Grading for Success

To truly measure achievement, grading practices should grow from a philosophy of teaching and learning that respects student differences and reflects individual growth.

Carol Ann Tomlinson

Teachers who want to help all students succeed in academically diverse classrooms often tell me, "I know I'm losing students when I teach as though they were all alike. I want to learn to be a more flexible teacher so that I can reach more of them. But even if I could figure out how to do that, how would I *grade* them?"

I find it difficult to answer this complex question because the questioner often wants a short answer, a ready solution. I don't know how to supply the quick fix. To me, grading grows from a philosophy of teaching and learning. It reflects what a teacher believes about learning.

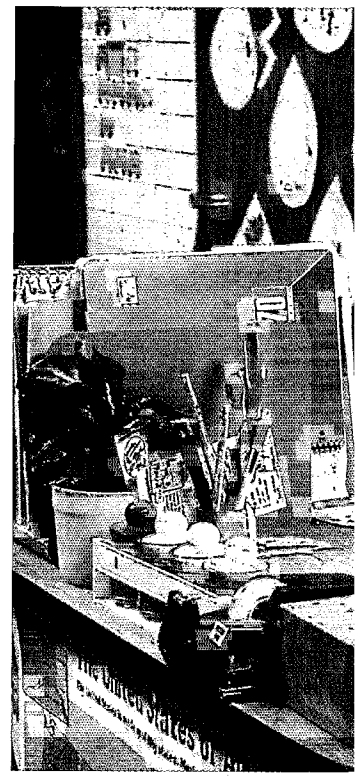
Whom Do I Teach?

To start thinking about grading, let's look at the classroom through the students' eyes. Philip, Xavier, and Anda sit among 30 peers. They are individuals, but they also are representative of other students.

Philip has some significant learning problems. Reading is an uphill climb; sitting still is a battle. Philip knows that some of his classmates struggle, too, but he still feels different and out of place. Too much print makes too little sense, and there is too much sitting, facing front, and listening.

Xavier speaks little English. He listens with a furious concentration, especially early in the day. Sometimes he seizes on a word or phrase, separating it from the long stream of speech. He silently repeats the words, but they don't sound the same as when the speaker said them. Sometimes Xavier feels winded from his efforts to listen.

Anda learns fast and remembers well. She wants to ask many questions in class about what she reads and about what the book doesn't say. The questions seem to puzzle her classmates, and the teacher seems more on stride when Anda is quiet, so Anda mostly entertains her questions on her own. The days are long.



Their names and needs may vary, but in today's classrooms, I am likely to teach students akin to Philip, Xavier, and Anda. To teach them well, I need to see school through their eyes.

How Do I Teach?

If I reflect on Philip, Xavier, and Anda, my next question is not "How do I *grade* them," but rather "How do I *teach* them?" There are many answers to that question. The short answer is "By figuring out where they are in knowledge, understanding, and skill and moving them on from there." This seems easy, but it requires that I know the landscape of the curriculum; figure out what each student understands and does not understand about a particular topic, skill, or domain; and design focused and powerful learning experiences to guide each student through the next learning stage.

If I consistently give any of the students work that is too difficult, they succumb to a frustration born of hopelessness. If I consistently give any of them work that is too easy, they march in place. I have to work steadily to gain a sense of the evolving readiness of each student and to provide escalators of learning opportunity to ensure their growth.

I also need to connect what I teach to what students care about through their experiences or personal inclinations. Interest lures students to learning. I have to understand student interest and build on it, even as I invite students to discover new interests.

In addition, I must develop learning opportunities that students can approach in varied ways. Students learn differently, so I need to consider that one student will work best alone and another will work best with a partner, that one student may fare best with concrete, hands-on learning and another may be drawn to abstract, minds-on learning. I strive to offer enough routes to knowledge, understanding, and skills-acquisition that each student can find his or her way to reach learning goals. When it is time to formally assess student learning, I will need to provide various ways for students to express what they have learned.

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What we know of how people learn leaves little room for debate about whether these approaches make sense. They do. Sole reliance on generic teaching and assessing often falls short of what students can achieve through personalized teaching. *Who* I teach should shape *how* I teach because who the students are shapes how they learn. I can't successfully teach Philip, Xavier, and Anda as though they are identical to one another or to their classmates.

