COVID-19: Assessment and Grading Concerns during Remote Learning – What’s the Helpful Thing to Do?

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Assessment and Grading Concerns

What do we right now to finish the current year, and what will we be doing down the road?

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About AMLE

Who we are:
The Association for Middle Level Education is the leading organization advancing the education of all students ages 10 to 15, helping them succeed as learners and make positive contributions to their communities and to the world.

What we do:
We provide vision, knowledge, and resources to over 50,000 middle level educators and leaders around the world. We help middle grade educators reach every student, grow professionally, and create great schools!

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Assessment and Grading Concerns

Equity

What do we right now to finish the current year, and what will we be doing down the road?
Reasonable Thinking for our Current Reality:

Given diverse family life situations, resources, levels of support, mental health concerns, and technology access issues, grading work students have done at home via sudden, online lessons is inequitable. This means grades are likely to be inaccurate reports of learning and deeply unfair, as some or many students will not get a fair shake at learning or at demonstrating what they’ve learned, which only further exacerbates already troubling gaps among student groups.

Our goal is accurate, ethical reporting. To grade now, however, creates bias and distorted reports of learning, and it constitutes a serious breach of ethics.

Pass/Fail may be as far as we go as we finish out the school year. Harvard, MIT, among others, have moved to Pass/Fail for freshman courses, too.

Alternatively, we can declare grades based on proficiencies demonstrated through March 1st and note that the grade is based on a truncated curriculum due to COVID-19 required school closures.

As teachers get more comfortable with remote learning lessons and assessment, however, pass/fail may be insufficient. We will more than likely move toward at least three levels of reporting:

- Proficient (or, “Mastery”)
- Developing (or, “Progressing”)
- No Evidence Presented
As teachers get more comfortable with remote learning lessons and assessment, however, pass/fail may be insufficient. We will more than likely move toward at least three levels of reporting:

- **Pass with Distinction**
- **Pass**
- **Incomplete**

Ken O'Connor suggests:

- This would be for high school only. Middle and elementary levels would receive narrative commentary only.

Each of these levels needs to be clearly defined.

If students go above and beyond expectations, and the teacher feels it’s truly the student’s work, there needs to be a separate addendum indicating such, as there are different standards.

At best, grades are temporary reports of proficiency as of one arbitrary calendar date imposed on the next generation by the current one.

Three Reminders Here…

- **Assessment is anything we do to gather evidence in order to provide feedback and inform instruction.**
- **Grading refers to the reporting of student’s final proficiency only.**

Note: We can’t have effective instruction without assessment, just as we can’t have effective assessment without instruction. They are inseparable.

Vital for learning, varied techniques, low stakes, different for different, recoverable, it’s oxygen, we do it daily.

Not vital for learning, various types of procedures, high stakes, same for all, unrecoverable in traditional systems, we do it less often than assessment.

In sum, assessment is legitimate, vital, and equitable during this difficult transition to remote learning. Do it. Grading is not. Minimize/Remove it.
Assessment is anything we do to gather evidence in order to provide feedback and inform instruction.

Grading refers to the reporting of student's final proficiency only.

**Put another way:**

We can learn without grades. We can't learn without assessment and its useful feedback.

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**Three Cautions when Developing Assessments and Lessons online:**

First: "But how will I grade it?" as our first thought before assigning something online should ring warning bells in our educator's mind. The primary indicator as to whether or not something is worth pursuing in a lesson shouldn't be its ultimate grade-ability. Much of the important stuff we teach and that students learn defies easy quantifying and grading. We can't forego that key content and learning experience because we don't see a quick grading solution. Be principled first, actionable second.

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**Second:** Lean toward synchronous learning experiences, interactions, and assessments. It's seriously difficult for multiple members of one give family to have simultaneous access to technology (if they have it), and interact and be assessed in real time, especially with parents working from home and families with more than one child. This is to say nothing of the new, uneven emotional cycles of the day out of students’ control. We can always set up synchronous experiences for those who can make it, but they should never be required or included in a final grade report.
Three Cautions when Developing Assessments and Lessons Online:

Third: Next year’s teachers will need to become very familiar with the previous year’s curriculum for the second semester, and integrate that content with their own. This will require heavy lifting as we create a hierarchy of curriculum. What are the most leveraging standards? For these we will fight. What are our secondary standards, and which ones are just nice to know, but we can let them go from an already overloaded curriculum.

