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# GRADING

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# SMARTER

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# NOT HARDER

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**Assessment Strategies That Motivate  
Kids and Help Them Learn**

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**ASCD<sup>®</sup>**



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*Benefits of the Alternative Response:*

- The response reflects a supportive classroom environment where grading is based strictly according to learning outcomes.
- The behavioral infraction (wasting time in class) is met with a behavioral consequence (missing free time at lunch). Because Simon can see the connection between wasting class time and losing free time, he is liable to be more accountable in the future.
- Simon is encouraged by his penalty-free grade and realizes the connection between effort and reward.

**Example 3: Student Delivers Perfect Project Two Days Late and Parent Lobbies for No Grading Penalty**

*Background:* During an 8th grade science unit on planets, Serena delivers an exceptional clay project displaying the size and color of the planets. Unfortunately, she hands in her project two days late, along with a note from her mother highlighting some medical concerns in the family that contributed to the tardiness and requesting that the teacher call her so she can explain the details. Serena's teacher is concerned, as he knows her to be not only a perfectionist, but also generally punctual. He recalls that a similar situation arose with one of her projects a month earlier. Despite the note from Serena's mother, the teacher feels that it would not be fair to the other students if he were to give her a high score on the project. As he sees it, Serena appears to have benefitted from extra time to complete it.

*Traditional Response:* The teacher applies a penalty to Serena's project of 10 percent off per day late, leading to an increasingly uncomfortable series of phone calls with Serena's irate mother and, eventually, the principal's involvement. In the end, the teacher is forced to rescind the late penalty and give Serena a perfect score. Around the time that the situation is resolved, another project is due that Serena will once again not hand in on time.

tracking sheet allows students to indicate whether or not they intend to retest any portion of the test and to supply information about their test-preparation and goal-setting skills. It also helps students create a graphic representation of their strengths and weaknesses in just a few minutes, thus actively involving them in the assessment process. After all the tracking sheets are completed and handed in, review them. Encourage students who request a retest to add different study routines to their sheets.

The data on your students' tracking sheets can help to inform conversations with them about their study habits. In some cases, it will be obvious to you when students need to better prepare for tests. When appropriate, you can even make the implementation of effective study routines a prerequisite for taking a retest. It is important to frame such prerequisites as supports for, rather than barriers to, retesting. Let your students know that they can expect a similar outcome on their retests if they don't make an effort to prepare effectively.

**STEP 3: Help struggling learners to close the gap.** Closely monitor the retesting decisions of your struggling learners. Such students will often choose to retest only one section of a test, and reluctantly at that. Putting in the effort to have struggling learners succeed on retests can fundamentally change their future learning assessment trajectory.

**STEP 4: Track the improvement.** You can track retesting data using a computer-based grading program. Consider the following example. The student in question—let's call him Bill—decided to retest the second and third sections of the Great Depression test. On the original test, he received a 1 out of 4 and a 1 out of 5, respectively, on those sections; on his retest, he improved by 2 points on the second section and 3 points on the third. Here is the breakdown of Bill's scores on both tests, with his retest scores in parentheses next to the scores from the original test:

4. Subdividing tests by topic allows students to experience micro-successes in certain areas and enjoy grades usually reserved for “the smart kids.” This allows students with low self-esteem to develop what Dweck (2006) refers to as a growth mind-set. The belief that improvement—a pillar of the growth mind-set—is possible is critical if students are to try again in the face of failure.

**6. Issues unrelated to content knowledge can be identified.** It’s possible for students to improve on one section of a retest without having revised their study habits. Although this could be the result of a sudden epiphany, other factors are more likely. For example, it could be that the improvement is due to changes in the question format between the original test and the retest. Research shows that students with reading difficulties struggle with multiple-choice questions (Cassels & Johnstone, 1984). Many such learners are quick to embrace diagram questions but shy away from questions that involve written responses. This being the case, I have sought to provide a balanced selection of question formats on tests to address different learning styles. I have adjusted many questions to read as follows: “Using sentences or a combination of drawing and written descriptions, indicate . . .”

Improvements on retests could also be due to social-emotional factors. We know that many of our students arrive at school each day carrying the incredible weight of challenges related to poverty, for instance, which can greatly affect their ability

#### PERSONAL STORY CONTINUED

“My mom and I are used to seeing 42 percent,” he said, “but never in my life has my name been on a sheet of paper with 100 percent on it.”

Before I could respond, he continued: “This would make a difference for me at home.” Raymond’s last comment hit me like a ton of bricks. Not wanting to pry, I didn’t ask him how the tracking sheet would make a difference for him at home.

In the weeks following the test, Raymond’s behavior changed to such an extent that it shocked his learning-assistance teacher, Cindy Postlethwaite. One afternoon, she blasted into my room asking what the heck had happened to Raymond—not only had he dramatically improved his support-block attendance, but he was also completing his homework and studying diligently for the next unit test. Most perplexing of all, he was gloating to anyone who would listen that he’d “scored 100 percent in social studies.” As his learning-assistance teacher put it, “When you work with at-risk students, it is a nice change to have to rein in overconfidence!”

For the record, Raymond never scored lower than 55 percent on any of his unit tests for the remainder of the year. His use of better study skills, focused revision, and retesting resulted in a final course standing of 62 percent, and he passed the standardized provincial exam at the end of the year.

**Figure 5.3**  
**World War I Test Feedback Sheet**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Did you feel prepared for yesterday's test?  yes  no

2. Did you study outside of class time for yesterday's test?  yes  no

How long? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What was your overall feeling during the test yesterday?

4. Are there parts or sections where you felt more confident than others?  yes  no

Explain:

5. Did it make a difference to you knowing that you could rewrite sections where you did not do so well?  yes  no

Explain:

6. Rank the following test formats from your most enjoyable (1) to least enjoyable (5):

\_\_\_\_\_ multiple choice

Explain your reasons for your ranking:

\_\_\_\_\_ written

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ diagram/drawing

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ spoken/oral

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ essay/paragraph

\_\_\_\_\_

7. If you were given a chance to show your knowledge and understanding in a different way (a project, video, game, test of your own design, etc.), would you prefer that?  yes  no

Explain:

The Edmodo system ([www.edmodo.com](http://www.edmodo.com)) is more specifically geared to education. It allows teachers to design online quizzes in multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank formats and automatically grades students' results as soon as they are finished.

Here are some reasons for including online document management systems in your classroom:

**1. Immediate feedback guides instruction.** Feedback using these systems is prompt and accurate, allowing teachers to adapt follow-up activities accordingly. If it is obvious from a glance at a data-results pie chart that most students are on the right track, teachers can feel free to move on to covering other elements of the content.

**2. Systems facilitate formative assessment.** Online assessments using document management systems can clearly measure how well students know the selected material.

**3. Handheld devices allow for instantaneous responses.** Many handheld wireless products, known commonly as responders, are available for students to use for individually responding to questions. And with an increasing number of students owning smartphones, schools will soon reap the budgetary benefits of the BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) era.

## Conclusion

Most people would agree that exploration, creativity, and invention are effective avenues to authentic learning experiences. Yet teachers very often don't feel comfortable venturing into the realm of creativity unless they feel that they can accurately assess the degree of creativity on display. If engagement is the key to unlocking the learning potential of students, then projects that allow students to blend their personal interests with prescribed learning outcomes should be encouraged. In my own case, I quickly realized that I only needed to measure the learning outcomes of assignments, regardless of the creativity