Where Do I Teach?

If I am going to teach students in ways that acknowledge both their singularities and their commonalities, I must establish a classroom environment that strengthens both the group and its individual members. I must build a sense of community, establish purpose, and ensure safety.

Community evolves through planning and shared experience. Every student must enter the room every day feeling that every individual is valued and that mutual respect is not negotiable. Community is based on the belief that every individual has something important to contribute to the group.

Our purpose in the classroom will stem from my ability to invite students to journey together with a shared purpose. From day one, I need to make clear and reinforce that we work hard in this classroom so that every person can reach his or her potential. Clear goals guide our work. Students' goals may differ at times because each learning journey differs, but the intent is the same. Each student should be involved, with the teacher's help and the support of peers, in trying to learn as much and at as high a degree of quality as personally possible. Each student must accept responsibility for working hard, reaching for excellence, and seeking assistance when needed.

Each student must also take responsibility for classroom operations that help them and their peers succeed. For example, they need to learn how to use their time well, to set and monitor learning goals, and to assist with distributing supplies and arranging the room for work. They need to learn to listen, to help one another, and to participate in solving classroom problems. As the teacher, I lead this endeavor and provide scaffolding and partnership for each student.

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To learn, students must feel safe. Aiming for excellence means that students will sometimes "fail." I teach each student that failure is not a catalyst for punishment, but rather, it is a way to find out how to improve. Students must know that their teacher teaches for success.

Students must also believe that they can be themselves and that they can learn at their own pace, as long as they are working their hardest. Give students a demanding, yet achievable, dream and provide them with road maps and partners for reaching that goal. Our knowledge of what compels students to persist in the face of difficulty clearly suggests that we will lose Philip, Xavier, and Anda in an environment lacking in community, purpose, and safety.

To commend learning to these three students and their peers, I must know the sequence of powerful understandings and skills in a subject, figure out where my students are in that sequence, and craft learning opportunities and assessments to match students' needs. Like the students, I sometimes fall short of my goals. Those aspirations, nevertheless, guide my teaching and give it coherence.

Given that sense of what it means to teach academically diverse learners well, I now have a sense of how to grade them.

