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All Students Can Learn

“Will this count toward my final mark?” an anxious student wants to know. Most students start school wanting to learn, but common educational practices, especially conventional marking, conspire to change students’ attitudes as they go through school. By their later primary school years, most students talk about marks more than they talk about learning, and this preoccupation continues through secondary school and beyond. As students progress through school, their dissatisfaction with and cynicism about marks increases, and their belief in the fairness of the marks they receive declines (Evans & Engelberg, 1988). How did it come to this? What have we done?

The Foundation

The premise of this book is the implicit promise or commitment teachers make to their students: *in my class, in this school, all students can learn*. Students won’t all learn the same things at the same level of proficiency or in the same amount of time, but if students are in school, they are there to learn *something*. It doesn’t take much of a leap to get to the implied questions: So, did they learn? What did they learn, and how well?

Marks are imperfect, shorthand answers to these questions. Assignment results are summaries of student performance on specific pieces of work. School reports are summaries of student performance over sets of work. These sets of work are usually intended to reflect learning goals derived from state and national standards. This book will show how to produce marks – both for single assignments and for school reports – that effectively communicate students’ achievement of these learning goals.

Of course, marks are not the only answers to these questions. Conferences with students and parents, narrative reports and other communication methods can supplement them. Given the number of students in the education system, however, some sort of efficient summary mark has seemed necessary, at least since the advent of the common school (S.G.B., 1840/1992). In almost every school system today, assigning marks is part of a teacher’s job. So if you have to do it, you might as well do it well!

Two big ideas follow from this foundation. These ideas should undergird your assessment decisions. School and system assessment policies should be

consistent with them. They are the principles on which all the recommendations in this book are based.

1. Marks should reflect student achievement of intended learning outcomes.
2. Marking policies should support and motivate student effort and learning.

Principle 1 addresses the implicit question “What did students learn (on this assignment or during this reporting period)?” Principle 2 addresses the larger question of how to create the kind of atmosphere that supports learning. Marking policies that are intended to elicit student compliance are not conducive to the active pursuit of learning.

The current standards-based climate forces these issues for us. Perhaps you, too, feel the pressure that other educators have reported from national proficiency tests. On the face of it, it seems like the pressure of external tests would also ramp up the pressure for traditional scoring and marking practices in the classroom. Paradoxically, though, we can actually use a focus on standards to our advantage. Standards describe the objects of students’ achievement – what they are to learn – more clearly than conventional assessment categories (mathematics, English, music and so on). This makes room for standards-based marking and other assessment reforms that focus on learning and achievement. What matters is not whether these practices are standards-based or conventional, but whether they support learning.

How Not to Use Marks

This is a true story about what happens when marks are *not* about learning. I was fresh out of university and had not yet secured my first teaching position. So, like many of you, I did substitute teaching. Within my first month of subbing, I was assigned to cover four days for a high school social studies teacher. Because he knew he was going to be out, he had planned in advance, and we had a brief meeting the week before he left.

One of his classes was composed of ten young men who attended vocational-technical school in the morning and came to school in the afternoon for their two required academic classes: English and social studies. According to this teacher, they “didn’t want to be there”, and he was afraid they would pose a discipline problem while he was gone. Therefore, he had given them a group presentation assignment, and my “lesson plan” was to listen to the groups’ presentations, one each day, and mark them. The scores I gave would “stick”, he said. By that he meant he would really use them in his students’ reports. He hoped that this would motivate the students to behave themselves.

I had just completed a primary teacher-preparation program and had almost no experience with managing secondary school students. And what was I given as my only instruction? Assess!

If you think this was a disaster waiting to happen, you're right. When I arrived on Monday, I found that three groups had done absolutely nothing and one student in the fourth group had prepared a few note cards to read to the class. The teacher had asked me to hand in the marks to him, so I did. I gave *F*s to the groups that did nothing and a *B* to the group that did something, even though it was pretty dismal. It was clear that the students really didn't care one way or the other.

But the feared discipline problems didn't materialise. The students and I mostly just talked. Back then, I felt I had probably wasted their time, that I should somehow have been able to teach them some social studies. I felt bad that I didn't have enough content knowledge to at least tell them something about their topics. Older and wiser now, I realise that in that context these students weren't really going to learn much anyway.

Why not? There were a lot of reasons, as you can probably tell, but the judgmental use of marks was a big contributor. First, assessment in that class was about discipline and control. It was the teacher's "big stick". And in this case, it was to be wielded on ten students who had a long history of being unsuccessful in their academic classes. Not only was this plan *not* about learning, but it sent the message to these students that their teacher didn't trust them (and he didn't). Second, I had been instructed to assess the presentations, but there were no criteria for them, no expectations except that they would fill a fifty-minute period and be on certain topics. So the assignment dehumanised the students and disrespected the content at the same time. And group assessments are a whole other issue in themselves – see chapter 4 for more about that.

