

**FIX 13****Don't use information from formative assessments and practice to determine grades; use only summative evidence.**

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The primary responsibility of our school is teaching and learning.

The individuality of every learner is recognized and welcomed.

The school culture nurtures both the joy of learning and the satisfaction of achievement.

Our shared vision of education empowers us to explore, experiment and grow.

Learners accept responsibility for their own learning . . .

—School District of Clayton, MO, 2006, n.p.

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**G**rades are broken if scores for everything students do find their way into report card grades. The fix is to include, in all but specific, limited cases, only evidence from summative assessments intended to document learning, that is, designed to serve as assessments *of* learning.

The primary purpose of grades is to communicate a summary of student achievement at a particular point in time; that is, what students know, understand, and can do as a result of their learning. It is important that teachers, students, and parents recognize that *learning* is a process in which learners increase their knowledge, understanding, and skills as a result of effort, instruction, feedback from

teachers and peers, and self-assessment and adjustment. As Jay McTighe points out, “We know that students will rarely perform at high levels on challenging learning tasks at their first attempt. Deep understanding or high levels of proficiency are achieved only as a result of trial, practice, adjustments based on feedback, and more practice” (McTighe, 1996–1997, p. 11). For this process to work well learners must believe that it is important and worthwhile to try and that it is acceptable to take risks and make mistakes; it is not necessary to always “get it” the first time.

This process is clearly acknowledged in the guiding principles of the School District of Clayton, Missouri, given in the opening quotation. However, it is not recognized when teachers include in grades evidence generated during practice (i.e., learning) activities. Unfortunately, this happens daily in many classrooms, when teachers judge everything students do and then use every piece of evidence to determine grades.

Standards-based teachers distinguish clearly between teaching activities (which include diagnostic and formative assessment) through which students learn and practice, and summative assessments in which students “perform” and show what they know, understand, and can do (Figure 5-1). They are clear about the purpose of every activity, and grades include *only* evidence from summative assessments.

It is critical that both teachers and students recognize when assessment is primarily *for* learning (formative) and when it is primarily *of* learning (summative). Students understand this in band and sports, when practice is clearly identified and separate from an actual performance or game. But often this is not clear in the classroom. If we did in basketball what we frequently do in the classroom, the game would not start 0–0, but each team would start with a score based on

■ Figure 5-1 Purposes of Assessment

**Diagnostic**—assessment that takes place prior to instruction; designed to determine a student’s attitude, skills or knowledge in order to identify student needs.

**Formative**—assessment designed to provide direction for improvement and/or adjustment to a program for individual students or for a whole class, e.g. observation, quizzes, homework (usually), instructional questions, initial drafts/attempts. (*Assessments FOR learning*)

**Summative**—assessment designed to provide information to be used in making judgments about a student’s achievement at the end of a sequence of instruction, e.g. final drafts/attempts, tests, exams, assignments, projects, performances. (*Assessments OF learning*)

an assessment of the quality of their practices in the days leading up to the game. Obviously this would be absurd—and it is equally so in the classroom.

A large and growing body of research supports this distinction. The Assessment Reform Group in the United Kingdom, which sponsored “Inside the Black Box,” the important paper by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (Black and Wiliam, 1998), has sponsored and published much of this research. “Firm evidence shows that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and that its development can raise standards of achievement, Mr. Black and Mr. Wiliam point out. Indeed, they know of no other way of raising standards for which such a strong *prima facie* case can be made” (editor’s introduction to Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 139). Their research and the work of others have shown that improving formative assessment and using assessment *for*

learning raises the achievement of all students, but also that it has the most significant impact on low achievers. Learning gains made through using assessment *for* learning are similar to those achieved through one-on-one coaching.

The key components of assessment *for* learning are (1) sharing the learning target with students from the beginning of the learning, (2) making adjustments in teaching as a result of formative assessment, (3) providing descriptive feedback to students from assessment, and (4) providing opportunities for students to self- and peer assess so that they understand their strengths and what they need to do to improve. This is obviously very different from a summative use of assessment—from putting a grade or number on everything students do and including every bit of evidence when computing grades. Such summative assessment is important, but only when balanced with appropriate formative applications. Students should be assessed regularly; everything (or almost everything) they do can be assessed and/or checked, but everything does not need a score and every score need not be included in the grade. Some student work must be for practice only, and be returned to them accompanied by the kind of feedback that will help them do better the next time.

