

Tips on Grading for a Growth Mindset

Written by Lisa Blackwell

Last month, I wrote about [a way to empower students to seek challenge and risk mistakes](#)—core principles of a growth mindset. But how can a classroom be risk-tolerant when there are tests and grades at every turn?

Recently, I gave a workshop in an elementary school full of creative and dedicated educators. These teachers thought their kids were wonderful, and they wanted nothing more than to simply nurture their enthusiasm, creativity, and growth. But the students (and their parents) were full of anxiety about grades and state tests.

It's no easier for the teachers. Assessment and grading are among the most complex and controversial areas of teaching, because they're expected to do so many different things: motivate students to do their work; measure progress towards learning goals; identify and promote talent and merit; and hold schools and, increasingly, individual teachers, accountable. Many educators are struggling with these competing priorities, and wonder how they can foster a growth mindset at the same time.

I certainly don't have all the answers! But my colleagues and I have learned some valuable lessons from our research and work with students and teachers.

In the world of the fixed-mindset student, grades measure how smart you are or how much potential you have in the subject at hand. The growth mindset alternative is to view grades as formative feedback that tells you how well you have met learning goals, and whether you need to work harder or change your strategy. But few kids can do so on their own in a context where everyone else—even parents and teachers—are treating grades as an end in themselves, with significant consequences attached to them. They need our help to create a context where assessment is informative and motivating, not judgmental and scary.

Did you ever wonder why students will persist in playing video games for hours, “dying” multiple times before they reach their goal? In a video game, students are motivated by earning points, but they don't get discouraged when they fail. If only they brought that same

spirit to what they learn in school! Of course, many video games have exciting graphics and interesting story lines. (Though those of us old enough to remember Pac-Man know that neither are pre-requisites to obsession!) Most importantly, video games involve skill, challenge, and incremental progress—without the threat of permanent failure or negative judgments from others.

How can you help your students to have a similarly growth-minded view of performance feedback in your classroom?

1. Dispel the mystery.

Make standards transparent. Use rubrics in kid-friendly language and exemplars to help them understand and own their learning goals. Encourage metacognition and self-assessment. Let the student, not the teacher, own the grade. If you do this, students will feel empowered to focus on learning rather than evaluation—one of the key components of a growth mindset framework. This means that you yourself must be really clear about the substance of what you're measuring and why. Simply scoring a certain percentage correct, if the items don't represent clear standards or measure their achievement accurately, creates the illusion of precision but keeps students in the dark about what they have and have not mastered.

2. Don't give grades on every assignment.

When beginning a new topic, give students a low-stakes learning period. Be explicit about this too—let them know that this is a safe space where mistakes are welcomed. Specific feedback that helps guide students is great, as are questions that invite students to assess their own understanding. Some teachers worry that students won't complete a task that doesn't "count" in their grade. In the traditional incentive structure of classrooms, this is true. But you can break the mold and create different kinds of incentives that foster other important aspects of the learning process, for example by recognizing effort, thoroughness, creative approaches, resourcefulness, persistence, and helping others.

3. The word is more powerful than the score (but only if you keep them apart).

Written feedback from teachers is a much more effective learning aid than a grade. It helps students understand what they need to work on to improve. But research studies have shown that most students [1]will not read[/1] comments on an assignment if there is a score

attached[B][I]. [/I][B]So give comments alone on some assignments, especially as students are building skills—and make them really informative. A good question to ask yourself is whether what you have written provides enough information to guide the student toward improvement. Comments like “Good job!” are lovely, but specific notes that refer to the standards are better. To make this more efficient, use rubrics to help highlight key areas of accomplishment and potential improvement, and supplement them with comments.

4. Make assessment a learning experience.

Recent studies have shown that tasks that require you to actively recall and produce knowledge lead to greater learning than those that involve reviewing or recognition. The traditional multiple choice format is largely dependent on recognition. Instead, ask students to put things in their own words. Many standardized tests do require skill in multiple-choice assessment, and so you may need to use it in your classroom so that students become comfortable with it. However, you can supplement it with an additional piece that asks students to [I]explain[/I] their reasoning and use of relevant facts as part of the assessment.

5. Grade for learning, not labor

When you do assign grades, measure mastery rather than task completion. The goal should be actual learning and growth, not compliance. If you have clear targets and good assessments, you will know whether students have achieved the learning goals, and be able to identify where they need to improve. Then emphasize to students that their scores or grades reflect their present level of mastery, and point to the particular areas where they could benefit from increased effort. You can and should recognize effort in your feedback, but students who have learned the key content shouldn't be penalized for a missed assignment with a poor grade. Instead, you can work to build in opportunities for increased challenge in these circumstances.

A component in the final grade that recognizes individual progress is another way to recognize mastery as a process, and to incentivize students to improve regardless of where they began.

6. Create multiple opportunities for mastery.

Students don't all start with the same knowledge base or learn at the same pace, and one-shot assessments can demoralize those who need more time. Nothing is more discouraging to effort and persistence than knowing there's no chance to recover—it's an invitation to

helplessness. So work on the principle of “Not Yet.” One way to do this is to build in spiral curriculum and assessment, returning to key concepts and skills over the course of a term or course. This offers students who struggle with a concept in the beginning more learning opportunities and additional chances to demonstrate mastery. And it also helps the students who initially performed well, because it reinforces what they learned and ensures that it will make its way into long-term memory. Research has shown that distributed practice over longer intervals is much more effective in ensuring deep learning than short-term “cramming” followed by assessment.

7. Use the language of growth.

(Okay, you knew this was going to work its way in here somewhere!) The growth mindset is catching. So model it, teach it, and recognize it explicitly every chance you get. Frame tests as formative feedback for both you and your students (“This will help us decide where we need to do more work”) and as measures of progress (“Let’s see how much we’ve learned”). Praise students for their strategies and improvement, not for perfect performance, to focus them on their learning process rather than your evaluation.

Incorporating these ideas into your classroom is the work of a career, but small steps can make a big difference right away. Thinking and talking with colleagues about assessment practices and how they influence students’ mindsets is a great way to start. We’d love to hear about your challenges and innovations regarding assessment practices here. So please add your thoughts in the comment section below!

<http://community.mindsetworks.com/tips-on-grading-for-a-growth-mindset>