Rick Wormeli

Fair Isn’t Always Equal
Assessing & Grading in the Differentiated Classroom

Facilitator’s Study Guide
Contents

Preface iii
Using the Study Guide iv
Writing a Personal Grading Philosophy Statement (GPS) iv
Prereading Suggestions v
Advice for Difficult Assessment and Grading Conversations vi
Facilitators Don’t Have to Know the Answers vi

Chapter 1 The Differentiated Instruction Mind-set:
  Rationale and Definition 1
Chapter 2 Mastery 3
Chapter 3 Principles of Successful Assessment
  in the Differentiated Classroom 5
Chapter 4 Three Important Types of Assessment 7
Chapter 5 Tiering Assessments 9
Chapter 6 Creating Good Test Questions 11
Chapter 7 The Relative Nature of Grades and Their Definitions 12
Chapter 8 Why Do We Grade, and What About Effort,
  Attendance, and Behavior? 13
Chapter 9 Ten Approaches to Avoid When Differentiating
  Assessment and Grading 14
Chapter 10 Conditions for Redoing Work for Full Credit 15
Chapter 11 Six Burning Grading Issues 16
Chapter 12 Grading Scales 18
Chapter 13 Gradebook Formats for the Differentiated Classroom 19
Chapter 14 Responsive Report Card Formats 21
Chapter 15 Thirty-Six Tips to Support Colleagues
  as They Move Toward Successful Practices
  for Differentiated Classrooms 22
Chapter 16 Putting It All Together: How Do Differentiating
  Teachers Assess and Grade Differently? 23

Supplemental Resources 24
Preface

Through his book Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessing & Grading in the Differentiated Classroom and this study guide, Rick Wormeli shows you the guiding principles of successful assessment and grading in the differentiated classroom. He begins the journey with the end in mind, asking participants in this book study to create their own personal grading philosophy statement that reflects their growing perspectives on differentiated assessment and grading. He leads participants through a clear definition of differentiated instruction and then moves quickly into what constitutes mastery and sound assessment principles. He explains how successful grading rallies around teachers’ clear understanding of their subject content and what they will accept as evidence of subject mastery. This determination is best attained through frequent conversation with colleagues who teach the same subject.

Rick reminds educators of the appropriate and inappropriate purposes of grading, and he identifies common grading practices that actually reduce a grade’s accuracy and usefulness.

With a deeper understanding of the guiding principles of Fair Isn’t Always Equal, participants will be able to reexamine their current grading philosophy and practice and to make necessary changes that ensure a highly responsive and effective learning experience for diverse student populations.

—Eds.
Using the Study Guide

This study guide is intended for use in faculty or team meetings, book study groups, university courses, and workshops. The assumption is that facilitators and school leaders will use this resource to guide professional development for faculty and staff. A separate study guide is available for teachers to use independently or with small groups of their colleagues. (Note: Some of the material is the same in both guides, but most of the pre- and postreading questions are unique to each. You may wish to review the guide for teachers to find additional questions that you can use with your study groups.) Because professional development needs vary, the ideas in this study guide are flexible so facilitators can use or adapt them as necessary.

The sequence of the study guide is important. For example, we really can’t assess students’ work unless we’ve already established what we’ll accept as evidence of learning, so the assessment section follows the material on determining standards and benchmarks (mastery). We can’t grade and report students’ progress without assessing their work properly, so grading comes after assessing. As a facilitator, be aware that educators will struggle with some of the book’s later principles if they don’t have the foundation from these earlier sections.

If you must adjust the sequence, please keep the larger goals in place. Create a clear picture of differentiated instruction, then define mastery, familiarize the group with those nonnegotiable assessment principles, and finally, launch into the issues of grading when fair isn’t always equal. The journey will be smoother as a result.

Keep in mind that reflecting and sharing with colleagues won’t always happen face-to-face. For example, when an activity indicates that participants should summarize their findings with a colleague, such sharing could occur through an e-mail exchange, a blog or wiki journal, a podcast, or in some other format.

In addition, be sensitive to teachers’ concerns about exposing their ideas in a public setting. Create a safe environment for sharing, encouraging open discussion and a willingness to examine one’s practices. Consider using a protocol that inspires nonjudgmental language, especially when asking questions. (See “Advice for Difficult Assessment and Grading Conversations” on page vi for more specific strategies to lead productive faculty conversations.)