Black and Wiliam define *formative assessment* as “all those activities undertaken by teachers and by their students [that] provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 139). To appropriately modify learning, feedback has to be effective; it has to be timely, describe features of the work or performance relating directly to learning targets and/or standards of quality, and be low stakes—i.e., allow for adjustments before it “counts.” This means that feedback has to be descriptive, not evaluative. A 7/10 or a 3 (from a rubric) going into a gradebook

is high stakes, provides no useful information about the learning targets, and contributes nothing that will improve learning. One of the important implications of this is that teachers need to identify clearly and record evidence derived from formative assessment separately from evidence from summative assessment. This can be done using separate pages for each in the gradebook, by color-coding entries, or by giving a zero weight to formative assessments in a computerized gradebook or spreadsheet.

One of the most common practices in North American education has been scoring and including all homework as a significant part of grades. This has been done in the belief that it promotes responsibility in students, but in fact it often has the opposite effect. Careful consideration has to be given to the purpose(s) of homework. Sometimes homework requires students to show what they know by extending or integrating their knowledge and understanding through projects or assignments done partially or completely outside the classroom. This is clearly summative assessment and is legitimately part of grades as long as there is careful monitoring to ensure that it is the student's own work. Another purpose for homework is preparation—introducing knowledge, understanding, and skills intended to help students to be ready for subsequent lessons. As this happens *before* instruction any assessment would be diagnostic, which obviously has no place in grades. Most often, however, homework is practice of whatever was learned in class that day—any assessment of this work should be regarded as formative. Practice is valuable only to those students who can have some degree of success on their own without teacher support. It is of little or no value to students that don't need to practice, and it can actually be damaging to students who don't understand because they may embed misunderstandings that will be difficult to correct.

Putting a mark on work done for practice renders it effectively summative, not formative. When homework assigned as practice is scored and included in grades, what becomes most important to students is that it be done because it “counts,” not because of any learning that might occur. It becomes an issue of compliance so it really doesn’t matter who does the homework—the student, a parent, a sibling, or a friend. If we want homework to be about learning, we need students to understand that it is for practice if they need it, not compliance or grading, because then the person who benefits from the homework is the learner.

One major concern that is often expressed about not including practice homework in grades is, “Students won’t do their homework if I don’t grade it!” We have done an absolutely superb job of training students into this perspective by putting a number on everything they do and making every number part of the grade. But as we have trained them into it, we can train them out of it. The motivation for practicing and doing homework should come from each student’s clear understanding that it will contribute to their learning. We want them to feel a sense of satisfaction from knowing, understanding, or being able to do something better today than yesterday. We want them to think, “If I had done my homework, I would have done better on the test.” We can tell them this day after day with no effect, but when they see the assessment evidence speak for itself and understand that practice really does help, they will come to this realization themselves.

As stated, including practice homework in grades can be damaging to struggling students because they may develop misunderstandings that will be difficult to correct. It is also damaging to these students because it reduces their willingness to try. If they know that they are going to get a low

score, then to avoid yet another failure one defense mechanism is not to do it. It is better to keep the stakes low and have students understand, “It is okay to try because if I try I am going to get feedback on what I did well and what needs improvement.”

Including practice homework in grades can also be damaging in other ways. Consider this quote from Elinor Burkett, after spending a year observing in a suburban Minneapolis high school: “Nick was fed up; . . . fed up with acing exams but getting C’s at the end of the trimester because he refused to do the worksheets assigned in order to help students study so they could ace exams” (Burkett, 2002, p. 124). Nick did not need to do the practice work. Students such as Nick, who refuse to go along and do what for them is busy work, end up with lowered grades that do not reflect their achievement.

Finally, including practice work and/or learning activities in grades can harm students who consistently improve. Consider the high school mathematics class with three formative quizzes and one summative test over a three-week period. Jeremy receives scores of 30, 50, and 70 percent on the quizzes and 90 percent on the test. He has obviously mastered whatever was taught over that unit. But if the quizzes count for one-third of the grade and the test for two-thirds (this is common) he would receive a grade of 77 percent, which in most high schools would be a C or worse.

The fix for all these broken grades is not to include scores from learning activities, including practice homework, in grades. One of the best ways to ensure this happens and to make the process clear to students is to develop assessment plans and (age appropriately) make them known to students.

An assessment plan should start with the desired results—the learning goals derived from the standards. The

summative assessments that are going to be used to determine whether the student “knows and can do,” (i.e., the only assessments that will be used to determine grades) follow. Next are the diagnostic assessment(s) that are going to help determine the what and the how for teaching and learning. Finally come the formative assessments that are going to help students achieve the learning goals and through which the teacher will adjust teaching and learning activities. These activities include the homework and quizzes that help students to be successful on tests, the practices that lead to performances, and the series of drafts that help students to produce high-quality products.

