

FIX 2

Don't reduce marks on "work" submitted late; provide support for the learner.

Teachers turn things in late all the time, as do workers in every profession. The idea that "You can't get away with turning work in late in the real world, mister" isn't true.

—Wormeli, 2006, p. 148

Grades are broken when they include penalties for student "work" submitted late. Penalties distort the achievement record the grade is intended to communicate, can actually harm student motivation, and for many students do not result in changes in behavior. The fix is to not use penalties and to set up support systems that reduce or eliminate the problem of late work.

It is critical to emphasize that we want students to exhibit responsibility and submit assessment evidence in a timely manner. The difficulty we face is, what do we do when students do not demonstrate these qualities? What policies and procedures are most likely to get them to learn as much as possible and exhibit the desired behaviors? Traditionally, we have used penalties such as a reduction of one letter grade or of a number of points for each day a required piece is late.

Many teachers believe that they need a policy with penalties to attempt to ensure that students turn in work on time so the teacher can maintain the pace of instruction necessary to meet tight curricular requirements. Many also use penal-

ties because they believe that it communicates fairness to students: everybody gets the same amount of time. There are, however, at least four problems with this practice. First, and most damaging, they distort the grade's representation of the student's true achievement. Second, they can motivate exactly the opposite behavior than that intended. At some point in the grade reduction scenario, accumulating penalties lead students to conclude that it no longer makes sense to do that work. If it is an important piece of assessment evidence, it is better that the student submit it late than not at all. Third, my own classroom teaching experience and anecdotal evidence from many teachers leads me to conclude that penalties don't work because they do not change behavior—the same student who is late with required evidence in week 2 is frequently late in weeks 18 and 36. Fourth, having absolute deadlines (and penalties) for everything does not prepare students for the world beyond school. In the "real world" timelines are frequently negotiated (real estate, legal matters) or adjusted to circumstances (contractors and consultants); deadlines range from fixed to considerably flexible. (Ironically, "You can't deliver work late in the real world" is the very reason some teachers tell students they have the policy!) We prepare students better for that world when we offer a variety of deadlines in school; work part of an instructional sequence needs to be done tonight for tomorrow, but timelines for long-term assignments might be framed more flexibly.

Furthermore, in the world beyond school, as adults, if we are not able to meet a timeline, we often can communicate with the person/institution to whom we are responsible, arrange a new mutually agreeable timeline, and then work to meet it. This is the responsible, adult behavior that we need to encourage in students and we do this by allowing

them to request extensions. This is preferable to students “hiding in the back corner” as they often do when they have late or missing assessment evidence. If we want students to be responsible and timely, then we can teach them and help them along the way, rather than assume they will learn the lessons through punitive policies.

Again, there is no suggestion here that teachers should condone or ignore lateness in submitting required evidence. Teachers should keep records of students’ timeliness and report on this behavior in expanded format report cards. They also can assign consequences as they would for any other unacceptable classroom behavior. Direct parent contact may also be necessary, especially if the lateness is chronic. Students who are late with important assessment evidence could be required to come in before school, at lunchtime, or after school where they will receive both the assistance and time they need. This is similar to the approach suggested by Rick DuFour (DuFour, Eaker, DuFour, and Karhanek, 2004), whose “pyramid of interventions” to help students succeed moves from “limited and voluntary” to “significant and compulsory.”

The consequences for submitting required assessment evidence late should be as positive and supportive as possible, although some “negative” consequences, such as detention, may be warranted for repeated or chronic lateness. Supportive approaches do not distort achievement or motivation and more closely mirror practices in the world beyond school. Support should also include identifying at the beginning of the school year students who are organizationally challenged and providing them structure in assignments.

The most appropriate fix for grades is to not use penalties at all. Some teachers (and parents) will see the emphasis on support and communication suggested here as too “soft.”

Thus, as we make the transition from traditional to standards-based practices, it may be both acceptable and necessary to use small penalties that do not distort achievement or motivation; that is, penalties that are more apparent than real. One example of this approach is that students who submit required assessments late receive the grade level they “earned” but it is recorded at the lowest form of that level (e.g., a student submits an “A+” paper several days late so the grade is recorded as “A-”). Using a grading scale with percentages linked to letter grades, it is easy to record the lowest percentage at the level earned—e.g., if an A is 90 to 100% the maximum reduction for evidence judged as A quality would be to 90%.

The principle that should be applied to late work is to separate achievement from behavior and communicate both to those who have a right to know about the student. If Rory is a brilliant writer who always hands assignments in late, both aspects are hidden if she gets a C or a D. But if she gets an A and the report says, “Brilliant writer, but always late,” then we have accurate information. A daily newspaper or an advertising agency may not want to employ Rory but she may be perfect to write features in a monthly magazine or as a novelist or playwright.

Student Involvement

Students should have input into decisions about timelines for required assessment evidence because when they have input they have ownership, and ownership frequently leads to meeting timelines. As noted, if a student is not able to meet a timeline, the teacher should not use mark penalties, but should encourage the student to acknowledge the lateness and request an extension and/or suggest other appropriate consequences.

Summary

Penalties distort achievement and motivation, and in my experience are generally ineffective. The fix for late student work is a positive, supportive approach that directly affects student behavior, leaving the scores and the resulting grades as pure measures of achievement.

The appropriate consequence for failing to complete an assignment is completing the assignment. That is, students lose privileges, free time, and unstructured class or study hall time, and they are required to complete the assignment. The price of freedom is proficiency, and students are motivated not by threats of failure but by the opportunity for greater freedom and discretion when work is completed accurately and *on time*.

—Reeves, 2006, p. 122, *emphasis added*