Writing a Personal Grading Philosophy Statement (GPS)

The ultimate goal of *Fair Isn’t Always Equal* and this book study is improving instruction to boost student learning. A critical first step for educators is defining their beliefs about instruction and assessment and being willing to do the following:

- Analyze and clarify their thinking so others can understand their core values.
- Interact with colleagues, including receiving and giving constructive critique.
- Revise and solidify their thinking based on what analysis suggests.
- Reflect on their practice, a key attribute of highly accomplished teachers (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards; www.nbpts.org).

One of the most transformative methods of reflecting on core values is creating a Grading Philosophy Statement (GPS). Just like the other GPS (Global Positioning System), this statement functions as a personal navigation device. Creating a GPS helps teachers explain what they do and why they do it.

A GPS has two parts. First, educators write their own statements privately, which consist of the following:
- A clear, one-sentence declaration of each specific assessment policy or belief (Example: 
  Homework will count for 5 percent of a student’s grade in my class)
- A short rationale for each core value

Second, they share the GPS with others and ask for critique. Although the first step is helpful, defending 
their core values is where the most growth occurs.

In their statements, teachers should try to address common practices (grading scales, rubrics, group 
grades, and extra credit) as well as more theoretical issues (What is authentic assessment? Should stu-
dents receive test questions before the actual exams?).

Prereading Suggestions

Many educators don’t realize how their beliefs about assessment and grading affect every aspect of their 
teaching practices. To help participants become aware of their current mind-set, consider assigning some 
of the following questions before the first study group meeting. You could pose selected questions on a 
Ning, a wiki, or a dedicated electronic mailing list and ask participants to come to the meeting prepared 
to discuss their responses. A graduate school course might ask for some written reflection as well. See 
Figure 1.

I have included a range of questions and activities throughout the guide. Some are designed to pro-
vide short answers; others will involve more thought, research, and time. You might choose the short-
answer questions, such as those in Figure 1, to initiate discussions. Questions and activities that require 
more reflection, such as those in Figure 2, can be used to help teachers compile professional portfolios or 
participate in an online network related to this book study or course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1</th>
<th>Checking Current Philosophy About Assessment and Grading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Why do we differentiate instruction?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What does each mark or grade on your grading scale represent?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Are grades precise and accurate indicators of what students know and are able to do? Why or why not?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. If we differentiate instruction for students, do we need to differentiate the assessment and grading as well?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is it important for teachers to have the same grading policies? Why or why not?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What does it mean to grade fairly?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In general, what are grades supposed to represent?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What’s the difference between formative and summative assessments, and what role does each play in the report card grade?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What’s the difference between norm- and criterion-referenced assessments? Which one is more appropriate for the differentiated classroom? Why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How does your philosophy about differentiation and grading vary from the philosophy of colleagues?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. How do you think differentiated instruction will affect schooling in the future?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. What do you hope to get out of your participation in this book study?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advice for Difficult Assessment and Grading Conversations

Because assessment and grading practices are often based on core teaching values, discussing them can evoke strong emotional responses from participants. In addition, our identity as teachers is often so wrapped up in our current practices that any critique of those approaches comes across as a personal attack, suggesting that we are teaching incorrectly. Book study group facilitators should prepare for the occasional divisiveness, self-doubt, and hurt feelings that may occur in discussions of such close-to-home topics: what happens when the stakes are high, yet we strongly disagree with each other?

Facilitators Don’t Have to Know the Answers

One of the most helpful mind-sets for facilitators is to accept that they don’t have to know all the answers to difficult assessment and grading issues. Facilitators don’t just ask questions to which they already know the answers, nor do they try to elicit particular responses from participants. Instead of seeing themselves as orchestra leaders, it’s more helpful for them to be true conductors: present a safe place for curiosity, risk-taking, and feedback, and guide the group members as they brainstorm constructive responses to important, but sometimes difficult, concerns. The facilitator can also help them identify action plans for further investigation if the group members are not prepared to resolve the issue today. This is the facilitator’s chief responsibility—to keep the group on track and exploring, not to be the bearer of policy.
**Tips for Difficult Conversations**

When conversations about assessment and grading issues become tense or divisive, there are several strategies facilitators can use to help teachers respond constructively:

1. Honor the perspectives and experiences participants bring to the group. Dismissing or minimizing participants’ points of view doesn’t incline them to accept others’ perspectives or new ideas; it shuts them down. Try to incorporate each participant’s background in your response, or point to the connections between that background and others’ experiences:

   **Dave, your work in rural schools with two-hour bus rides for students made it impossible to do anything like this after school hours. What were some of the other options you considered when it came to students redoing work?**

   Facilitators want teachers to personalize the ideas for themselves. To help, ask participants to consider what applying the ideas and policies would mean for their individual subjects or roles in the school building. If they say it would be difficult to implement an approach, ask them what they would need to change to make it work or live up to the accepted principle. Begin some questions with, “Based on your experience . . .” and, “How does this fit with what you know?”

