

HOW TO HELP STUDENTS LEARN THROUGH ASSESSMENT

It all began with three students. Mary* struggled to keep up with her financial obligations. Although she worked long hours, she found time for a variety of activities, and enjoyed the physical activities organized by the college. It appeared that she had everything a late adolescent desired. However, one day she confided that she lived in fear because she was not learning all she needed to know and because her grades were very low. She was a slow reader who seldom completed her quizzes or exams, and often handed in her assignments unfinished. She attributed this to her long hours of work and the inflexibility of the assignment schedules.

Handsome and blessed with physical skills, Paul* was a favorite among his peers. His grades, too, were very low, and he worried that he would have to withdraw from school. Although his IQ scores were above average, interviews with some of his teachers and the results of some diagnostic tests showed that he had learning problems related to mild dyslexia.

Roger* was disabled. He and his family preferred that he be included in the regular classroom, although a tutor had been supplied for him. Roger wrote very slowly, and his handwriting was difficult to read. He too had difficulty completing his assignments.

How could I help these students succeed?

After teaching assessment techniques for many years, I now had to devise a strategy that would be applicable to all, but that would encourage students who needed help. Commonly, teachers use assessment results to improve their teaching techniques. This indirectly helps the learning process, while giving a basis for assigning grades. Neverthe-

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less, assessment should do more than show the teacher's success as a strategist and provide a platform for assigning grades. Students may acquire some general knowledge from teaching strategies, but area-specific knowledge is not gained from this source alone. Personal effort, backed by internal and external motivation, is indispensable. Assessment's main purpose should be to improve learning and increase knowledge.

I decided to keep the assessment procedures that many teachers use—portfolios, peer evaluations, etc.—while adapting them to motivate all students, including those with special needs.

The strategies I chose were intended to improve learning and convince each student that he or she could succeed. This approach assumes that every student can learn and develop intellectually. It views grades not an end but as the means to an end—improving the learning experience. It recognizes that all learners are different, and seeks to include each individual in classroom activities. It endeavors to be fair to every student.

This is not an “easy grading” strategy. The students must invest effort, time, and perseverance to fight for every

available point. But it gives hope to everyone because it shows that success is attainable.

My technique utilizes three procedures relating to the course requirements that most affect students' grades: quizzes, assignments, and exams. Students are given the opportunity to do the following: (1) “recuperate” a quiz grade lower than 70 percent; (2) redo assignments until they get a score of 100 percent; and (3) improve their exam grades a few percentage points by participating in supervised activities. These procedures are easy to implement:

Quizzes

1. Quizzes are administered every day, right after prayer is offered.

2. No quizzes are administered outside of classtime, and latecomers are not allowed to take the quiz.

3. Quiz grades lower than 70 percent can be “recuperated” by the student.

Recuperation involves the writing of a paragraph of appropriate length and content about each item missed in the quiz.

4. Since everyone has an occasional bad day, the lowest one of every 10 quizzes is not averaged into the grade.

5. Recuperation can occur only during the first week after quizzes are returned to the students and can raise the grade to 70 percent. (It would be unfair to the students who got above 70 percent to raise it higher.)

Assignments

1. All assignments are given to reinforce student learning and to help cement information in memory. No assignment is given over material the teacher has not presented in class.

2. Getting a poor grade on an assignment does not mean that hope is lost. For one week after

*The students' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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the assignment is returned to the student, under the teacher's direction, he or she can redo the work as often as necessary until he or she attains a perfect score. After one week, the grade cannot be changed.

Exams

Exams are usually administered for grading purposes, not to enhance learning. However, each exam can be made into a learning experience.

Any student who does not get a perfect score in the exam may improve his or her grade up to a certain percent by completing an assignment on the content covered by the exam. The assignment includes all types of test items (alternative, short-answer and completion, matching, multiple-choice, interpretive, and essays). Since this requires extensive research, students with high scores do not often take up the challenge. Those with low scores readily seize the oppor-

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tunity to improve their grades and to learn what they failed to master.

As with all strategies, there are advantages, disadvantages, and guidelines to consider.

Advantages

1. The students must work for their grades; they get nothing free.
2. Students become internally motivated as they achieve mastery of the

subject matter and their grades begin to improve.

3. School work is no longer seen as a burden, but rather, a route for success.

4. Students' grades improve and their fears diminish.

5. Students stop comparing themselves with others in class.

6. Teachers see evidence that students are learning, and their relationships with students are enhanced.

7. The teacher becomes a true facilitator of learning, a companion in the journey toward success.

Disadvantages

1. It takes extra time to check on recuperation of quiz grades and to re-correct assignments.

2. The teacher has to keep tabs on student grades and engage in follow-up activities.

3. Preparing post-exam assignments may require many hours of work.

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Some Guidelines and Precautions

1. Superficial work is unacceptable.
2. The one-week deadline to recuperate grades or redo assignments is non-negotiable.

3. Grades should be registered in pencil and changed to ink only when the permanent grade is recorded.

4. No cooperative work should be allowed unless the original assignment was to be completed cooperatively.

Applying this approach to assessment had positive results for the three students. Mary had to readjust her program to dedicate more time to her learning. She did this willingly when she realized that she could improve her grades. Roger's marks went up when he was allowed to spend more time with his assignments and exams. Paul's performance improved so much that soon he did not have to recuperate or redo assignments. For all three, learning became a pleasant challenge as the fear of failure receded.

Since then, I have used this strategy

in all of my undergraduate and graduate courses. Students' evaluations of the procedure are very positive. Although some still fail in my classes, they recognize that the responsibility for the failure is theirs alone. I have few arguments with students about grades, feelings of guilt, animosity, or failure. Students know that the marks they receive reflect their efforts, not the teacher's bias or preferences. Many have told me that they now perceive me as a fellow traveler.

Mary, Paul, and Roger have graduated and all are doing well in their professional lives. ✍

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