It may take 2 to 5 full years of back-in-the-classroom learning for students to recover from the curriculum/learning loss.

So what assessment, feedback, and grading principles still hold up while working with students via remote learning for extended periods of time?

• We can still separate formative (coming to know) learning and assessment experiences from summative ones, facilitating helpful feedback and revising learning with formatives, but not making the formatives high stakes in nature (i.e. “no grades, %’s, rubric scores”).

• We can still brainstorm (and let kids suggest) alternative ways to demonstrate evidence of learning and not get hung up on whether or not they did something so much as that they demonstrated learning.

• This means conferring with our subject-like colleagues and brainstorming multiple ways to elicit the same evidence of proficiency. There are often dozens of ways to assess the same evidence.
Great Ideas on Multiple Ways to Engage and Assess Students via Universal Design for Learning:

Principle: Provide Multiple Means of Engagement (the "why" of learning), multiple ways to build and sustain motivation and perseverance

Principle: Provide Multiple Means of Representation (the "what" of learning), multiple ways for students to perceive and comprehend information

Principle: Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression (the "how" of learning), multiple ways for students to interact and process content and skills, including how to express what they know - www.udlcenter.org

We're still going to be aware that students learn at different rates and not let an arbitrary timeline keep a student from learning.

We're still channeling Dr. Tom Guskey and will focus on cultivating students and their talents instead of merely using grades to sort children.

We can be mindful not to conflate the report of one thing with the report of another (We still separate work habits from reports of academic proficiency, and we're still primarily criterion-referenced, not norm-referenced).

We can still disaggregate our reports, reporting less curriculum per symbol, & reporting by standards instead of a massive aggregate.

Unidimensionality – A single score on a test represents a single dimension or trait that has been assessed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Dimension A</th>
<th>Dimension B</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Problem: Most tests use a single score to assess multiple dimensions and traits. The resulting score is often invalid and useless. – Marzano, CAGTW, page 13
We can still focus on what students can carry forward and do independently of all assistance as the most accurate report of final proficiency.

We will still need to identify evidence for performance of different levels of proficiency regarding our standards, and to calibrate all of that with our subject like colleagues. We also provide examples to students of different levels of proficiency that students can analyze in light of criteria for success for their own work on the same content.

We can still seek more than one incidence of demonstrated proficiency for the larger standards in order to claim a pattern over time.

What's the minimum # of points needed to draw a straight line?
What's the minimum # of points needed to draw a parabola?

Do I have a pattern of evidence over time, not just a single snapshot moment in time? Accuracy increases with larger sample sizes.
• We can still use multiple descriptive feedback techniques, teach them to our students and their parents, and help them self-monitor how they’re doing in relation to learning goals.

• We can still do re-learning/re-assessing/re-do’s if students have not learned to a solid level of proficiency, at least for the most leveraging of standards, and yes, we can still remove extra credit activities that do not actually elicit evidence of the same proficiencies.

• We can still study interval science and grading accuracy and get rid of 0’s on the 100-point scale that distort reports of student learning.

• And yes, we can still study research on how to build self-efficacy, executive function, self-discipline, and tenacity in students and see that none of it says to use grades, or to falsely report student proficiency based on elements that are not evidence of the standard itself.

• We can still see grades are accurate, ethical, helpful communication, not compensation, reward, affirmation, or validation.

• We can also choose to be fair (equitable and developmentally appropriate for what students need, even when it is different from what others might need to achieve the same level of learning or higher), instead of hiding behind claims we have to be equal.

Quick Practical Tip for School-Home Communication: On Parent View (or Parent Oracle or similar platforms), enable the pop-up text box function on assignments and assessments.

Miguel can complete fragments, making them full sentences, but he is inconsistent in recognizing fragments. Here’s a great link to an animation tutorial that will help him spot fragments: www.schooltube.com/Youcompleteme-afragmentary.

Keys to this last one: Grades are reports of proficiency at journey’s end, NOT how students got there, or how they demonstrated evidence of learning.