2. Set the tone of civil debate from the beginning. Ask everyone to play the role of a skeptical Socrates or devil’s advocate at every turn. If possible, make it your responsibility to be contrarian—even to ideas you suggest—to help everyone fully explore the principles under review. Unexamined concepts don’t serve us as well as fully examined ones do, and we give ideas life through debate, not quick acquiescence.

   A good way to politely air opposing views is to distribute large index cards with “Yeah, but . . .” written boldly across the front. Participants wave the cards when they have a concern about an assessment or grading concept.

   It’s also useful to have everyone list issues and concerns about assessment and grading on index cards throughout the session. Ask participants to submit the cards anonymously afterward. Before the next meeting, you can look through the cards, note the group’s needs, plan accordingly, and organize the cards for group processing and response to kick off the next session. If the facilitator posts the questions, participants will be less likely to let biases toward personalities and programs color their thinking. In addition, the facilitator can affirm the value of contrarian statements by recording and listing them again for everyone at the end of the session.

3. When participants are particularly divisive or suggest something you know is an inappropriate policy or strategy, you may want to ask them to explain their position. You or others may have misunderstood them; clarifying ensures hurt feelings don’t build from unclear communication. Use an invitational, nonjudgmental phrase such as, “Tell me more about that.” When asked to fill in the details, participants will often realize the limits of their original positions.

   However, let’s say a participant clarifies and you are correct—the ideas are inappropriate or incorrect. Consider asking the participant a series of questions so he or she can see the potential fallout:

   **Let’s apply that policy to a second-period English class with 50 percent ELL students. Would it still create an accurate report of every student’s performance against the standards? How does that stance fit with our accepted definition of formative assessment?**
4. Provide the big-picture perspective. When there is serious division among the group members, or one teacher is largely contrarian or uncooperative, focus on the crucial aspects of your conversation:

*What if we applied this policy to all students in all situations—would it still be effective?*
*What’s the role of homework?*
*How do we know whether an assessment is formative or summative?*

5. If someone is troubled by the policy, he or she may be feeling backed into a corner with no alternative. Clear thinking rarely happens when we feel emotional. During these times, it may be helpful to give teachers an “out.” Ask them to try the new idea on just one assessment, for just one subset of students, or for a finite period of time, and then to return to the group with the results. This more limited process helps everyone see the endeavor as analytical, removing some of the angst that accompanies most educational change.

6. If someone struggles with a particular assessment or grading policy, it often helps to ask him or her to compare it with how we treat each other and, in particular, how we as adults use teacher evaluations. We can come up with examples in all professions, actually. For instance, would we ever tolerate having a single observation of our teaching be the sole determinant of a salary increase or decrease? No, because we realize anyone can have a bad day, and the most accurate evaluations come with clear and consistent evidence over time. In other professions, are we ever allowed to redo something that was incomplete or substandard the first time? Yes. Are there formative moments in the fields of architecture, medicine, and law enforcement? Yes. Comparing with the adult world helps teachers escape the myopia that happens when focusing only on conventional classroom practices.

Caution: Be careful of the “We don’t do that in the real world” rationalizations about assessment and grading. Help the group or individual remember that educators are experts in the way the mind best learns and that we should teach that way. Yes, school is preparatory for the world beyond school, but treating students as if they were proficient and mature adults is wrong. They are in the formative stage of learning. As adult learners we would never tolerate summative demands on our performance when we are en route to proficiency. This principle pertains to almost all philosophical issues associated with differentiated instruction and standards-based grading. It’s worth discussing with the group.
CHAPTER 1

The Differentiated Instruction Mind-set: Rationale and Definition

Overview

This chapter addresses many of the concerns educators have about differentiation, such as whether it makes learning too easy for students and properly prepares students for standardized testing situations or the world beyond school.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

(Note: For the purposes of space, we did not repeat questions mentioned in the prereading section. However, you may wish to include some of those questions with this chapter and subsequent ones. After reading the chapters, participants may be open to revising their earlier thinking, which can lead to important interactions in individual and group professional development.)

In order to be helpful and not overwhelm participants, ask them to answer only a few questions from the list of suggestions, not all of them. In every case, ask them to explain their rationales and be prepared to defend their positions.