Every time I think of this story, it makes me sad. But I am no longer powerless to do anything about it, as I was then. The principles and practices I share in this book are, basically, the opposite of everything in this story. They are designed to help readers be the antithesis of the teacher in this story. Ultimately, they are designed to make school learning better for those ten young men and other students like them.

Common Terminology

Before getting into specifics, it will be helpful to establish definitions for some common terms that will appear throughout this book.

In this Australian edition of the book, we will be using the word *mark* as opposed to the American term *grade*. Whichever word you use, both terms are

commonly used to mean both the score on an individual assignment and the symbol (letter or number) or sometimes level (such as “proficient”) on a school report (Taylor & Nolen, 2005). O’Connor (2009) uses the term to mean only the score on a report, and not the one on individual assignments. However, the dual usage is so common that perhaps the best way to handle it is to accept it and live with it. That is the approach I will take in this book. I endeavor to be very clear about whether I am talking about individual assignment marks or marks in a school report.

Marks for individual assignments should reflect the achievement demonstrated in the work. Marks in reports should reflect the achievement demonstrated in the body of work for that reporting period. I’ll have a lot more to say about that throughout the book, but for now, just consider achievement as part of the definition of *mark*.

Scores are numbers. Some individual assignments, most notably tests, receive scores that result from a *scoring* procedure. The scoring procedure should be defined. For example, on a test made up of multiple-choice, true/false or matching items, a typical scoring procedure is to give one point for each correct answer. Tests that have multi-point problems or essay questions require clear scoring schemes that define how to allocate the points.

Validity means the degree to which marks or scores actually mean what you intend them to mean. In the case of marking, if you intend a report to indicate achievement of a standard, the mark should do that – and not, for example, represent attendance, how appealing a student’s personality is or something extraneous like that. In the case of a classroom unit test score, if you intend the test score to indicate the achievement of a science unit’s learning goals, the score should do that – and not, for example, represent how beautiful the student’s handwriting is, or how well the student could read very complicated passages in some of the questions.

Reliability is the level of confidence you have in the consistency or accuracy of a measure. So, for example, in the case of that test score, how close is the percentage correct to the real level of achievement “inside the kid’s head”, and how much is it influenced by the form of the questions, time of day, inaccuracies in the teacher’s use of scoring procedures, and so on? There will always be some inconsistencies (errors) in measurement, but you want to keep them as small as possible.

Marking is only one kind of student assessment or evaluation. Both of these terms, *assessment* and *evaluation*, are broader in scope than marking. *Evaluation* means judgment or appraisal of the value or worth of something. All evaluative judgments, not just marks, should be based on high-quality evidence

that is relevant to the particular kind of judgment you are making. *Assessment* is a general term that means any process for obtaining information.

Classes, schools, programs, textbooks and materials are also commonly evaluated. In this book, we follow the convention that if we are talking about appraisals of students, we will use the term *assessment*. If we are talking about appraisals of classes, schools, programs, textbooks and materials, we will use the term *evaluation*.

Formative assessment means that students and teachers gather and use information about student progress toward the achievement of learning goals as the learning is taking place. Information from formative assessments helps both students and teachers with decisions and actions that improve learning. *Summative assessment* is assessment that is conducted after the learning has taken place to certify what has been learnt. Marking is one form of summative assessment. Unlike formative assessment, in which students must participate, summative assessment is usually the teacher's responsibility.

Student Assessment

Assessment information that is used for marking is only a subset of all the possible assessment information that is available for a student. Assessment information may be about student achievement, but it may also be about students' attitudes, effort, interests, preferences, attendance, behaviour and so on. All of this information is relevant for knowing your students, providing appropriate instruction, taking appropriate action with regard to student behaviour, coaching students in their work, talking with them and inspiring them. So when in this book we say that marks should be based on achievement information only, that does *not* imply that you should ignore the rest of the information you have about students.

Figure 1.1 presents a diagram of the relationships among all the different kinds of information a teacher gathers about students. Discussions of assessment often refer to three of these categories: (1) assessment information (everything a teacher assesses about a student), (2) reporting information (only those measures and observations the teacher reports) and (3) marking information (only those measures and observations the teacher reports in a mark representing student achievement) (Frisbie & Waltman, 1992; O'Connor, 2009). Figure 1.1 completes the picture by adding the classroom-only information that the teacher uses formatively and does not report.

External Pressures on Marking Policies

Changing marking policies and practices is not simply a matter of deciding to do something different. Marking happens in a context. This context is somewhat different in each community but often includes pressures from parents and community members and from higher education. These pressures tend to favour conventional, competitive practices that rank students. Changing marking policies and practices will require addressing these pressures.