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We’ll redo these fragment assessments on the unit exam in two weeks. It’s vs Its understanding and use are proficient. (We can insert audiofile commentary, screenacastify videos, evaluative commentary, links to sample exemplars, and much more here.)
• We can still begin with the end in mind (Covey) and hold to Rick Stiggins' reminder that students can hit targets they can see and that stand still for them. We can be overtly transparent with assessments at every turn so nobody wonders at the criteria for any level of proficiency.

• We can get up to speed on varied assessment prompts and test designs and use them, and we can ask students to perform more traditional assessment responses on paper, if they prefer, and send in a picture of it. If they want to include an audiofile of some sort to explain it, that's great!

• We can still do portfolios, though this time, e-portfolios, of their work over time, and ask students to reflect on their growth, and how each piece represents their learning regarding specific standards.

• We can definitely build our repertoire of activities to engage in content that also assess students formatively. Warning: shameless plugging about to commence: A great place to start is Summarization in any Subject, 2nd ed by Dedra Stafford and myself published by ASCD.

We can employ all those websites and software that really help with assessment, feedback, teaching, and grading, such as:

#SBLchat, Zoom, Flipgrid, Edmodo, Schoology, Seesaw, Quizizz, Screencastify, Quietly, Padlet, teacher.desmos.com/, Montimeter, Nearpod, Pear Deck, Skype, Kahoot, Vexer, Quizstar, Google Forms/Docs/Hangout/Suite, and your grading software and student management records system,
Minimize the Likelihood of Student Cheating

- Construct assessments that require creative, unique responses not easily traded among students, classes, and schools. This can include student proposals on how to best represent learning evidence.
- Teach students in a developmentally responsive manner, focusing on what works well for the developmental level we teach. When students learn well, they grow competent in our disciplines, which reduces the need to cheat.
- Teach personal integrity overtly and repeatedly.
- Be very, very clear in expectations. Make the implicit, explicit.
- Help students move away from over-reliance on external validation.
- "Tell students caught cheating that they are liars. Students tend to shrug off cheating by saying, 'It's no big deal -- everyone does it!' ...Connecting cheating with lying unmasks the 'sleight of mind' that allows students to think of cheating as a justifiable way to act." - Sharon Cromwell, 2006, Education World, www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin375.shtml
- Take students on a virtual tour of Websites teachers can use to check student work for plagiarism, so they see that we take cheating seriously and have to the tools to act upon that solemn responsibility. In addition, it may be helpful to take students on a brief tour of a website that sells students finished essays and reports they can download and submit as their own. Walk them through the lack of ethics employed when choosing this route, how it undermines their real learning (setting them up for later humiliation when others think they’ve learned the content but they have not done so, or when others discover their dishonesty), and how it runs their academic and personal reputations for years to come.
- Teach students the skills of executive function so they can better manage their studying and preparation, avoid impulsive decisions, appreciate the consequences of their actions, reason morally, and self-regulate.

Executive Function skills:
(Guare, Dawson, Guare, 2013, p. 15-17)
- response inhibition
- working memory
- emotional control
- flexibility
- sustained attention
- task initiation
- planning/prioritizing
- organization
- time management
- goal-directed persistence
- metacognition
Recommended Resources:

- *Smart but Scattered: The Revolutionary "Executive Skills" Approach to Helping Kids Reach Their Potential* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare
- *Smart but Scattered Teens: The "Executive Skills" Program for Helping Teens Reach Their Potential* by Richard Guare, Peg Dawson, and Colin Guare
- *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents' Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning* by Joyce Cooper-Kahn and Laurie Dietzel
- *Promoting Executive Function in the Classroom (What Works for Special-Needs Learners)* by Lynn Meltzer
- The National Center for Learning Disabilities (www.ncld.org)
- "Worth a Closer Look: Executive Function," Rick Wormeli, *Middle Ground* magazine (Now, AMLE Magazine), August 2013, Association for Middle Level Education

Recommended Resources for ADHD information:

- The Attention Deficit Disorder Association (www.add.org)
- [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/adhd_add_signs_symptoms.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/adhd_add_signs_symptoms.htm)
- National Resource Center on ADHD (http://www.help4adhd.org/), which includes resources for the organization, CHADD (Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder)

- Teach parents what is and is not appropriate assistance to offer their children when they are struggling with their learning.
- Teach proper paraphrasing and summarizing techniques.
- Teach proper note-taking techniques and how to keep track of quotes, gathered information, and citations.
- Help students analyze samples of students' work that have and have not been plagiarized. Talk about your feelings as you discover the cheating in students' work, and how they would feel if some of their cultural and sports heroes cheated in their fields.
• Use multiple assessments in varied formats, not just one, to determine a student's true proficiency. It's far more difficult to cheat across multiple formats and on multiple occasions.