- What is your definition of differentiated instruction?
- What can you point to in your class that demonstrates a differentiated approach?
- Why do we differentiate instruction and assessment for students?
- Do differentiated practices have a positive or negative effect on students’ performances on standardized tests? How do you know?
- If two students do different tasks as part of the same unit of study, and both earn an A on the assessment, did the work have equal value?

Practice and Application Ideas to Further Understanding

Depending on your needs and time frame, ask participants to complete one or more of the following activities. Mutual sharing, either in your meetings or in an online format, would be beneficial. See the Supplemental Resources list included at the end of this study guide for suggested reading.
Interview at least five colleagues about their perceptions of differentiated instruction and report the results. Compare their perceptions with your own.

Create a working metaphor or analogy for differentiation that communicates its fundamental message clearly for others. As a reference point for the metaphor, consider objects, social structures, geographical features, and anything else from your subject area that would illuminate the purpose of differentiated instruction.

Identify at least four specific steps you can take to become more aware of differentiated practices, and implement them in your classroom.

Participate in an online conversation on an electronic mailing list or in a wiki project on differentiated practices. A good place to start is with subject associations, such as National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), International Reading Association (IRA), and so forth.

Describe what a highly accomplished, professional educator should do if a colleague in the classroom next door refused to differentiate instruction for a diverse group of students.

Ask your building administrator or school division’s administrators for their philosophy on differentiated instruction. Compare it with your own. If they are not up-to-date with differentiated practices, share three actions they can take to be supportive of differentiation in the school.
Overview

Before we can assess or grade students’ work, we must understand the learning targets for ourselves. This involves more than just listing a standard or outcome at the top of a lesson plan. We must be able to clearly communicate those goals to colleagues, students, and parents; break down the larger goals and standards into cohesive instructional units; and defend our choices and practices with evidence. This chapter explains the complex process of defining mastery learning and helping students achieve it.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

1. We often hear the terms mastery, competency, proficiency, literacy, and understanding. Choose one of these terms and define it in student- and parent-friendly language.
2. Identify one standard, outcome, benchmark, or learning target that you will address during the year. Describe the work from students that you would accept as evidence that they have achieved the goal.
3. Is it necessary for teachers of the same subject to be consistent in their definitions of mastery? Why or why not?

Practice and Application Ideas to Further Understanding

1. It’s beneficial to discuss multiple examples of excellence from students, but we can’t stop there. We develop a more accurate and useful understanding of acceptable evidence for mastery when we also draft an operative definition of mastery and share it with others. The composition and articulation of our definition of mastery, including its defense as warranted, is seriously powerful for participants. Some secondary English departments, for example, spend hours discussing anchor papers so they can agree on what they’ll accept as qualifying for a 4.0, 3.0, 2.0, or 1.0 writing performance; yet, without first taking a step back and identifying what they are seeking and how it fits into their general definition of mastery, grading across the department will still be inconsistent at best—and, for many, final marks will not be accurate.
If we define mastery as something more than simple recall of facts or rote execution of tasks, we won’t settle for just these elements in the evaluative criteria for writing compare-and-contrast papers in our department. Instead, our definition of mastery includes the need to apply knowledge skillfully, demonstrating attention to more than one facet. We reflect on this larger point as we discuss specific rubrics. If we never fully captured our sense of mastery, we’d have no point of reference as we develop our evaluative criteria. Consequently, we tend to stray from what is accurate, consistent, and useful.

Review the definition of mastery at the bottom of page 12 in *Fair Isn’t Always Equal*. Does this definition work for you? If not, write your own definition of mastery. Share it with the book study group and invite critique. Ask colleagues from your department to share their definitions. Consider revising your definition based on insights gained from these interactions.

- Discuss with colleagues how best to resolve differences about what you will accept as evidence of mastery.
- Read the standards and benchmarks recommended by a national professional association that represents the subject you teach. Summarize for a colleague where your program of studies differs from those national standards and benchmarks. Are these differences important? Should you change anything you’re doing as a result of this comparison?
CHAPTER 3

Principles of Successful Assessment in the Differentiated Classroom

Overview

This chapter describes universally accepted assessment practices that need to be in place for learning to occur. The chapter includes a special emphasis on formative assessment and how to take action based on what it reveals about student learning. It also explores the importance of keeping assessments substantive, authentic, and varied over time.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- Is it necessary to assess students before, during, and after instruction?
- Should we hand students a copy of the final assessment on the first day of the new unit we’re teaching? Why or why not?
- How many assessments in a grading period are sufficient?
- Does varying the format of an assessment diminish its value?
- What is authentic assessment? Can you find examples from your classroom or those of your colleagues?
- What makes an assessment a valuable indicator of learning?
- What advice about assessment would you give to a new teacher?
- How should assessment guide instructional decisions?
- Explain “standards/outcomes-based assessment” and provide an example.
- What’s the difference between formative and summative assessment? Which one has more impact on students’ learning?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Each of the prereading questions serves well as a postreading reflective prompt. Choose any three from the prereading list and respond based on insights gained while reading and discussing Chapter 3.
Design a high-quality summative assessment based on at least five principles described in the chapter. Show this assessment to a colleague, explaining how you demonstrated each principle. Do the same thing with a formative assessment of the same material.