Parent and Community Pressures

Parents and community members have definite expectations for marking policies and practices. However, some of these expectations may not be helpful and may present an opportunity for parent education. For example, even parents of young children seem to want schools to use letter-based marks and to provide information that compares their child to other students (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). Yet normative marking – comparing students to one another – is harmful educationally (Ames & Archer, 1988; Dweck, 2000). Moreover, the information that Hannah does something better than Johnny and worse than Yolanda reveals nothing about what Hannah actually knows and can do.

In schools with traditional letter marking, parents sometimes misconstrue the meaning of the letters. In Victoria, for example, the “average” letter mark that most teachers give is a C, with A’s only being given to students who are 18 months ahead of the expected level for their age. So parents whose children bring home Cs may think their child’s marks are poor when, in fact, the student is performing at the expected level.

Parents’ ideas about marking can vary among different communities. In one US study, Chinese American and European American parents of students in the first years of school had different expectations. The Chinese American parents were, on average, less satisfied than the European American parents with the descriptive scales often used with younger children, such as “1 = consistently demonstrating, 2 = progressing and 3 = requires additional attention” (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009, p. 404). Both groups wanted comparative information about their children. We know, however, that information about what individual students have actually accomplished is more helpful for teaching and learning.

The larger point here is that you should not assume that everyone shares one perspective on marks and their meaning. You can expect a diversity of perspectives, and you can expect that whatever the perspective, the person holding it thinks it is in the student’s best interests. This book will make recommendations for how to communicate your marking policies to parents and

how to give them different kinds of information without confounding the meaning of your marks.

Higher Education Pressures

At least at the senior secondary level, teachers and principals perceive expectations for using marking practices that function well to rank students. Most universities rely on these ranks to assess a student's suitability for admission. In workshop settings, I have often heard secondary school teachers state that they must give certain kinds of marks because universities expect it. I have even heard some middle years school teachers say that they must give certain kinds of marks because parents want to be sure their children will be ready to gain admission to selective schools or prestigious universities.

To be honest, I think some of those teachers were copping out. ("I don't want to change my marking practices, and here's an excuse not to.") But some of them were expressing a real dilemma and real discomfort at confrontations with assertive parents.

Time for Self-Reflection

Take a moment to think about your own approach to marking, your own history with it, and in general where you're coming from when it comes to marks and marking. Everyone's background is a little different. In fact, my own marking background is part of what led me to write this book. So first, I ask that you give serious reflection time to the questions in figure 1.2.

Reflect on your personal experience with marking.

1. Do you have a story from your own career as a student where marks play a prominent role? If so, tell that story. What did you learn from it?
2. When you first became a teacher, did you feel prepared to "give marks" to students, either on individual assignments or on report cards? Describe your first efforts at marking and what you learnt from them.
3. What are the main principles you use in your current marking practices? How have they been influenced by your previous experiences?
4. Are you satisfied with your current marking practices? Where do you want to focus your next steps in the development of your marking practices?

Figure 1.2: Self-reflection questions on your marking background

Now that you have answered these questions, I will share my personal reflections (figure 1.3). How is your story like mine? How is it different?

1. Do you have a story from your own career as a student where marks play a prominent role? If so, tell that story. What did you learn from it?

In Year 10, a girlfriend and I were tied in class rank. In Year 12, she took a more difficult schedule than I did, and she learnt more. But she got a B in a university-level biology course, so she slipped behind me in class rank. At the end of the year, I got an academic prize that was based on class rank. I felt like a fraud. My year of “coasting” had resulted in marks that made me look smarter than my friend, and it wasn’t true. At the time, I just felt bad. With hindsight, I believe that was a pathetic lesson to have taught two excellent students.

2. When you first became a teacher, did you feel prepared to “give marks” to students, either on individual assignments or on report cards? Describe your first efforts at marking and what you learnt from them.

My teaching career began with a half year of daily substituting. Then I accepted a position in a Year 3 classroom when the teacher left after the first term. Three reading groups were already in place, and the assessment folder was already set up, including places for “oral reading” marks. So there I sat, with a group of seven students taking turns reading out loud to me while the rest of the class was doing seatwork. I had no criteria, no marking scale (what should I put? A? 100? 4?), and no experience with marking oral reading. Each reading group, and each student in each group, read something different. I just “made it up”. I put 100 for readers whose work I liked, and 90, 80, and 70 for lesser performances, although I could not have told you in any given case why I came up with the scores I did. Again, I felt like a fraud.

3. What are the main principles you use in your current marking practices? How have they been influenced by your previous experiences?

Influenced by the experiences I have already recounted and others like them, I read research on marking and did some research on the subject myself. I have become thoroughly convinced that no marking system will ever be perfect but that, on balance, marking on achievement is the best policy. It solves many problems, and it is defensible educationally. Marking on achievement gives students information about what they know and can do, and it supports students’ self-regulation and feelings of control over their learning.

Figure 1.3: The author’s personal reflections on marking.

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