• Ask students to sign an honor code statement with higher stakes assignments that they have neither given nor received assistance on the task, and include spot for parents to sign that they, too, have not given any assistance to their child on the task.

• Outline the class and school rules on cheating and plagiarism clearly. Describe the consequences for such infractions in vivid terms.

• Two-Tier Verification: Do a follow up call or video conference, and ask a select few questions point blank, asking for demonstration of proficiency right there and then. (Trust, but Verify)

• Show students the test or quiz ahead of time. There are not going to be any surprises for students here, and they are more confident going into the exam, reducing anxiety and the panicked moment of cheating. Come across as advocate, not a, “gotcha,” adversary.

• For long-term projects, ask students to submit sub-sections of it for status checks periodically throughout the quarter or trimester.

• Cultivate positive relationships with students, so they know they can be honest with you, trusting that, if they come to you admitting they are not prepared for the exam, you will find a way for them to learn the material, obtain credit for mastery demonstrated at a later date, and save face.

• Allow re-learning and re-assessing for full credit. Make F’s and 0’s recoverable in full. There’s hope here, students reason, so there’s no need to panic and cheat their way to a more acceptable grade.

Potentially Controversial Statement

In the early stages here as we adapt to family inequities, anxieties, grieving, isolation, and teachers’ first steps in distance learning, maybe we shouldn’t sweat the cheating/copying issue at home so much. It’s actually not the bigger issue at hand. It will happen, and we can take steps to minimize it, but it’s not worth a teacher’s harsh scolding at the student or shutting down a student and his learning, particularly when he is deeply stressed, doesn’t have a lot of tools (Executive Function, for example) in his maturity tool belt yet, and mom and dad are struggling a bit in their assistance for him.

And really, our normal responses (detention, suspension, removal from school activities, failing the course, etc) to cheating/copying are ineffective with distance learning in this stressful time. In addition, getting an F doesn’t teach anything. Seriously. Allowing students to remain incompetent and escape their learning doesn’t teach ethics or responsibility.
Definitely Challenging:

- Finding time to get enough evidence to constitute proficiency or a pattern thereof
- Equitable access to online content in students' homes
- Equitable home support, resources, and sleep
- Raised anxiety, panic, and depression levels
- Limited teacher training in assessment design
- Preparing for long term distance learning/grading
- Administrators requiring grades on non-evidence tasks
- Required state/provincial testing
- Requiring students to demonstrate proficiency with anything that requires them to be together. Important point, though: Creative responses to this issue have been blossoming all over the internet and it relatively solvable. So, yeah, do debates, book discussions, mock trials, performances, and the like.

Assistance as We Dive Deeper into these New Waters:

On Twitter: @tguskey @TomSchimmer @mctownsley @garnet_hillman @RoweRikW @MandyStalets @kenoc7 @leeannjung @CVULearns, @rickwormeli2, @myronduck

Websites:
- mctownsley.net/standards-based-grading/
- tguskey.com
- oconnorgrading.com
- cafln.ca/ (Canadian Assessment Learning Network)
- pearsonassessments.com/ati/ (This is the Assessment Training Institute)
- tomschimmer.com
- rickwormeli.com
- crescendoeedgroup.org/community/resources/ (This is Joe Feldman’s grading for equity organization)
- asc.ab.ca (Alberta Assessment Consortium)

Assistance as We Dive Deeper into these New Waters:

- State of Illinois: Remote Learning Recommendations During COVID-19, March 27, 2020, Final Draft: www.isbe.net/Documents/RL-Recommendations-3.27.20.pdf?bcid=IwER1g_2107e-gP4gOPQz3JUd8zUM/S4T9YFWSJZP5WAAUGElP00rQ

[Thanks to Ken O’Connor for sharing this site with us.]
All three just out in 2020!


Warning: "Mind-changing essays, unusually well-researched content, compelling prose, myth-busting impact, and a rather intense Foreword!"
For further conversation about any of these topics:

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