Imagine you're a student on the first day of class. In reviewing the class norms and expectations, your teacher addresses the issue of bathroom breaks as follows:

Although we all know you should use the bathroom during your break so that you don't interrupt my teaching or your learning, you will each receive five tokens that you can use throughout the semester whenever "nature calls" during class. Once you have exhausted your five tokens, you will be deducted 1 percent of your grade at the end of the course for each additional time that you use the bathroom during class. Because I believe in fairness, the converse will be true as well: for every token you have left over at the end of the course, I will add 1 percent to your final grade.

I hope that very few educators would agree that bathroom visits should be tied to measures of learning outcomes! An online search for "frequent urination" should convince even the most steadfast supporter of

this token system that someone who needs to use the bathroom frequently is probably not doing so by choice. Pregnancy, bladder infection, stress, diabetes, and a host of other conditions can cause someone to have to urinate frequently.

To what extent do members of the educational community introduce nonacademic variables into the grading of student learning? How many of these variables lie outside of students' direct control? These two questions will help guide the conversation in this chapter.

Behaviors Versus Academics

Let's examine some hypothetical scenarios that involve missing student assignments. For each scenario, let's assume we know the intricate details of each student's experience and ability.

Scenario 1: Tim is walking to school with a completed science assignment safely secured in his backpack when a thief suddenly accosts him and forces him to surrender his backpack. Is the fact that Tim arrives at school without his homework a measure of his learning or ability? Clearly, the answer is no. If any measure were to be applied here, it would be of his bad luck or poor choice of school route.

Scenario 2: Sally chooses not to bother even starting her science assignment, though she's a very capable student and would likely do well on it. In this instance, is the absence of an assignment a measure of learning or ability? Again, the answer would be no: because Sally did not complete it, her teacher can't measure its merit. If any measure were to be applied here, it would be of her stubbornness or poor decision making.

Scenario 3: Lee is new to his school, having moved into town with his family a few months ago. He struggles with his English speaking and writing skills. He has no friends at school and remains very quiet in class, sitting by himself and seldom asking for help. Though he misses the due date for his science assignment, his teacher can't determine

whether or not he is able to complete it because he is so quiet. The fact is that Lee, uncertain of his ability to complete the assignment, never even starts it. His weak English skills make it hard for him to convey what little understanding he has on the subject. Is Lee's lack of work a measure of learning or ability? Although his choice not even to try completing the assignment is a behavioral decision, it is partly due to a lack of linguistic confidence and a fear of failure. An academic measure might be applied in this case, but determining it would be very difficult.

Scenario 4: Clark tries to complete his science assignment but gives up in frustration. He crumples it up and throws it in the garbage. When his mom demands that he take the assignment out of the trash and complete it, Clark dumps her coffee on it, slams the front door, and goes off to hang out with his buddies at the skate park. Although this scenario is the closest to allowing for a measure of academic ability, there is no evidence available of Clark's level of understanding, and it is unlikely that anyone is willing to sift through the city landfill to find it.

I decided a few years ago that I would only measure hard evidence of the extent to which students understood and could meet established learning goals. To be clear, the behaviors my students exhibit in class and throughout the school are very important to me. As educators, we must preserve and guard our role in forming and encouraging positive behaviors among young people. That said, I have chosen to make every attempt to avoid factoring student behaviors into my grading unless I am explicitly asked to do so by prescribed learning outcomes. Fairly applied, this approach must go both ways: if we decide not to penalize students for negative behaviors, then conversely we should not inflate grades on account of positive ones.

Ultimately, behaviors will factor into grading whether or not we explicitly attempt to measure them. Students who show up to class on time, arrive with the necessary materials, attempt to complete their homework, and treat others nicely will likely benefit

academically—just as students who make poor decisions will suffer academically. If teachers make every effort to collect evidence of learning and measure this alone, behaviors will result in their logical consequences. As my friend and colleague Chris Terris put it, “I care far more about my son’s behavior indicators than I do about his academic grade; if he is trying hard, paying attention, and doing what he is supposed to, his grade will fall where it belongs.”

“Lates” and Zeros

When addressing punitive grading measures in this chapter, I will be speaking mainly of *deductions for late assignments* (“lates”) and *zeros*. Any discussion of zeros must include a distinction between a 4-point scale and 100-point scale. Doug Reeves (2010) explains the difference very well:

On a four-point scale, where “A” = “4,” “B” = “3,” and so on, the zero is accurate, because the difference between the “A,” “B,” “C,” “D,” and “F” are all equal—one point. But assigning a zero on a 100-point scale is a math error; it implies a 60-point difference between the “D” and “F,” while the other differences are typically about 10 points. It makes missing a single assignment the “academic death penalty.” It’s not just unfair—it is not mathematically accurate. (p. 78)

The majority of the zeros I see getting handed out are on a 100-point scale. Both lates and zeros are attempts to affect behavior by statistically incorporating punitive measures into the grading scheme.

Here are some examples of how lates and zeros are typically used in grading decisions:

- 10 percent of the grade is deducted per day after the assignment’s due date.
- A 50 percent deduction is applied to the assignment following an arbitrary number of days beyond the original due date.

- After the due date, the assignment is graded on a pass/fail basis; if awarded a “pass,” 50 percent of the grade is still deducted.
- If the assignment is not handed in by the due date, it receives an automatic zero.

