Assessments and Grading in the Midst of a Pandemic

By **Peter DeWitt** on April 13, 2020 7:00 AM

Today's guest blog is written by Thomas R. Guskey, senior research scholar, University of Louisville, and professor emeritus, University of Kentucky.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to educators throughout the world. Schools have had to change entire instructional programs in widely varied contexts with inequitable access to technology and other vital resources. School closures and requirements for social isolation have created untold hardships for students and their families, especially those with multiple children at different grade levels, whose parents cannot stay at home, whose English may not be the primary language, and where the parents are also teachers.

In making these changes, educators recognize that we can't do everything we did before. We must examine our purposes, establish priorities, and decide what is truly most important. When it comes to assessments and grading, two major needs influence these decisions.

First is the need to *encourage and support student learning*. We need to provide the best possible learning experiences for students under these constrained and demanding conditions. We also must do our best to ensure *all* students learn well, achieve important academic goals, and are not hindered in their learning progress.

Second is the need to *document and quantify student learning* for the purposes of accountability. Schools need to verify the success of these alternative instructional programs. For students, we also need to complete report cards and fill in transcripts. For graduating seniors in many schools, we need to calculate class ranks, identify the top 10 percent, distribute academic honors, and name a valedictorian.

Unfortunately, under the adverse circumstances we currently face, these two needs pull us in different directions and prescribe different courses of action. To accomplish one means sacrificing aspects of the other. This brings new importance to establishing our priorities, especially in light of issues related to fairness and equity. For educators who make encouraging and supporting student learning their priority, however, the direction is clear.

Assessments

When it comes to assessments, supporting student learning means focusing on feedback instead of a score or grade. It means helping students to see assessments as

learning tools that have an integral role in the learning process, rather than as evaluation devices that mark the end of learning. It means making clear to students that the primary purpose of assessments is to verify what they've learned and to identify any learning problems so we can work together to remedy those problems. Hence, cheating on an assessment serves no purpose other than to delay our efforts to help *all* students learn well.

An emphasis on feedback also means we must plainly articulate our learning goals and the criteria we use to determine when students meet those goals. We need to be clear about how we will know if students "get it" and not worry about quantifying their performance on a scale with 101 different levels. Most important, we need to plan alternative approaches to help students when they don't get it. This change eliminates the need to distinguish formative and summative assessments. If our focus is on feedback, then *all* assessments are formative until students get it. When results show they get it, then the assessment becomes summative.

Grading

When it comes to grading, encouraging and supporting student learning means ensuring grades accurately reflect what students have learned and are able to do, not when or how they learned it. As schools physically close and move to online learning, most attempt to accomplish this in one of two ways.

In schools required to give grades for the current term, even when not all students have adequate online access, grades are typically based on evidence of student learning gathered up to the time of school closure. But then they do three things:

1. Add an asterisk to the grade to indicate it is based on the portion of the course completed up to the time of school closure.
2. Develop specific procedures that allow students to improve that grade by redoing assignments or assessments, even when the grade remains based on only a portion of the course.
3. Develop additional procedures for students to fulfill all course requirements and complete the course, with assistance from teachers, in order to remove the asterisk from their grade. Schools vary in the timelines they set for both #2 and #3 because the length of school closures remains uncertain. Ensuring fairness and equity for *all* students remains paramount in making these decisions.

Other schools, however, recognize the extraordinary nature of our current situation and are taking the same path as many elite colleges and universities: They are shifting temporarily to "pass/fail," "satisfactory/unsatisfactory," or "credit/incomplete" grading for the current school year. The University of Chicago, Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Stanford University, along with many others, all recently decided to temporarily shift to pass/fail grading after switching to remote learning this semester in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The key to successful pass/fail grading rests in establishing clear criteria for "pass" and making those criteria challenging, rigorous, and attainable. This doesn't mean lowering standards. Rather, it means being clear about the standards and doing all we can to ensure students meet them. Excellent examples of similar pass/fail grading include certification examinations in medicine, nursing, law, military, or civil service.

The ancient Greek physician Hippocrates said, "Desperate times require desperate measures." What he meant is that in adverse circumstances, actions that might have

been rejected under other circumstances may become the best choice. And these are certainly desperate times.

Pass/fail or credit/incomplete grades may prove to be the fairest and most equitable grading option available to educators in these desperate times. By making student learning our primary focus; helping students share the same focus; ensuring the criteria we establish for passing or earning credit are clear, rigorous, and attainable; and then doing everything we can to help *ALL* students meet those criteria; we will make the best of these difficult and trying times.

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