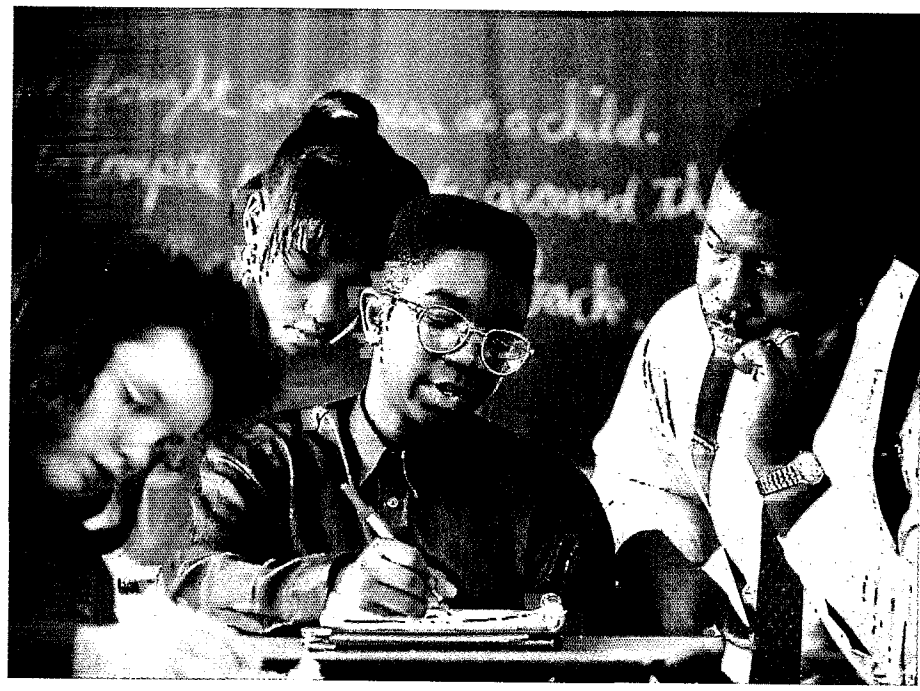
Grading and Student Success

Grading, as we typically practice it, is more about charting circumstances of student birth and experience than it is about documenting growth. It is more about control than empowerment. Under such a system, Philip receives quarterly reminders that he does not measure up. Xavier is deemed a failure because he cannot understand the language in which he is taught. Anda learns that excellence requires little effort or intellectual risk. How many days, semesters, or years should we expect Philip and Xavier to persevere when substantial academic growth only converts to a *D* or an *F*? Why should we expect Anda to embrace hard work when she earns an *A* without serious effort? My beliefs about teaching must extend to grading, which is, after all, a communication tool that should serve learning.

So where does a philosophy of responsive teaching take me when it's time to grade Philip, Xavier, and Anda? What actions do I take so that grading encourages these learners and their peers? I've reached several conclusions:

■ I need to grade for success in the same way that I teach and assess for success. That doesn't mean students can't be unsuccessful. It means their degree of success must reflect the degree of their own growth.

■ If much of the time I give a student work appropriate for his or her current needs, I must then grade the student's work on the basis of clearly delineated criteria for quality work on that task. It makes little sense to assign an appropriately challenging task and then grade a student on something else. So when it's feasible, I align activities, homework, products, and other assessments with student need. When I grade those assignments, I note in my grade book the differentiated assignment and the student grade on that assignment. When I give all students the same task (for diagnostic purposes, for purposes of benchmarking student standing relative to common goals, or because I simply could not find the time and energy to differentiate the work), I'll make a note in my grade book and enter the more normative grade.



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■ I need to give students consistent, meaningful feedback that clarifies for them—and for me—present successes and next learning steps. Using such methods as student self-assessments based on pre-established criteria, teacher-student conferences about specific work, mutual goal setting, and written teacher comments with student responses may be more helpful than assigning a letter or number grade.

■ I need to look for growth patterns over time when I assign report card grades. If I expect my students to work consistently at tasks that are a little too difficult for them, I must also know that they will occasionally hit snags. If a few snags are followed by a solid success, I should weigh the impact on future learning of allowing the snags to obliterate the success.

■ On report cards, I need to find a way to show individual growth and relative standing to students and parents. I can accomplish this by working with colleagues to develop report cards that use checklists of escalating competencies that allow me to report specific progress, combined with notations of where students of a similar age generally perform on those checklists.

Or colleagues and I can work to develop report cards that note, for example, that an *A* means excellent growth, a *B* means very good growth, a *C* means some growth, a *D* means little growth, and an *F* means no observable growth—coupled with a notation that a *1* means the student is working above grade level in the subject, a *2* means the student is working at grade level in the

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subject, and a *3* means the student is working below grade level in the subject. A student might then, for example, earn an *A1* or a *B2* in reading or science, indicating both the student's personal growth and the student's standing relative to peers or curriculum benchmarks.

I can also accomplish the same end by attaching a note to the report card or conducting parent-student conferences. Doing so allows me to explain that the student's grade takes into account both differentiated and common tasks, to show how the grade reflects both, and to interpret what the grade means for the particular student's learning.

Individual Success

When we compare students like Philip and Xavier with other students, we may be tempted to see them as failures. Will they be more likely to persist and succeed as learners if we continually ask them to work on standardized tasks that ignore their needs and their learning preferences or if we provide learning opportunities that match their needs? If we believe the former, then standardized grading seems logical. If we accept the latter, then grades must, at least in part, reflect the boys' growth.

When we compare Anda with other students, we say she is successful. Will she be more likely to embrace the challenge that accompanies genuine learning if we continually give her unchallenging work or if we offer her tasks that help her learn to persist in intellectual struggles?

Life gets the most out of us—and we out of it—when it asks us to be the best we can be, rather than what someone else can be. Can grading be a part of efforts to help all students succeed? Absolutely, when it grows from a philosophy of teaching for maximum individual growth. ■

Carol Ann Tomlinson is Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903; cat3y@virginia.edu. She is coauthor with Susan Demirsky Allan of *Leadership for Differentiating Schools and Classrooms* (ASCD, 2000).

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