Other grading schemes incorporate penalties in less obvious ways. Here are a few such examples I have encountered:

- A teacher gives a quiz as soon as class begins, and anyone who arrives late is not allowed to take the quiz. Any student who does not take the quiz is given a zero. As a result, students who arrive late to class receive a grade based entirely on their lack of punctuality on a quiz designed to measure learning.
- The top aggregate score a student can have on a summative unit test is reduced based on the number of missing assignments or homework tasks during that unit—so, for example, if Sally only completes 80 percent of the homework assignments, the maximum score she can receive on the unit test is 80 percent.
- Missed tests are given a zero unless students agree to attend a mandatory tutorial session. The session is offered at 6 p.m. on Friday evenings and must be booked via written application two weeks in advance. The make-up test is administered one week after the tutorial—also at 6 p.m. on Friday. Because of the rigidity and inconvenience of this “tutorial support,” very few students go through with it.

The Four Conditions for Punitive Action

Penalties should be just, reasonable, and linked as closely as possible to the offense if the threat of their enactment is to effectively change behaviors. Here’s an example. As a young car driver, I received a lot of speeding tickets. Paying over \$1,200 in fines, though inconvenient, did little to curb my speeding habit. What eventually compelled me to lay off the accelerator was a meeting I had at the government-licensing

branch. "One more ticket in the next 365 days, Mr. Dueck, and you will have your license suspended for one year," proclaimed the humorless adjudicator. That is all it took for me to go from being pulled over four times a year to getting pulled over once every four years. The threat of losing my license for a year worked well to modify my behavior because it met the CARE guidelines mentioned in the introduction to this book:

- **Care:** The prospect of not being allowed to drive my car for a year terrified me. To say I that cared would be a massive understatement.
- **Aims:** The government wants safer roads and fewer emergency calls. Speeding drivers should pay for the costs that they incur.
- **Reduction:** Since that meeting in 1994, I have had three speeding infractions and I have never been summoned for another licensing meeting.
- **Empowerment:** I had power over my own speeding and it was up to me to slow down. Only I could improve my time management, leave earlier for important events, and turn on the cruise control feature.

Where the threat of losing my driver's license met the CARE guidelines for punitive action, behavior-based grading does not. Here is why.

Care

Many students do not appear to care about grading consequences. Consider the following conversation I had with a frustrated educator who used late penalties:

Teacher: I use late penalties of 10 to 20 percent reductions and I will tell you why: I am tired of working harder than my students. I put in the effort, the time at lunch or after school, and they don't.

Me: I have felt the same frustration. Do most of these students seem to care about a 10 or 20 percent deduction to their grades?

Teacher: (Pause.) No, and that is a huge frustration as well. I keep applying the same penalty to the same students.

Some students care about grading penalties and others don't. Those who are very concerned about getting into a good college might work hard to avoid grading penalties, whereas others might prefer to suffer the penalties than to actually complete their assignments. Students who ask questions like "If I don't hand in my work, what is my grade going to be?" or "If I get a zero on this assignment, am I still passing?" are probably debating whether or not to consider the assignment optional. When students opt to ignore assignments, penalties may serve to make teachers feel as though they've addressed the issue, but they do not increase student accountability or responsibility. Academic threats have lost their potency for students who are already disillusioned with their school experience and thus inclined to think, "If I'm already failing, why should I care about another zero?" Many students confront issues that loom much larger than late or missing assignments.

For many years I handed out penalties for late assignments like they were candy. It took me too long to recognize that school is like society at large: if we are building more prisons, something isn't working.

Aims

Punitive grading does not complement my overall aim to measure learning outcomes, increase student confidence, and provide an environment of fairness and equity. My job requires me to measure evidence of learning or capacity against a set of standards. If my grades reflect behavioral penalties, then they do not relate directly to learning outcomes. Furthermore, applying lates and zeros does not inspire academic confidence in my students, some of whom may be very capable academically but struggling with behavior patterns. And despite popular belief, punitive grades diminish fairness and equity in the classroom: the moment I apply grading consequences to factors outside my

classroom, some students will be penalized more than others for factors that are not in their control.

Reduction

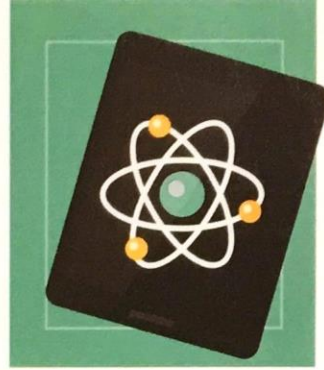
Punitive grading may not result in a reduction of the negative behavior. Consider, for example, that an estimated 20 percent of people are chronic procrastinators (Marano, 2003). Students in this cohort who have trouble meeting deadlines and who struggle with organization will undoubtedly feel frustrated and discouraged by lates and zeros. (I can speak from experience as someone who struggles with punctuality and due dates—traits directly linked to my speeding violations.)

Many systems in our society account for the fact that humans will predictably miss deadlines. Airlines appear to set the boarding time for the flight further in advance than is actually required; the state of Iowa has a 60-day grace period for those who forget to renew their driver's licenses on or before their birthdays. Those who think teachers are all punctual and time-conscious might be disappointed at the reality that many teachers struggle with due dates. In every school in which I've worked, a certain percentage of teachers tended to arrive late for staff meetings. I do not know if they were penalized for this, and I am not suggesting that they should have been; for all I know, these teachers were late because they were helping students or giving injured athletes first aid.

Empowerment

Students being penalized must have power over the causal variables. Of the four conditions that must be satisfied in order for me to apply a penalty, this is arguably the most powerful. As Ross Greene (2009) puts it, we have to believe that "if a kid could do well, he would do well" (p. 49). Many of the factors that affect students' abilities to succeed in school lie outside of their control. Here are some examples:

Poverty. Around 22 percent of students in the United States live in poverty (Felling, 2013; National Poverty Center, 2013). Many



GRADING

SMARTER

NOT HARDER

Assessment Strategies
That Motivate Kids
and Help Them Learn

MYRON DUECK

Foreword by Ken O'Connor