Figure 5-2 shows an example of the formative and summative assessment part of such a plan.

■ Figure 5-2 Sample Assessment Plan

### Formative Assessment for Unit 1

Task	Method(S)	Strategy(ies)	Scoring Tool	Assessor
ROLE PLAY Practice(s)	Performance Ass't	Performance	Rubric	self/peer
QUIZZES	Paper and Pencil	Selected Response	Marking Scheme	Teacher
BROCHURE Draft	Performance Ass't	Product	Rubric	peer
BROCHURE Near Final	Performance Ass't	Product	Rubric	self/peer

### Summative Assessment for Unit 1

Task	Method(S)	Strategy(ies)	Scoring Tool	Assessor
ROLE PLAY	Performance Ass't	Performance	Rubric	Teacher
TEST(S)	Paper and Pencil	Selected & Constructed Response	Marking Scheme	Teacher
BROCHURE	Performance Ass't	Product	Rubric	Teacher

Note that in this plan there is a clear link between the formative and summative assessments—one or more practices of the role play with descriptive feedback will help students to perform high-quality role plays, one or more quizzes followed by analysis of strengths and weaknesses and appropriate reteaching will help students to be successful on the test(s), and the draft and near final versions of the product with descriptive feedback will lead to high-quality brochures. When a plan such as this is in place and students—and parents—are familiar with it, it is obvious to all that the focus is on the learning, not simply on the accumulation of points.

Quality school and district policy documents distinguish between formative and summative assessment and state clearly the uses of each, as in this from Manitoba:

The thrust of formative assessment is toward improving learning and instruction. Therefore, the information should not be used for assigning [grades] as the assessment often occurs before students have had full opportunities to learn content or develop skills. (Manitoba Education and Training, 1997, p. 9)

As a final idea in this Fix, I would like to note that this statement in the Manitoba policy and that made in the first paragraph of this Fix (“include only evidence from summative assessments intended to document learning”) state the principle very strongly and clearly. However, once teachers have become clear about the appropriate uses for formative and summative assessment, and abandoned the practice of including everything in grades, especially homework, it is acceptable to *consider* formative assessment evidence when determining grades. This, of course, also requires that teachers are determining, not simply calculating, grades (see Fix 11). I acknowledge that I overstate when I say summative “*only*,” but given traditional grading practices it seems

to me that we have to establish this “strong” position; when teachers have developed a deeper understanding of grading issues, they can take a more holistic view of the evidence of achievement that each student has produced.

### Student Involvement

This is the most critical area for student involvement because students have often been “trained” in classrooms where no distinction was made between practice and performance and where there was little feedback or opportunities to make adjustments in learning (or teaching) based on formative assessment. Students who are actively involved in every aspect of assessment are more able to themselves distinguish between practice and performance. This can be achieved by encouraging self-monitoring and self-adjustment through assessment for learning and by avoiding rushing to judgment (summative assessment) for as long as possible. Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) describe strategies that teachers can use to involve students, including the following:

1. Engage students in reviewing strong and weak samples in order to determine attributes of a good performance or product. . . .
3. Students practice using criteria to evaluate anonymous strong and weak work.
4. Students work in pairs to revise an anonymous weak work sample they have just evaluated. (2005, p. 15)

Teachers can also help students to be reflective learners by providing them with opportunities to think about their performance on summative assessments. Stiggins and Chappuis suggest one way to do this:

9. Teacher arranges items on a test according to specific learning targets, and prepares a “test analysis” chart for student, with three boxes: “My strengths,” “Quick review,” and “Further study.” After handing back the corrected test, students identify learning targets they have mastered and write them in the “My strengths” box. Next, students categorize their wrong answers as either “simple mistake” or “further study.” Then, students list the simple mistakes in the “Quick review” box. Last, students write the rest of the learning targets represented by wrong answers in the “Further study” box. (2005, p. 15)

### Summary

Grades are broken when they are merely about accumulating points. To make it obvious that they are about learning, the fix is to distinguish between formative and summative assessment and to include only results from the latter directly in grades.

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The test of a successful education is not the amount of knowledge that a pupil takes away from school, but his appetite to know and his capacity to learn. If the school sends out children with the desire for knowledge and some idea about how to acquire it, it will have done its work. Too many leave school with the appetite killed and the mind loaded with undigested lumps of information.

—Sir Richard Livingstone,  
President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford,  
1941, quoted in *William*, 2003, n.p.

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