

7. Avoid group grades.

Many of us from time to time have done something similar to this: We've told students in groups that we will select one notebook from each group at random and grade it. Every group member will get the same grade for their own notebook as the one representative notebook earns. We then give the group time to compare notes and get everyone's notebook up to speed so that whichever one we choose, the group will look good.

Pretty reasonable, right? Maybe not. What does that grade tell us about any one of the students in that group? Little to nothing. How does that grade guide our next steps? It doesn't; it's not an assessment.

Most teachers consider it unfair to give entire groups of students the same grade based on one group member's performance or on the whole group's performance on a task. This makes sense. Grades that are given to whole groups like this don't reflect an individual student's achievement or growth, and therefore can't be used to document progress, provide feedback, or inform instructional decisions. Group grades are often a form of coercion used by teachers to compel students to work with members of their groups to learn the material, at least superficially. Since they are not accurate indicators of mastery on the part of any one student, and that's what grades are supposed to be, they undermine the legitimate use of grades.

In addition, group grades tend to create unhealthy peer pressure among classmates, often generating negative feelings toward immature and/or unmotivated members of the group who did not work as much as others, or who had trouble achieving to the same level. Some students can glide through a group task doing little or no work, but earning the same high mark as those who did all the work and made the group score well. For the ill will they often engender and the antithesis of grades and learning they promote, group grades are wisely left off the differentiating teacher's menu of best practices.

Does this mean cooperative learning activities are inappropriate? No. Cooperative learning is an outstanding teaching strategy. When we use it with our students, however, we're mindful that it is a technique used to teach students about a topic, not a demonstration of proficiency in that topic itself.

Fair Isn't Always Equal

For one reason or another, we may assign grades to a cooperative learning product and everyone in the group gets the same grade. That doesn't mean the grade has to be fully influential in the end of the grading period declaration of mastery, however. We can use the grade as a minor feedback or documentation symbol in the moment of the lesson, but the discerning teacher takes time after the lesson to decide whether the grade earned in the cooperative learning task was a grade indicating mastery of the topic being studied or of proficiency with the cooperative learning process. If it's associated more with the process, we drop the grade's influence on the final grade because it is not a statement of mastery. With cooperative groups, we strive to grade students individually, and we set up the positive interdependence such that no student receives a lower grade for another student's lack of achievement.