Identify one assessment principle from Chapter 3 that is new for you, and identify three steps you will take to learn more about it and incorporate it into your instruction.

Choose one assessment principle from Chapter 3 with which you disagree and read at least one other article or chapter from a book on assessment about that same principle. Compare the two perspectives with your own and summarize your observations for a colleague.

Watch one professional development video on assessment and compare the video content with the principles in Chapter 3. For good videos (or at least great launching points for finding good videos) on assessment, consider these sources: the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (www.ascd.org), Dylan Wiliam (www.dylanwiliam.net), Grant Wiggins (www.grantwiggins.org and www.authenticeducation.org), Jay McTighe (www.jaymctighe.com), Rick Stiggins (www.assessmentinst.com), and the Educational Testing Service (www.ets.org).
CHAPTER 4

Three Important Types of Assessment

Overview

Chapter 4 focuses on three types of assessment that research has shown to be effective: portfolios, rubrics, and student self-assessment.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- What is portfolio assessment, and what can it offer us that wouldn’t be achieved by other forms of assessment?
- What makes a rubric effective?
- What’s the difference between holistic and analytic rubrics?
- What role does student self-assessment play in learning?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Design a rubric for a unit you will teach later this year. Analyze it against the criteria for successful rubrics described in this chapter. Summarize for a colleague where it worked and where it fell short. Revise the rubric in light of new insight gained from the interaction with your colleague.
- Identify at least one assessment insight gained or reaffirmed for your own assessment designs. For example, while working with students you may have discovered that if students see descriptors for rubric levels lower than the one provided for excellence, they settle for these lower levels and don’t push for the higher performance in their work. You wonder what would happen if you gave them only the description for excellence. Would they rally around only evaluative criteria for excellence and thereby come closer to achieving them? If so, maybe you should provide only the descriptor for standards of excellence on the next assessment, and nothing else.
- Teach a lesson with no opportunities for regular and meaningful self-assessment by students. Then teach a lesson with ample opportunities for students to assess their understanding and
performance against the lesson’s goals. Finally, analyze students’ final performance in relation to the standard(s) taught a week or more later. Which approach led to more learning?

- Create a professional portfolio of items that represent your best teaching attributes. This can be in hard copy or electronic. Be sure to include reflections on the works you deem important enough to include in the collection. If time allows, pattern your professional portfolio on the descriptions provided for portfolio preparation by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (www.nbpts.org).
Overview

This chapter provides clear strategies and examples for raising and lowering the complexity or challenge level of assessments.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- Why would we want to tier an assessment?
- How do we tier assessments while also holding students accountable for the established curriculum goals?
- Is it appropriate for students to negotiate with teachers about how they will demonstrate mastery of content?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Choose any two of the tiering formats presented in the chapter, and list the advantages and disadvantages for you and your students.
- In writing or through a multimedia presentation, create a powerful rationale for tiering assignments and assessments for students in diverse classrooms. Then ask a colleague to find “holes” in your thinking and revise the rationale to respond to those concerns. Finally, present the rationale to a parent or group of parents and report their response to this book study group.
- Create a T-chart that lists pros and cons about tiering instruction/assessments for students. Share this with a colleague and solicit critique.
- Consider the differences between tiering during the learning process and tiering for individuals who have already demonstrated full competency or certification in the field. If there are differences, what are they? Do you think tiering assignments and assessments during the learning process yields a better performance from the student after he or she has achieved mastery? Why or why not?
- In what situations would tiering assessments be inappropriate? Why?
Besides the time factor, what are the downsides of tiering assessments? Share your response with another member of the book study group and see if you agree. If you do, what can you do about this potential issue? If you don’t, consider whether or not you need to revise your thinking.

How does tiering assessments and assignments run counter to the factory model of schooling?

Teach a lesson on tiering to your students so they understand it and avail themselves of the strategy when you use it in class. If time allows, invite students to assist you in tiering when you plan your lessons. Observe student reactions; share both the lessons and the student responses with the book study group.
CHAPTER 6

Creating Good Test Questions

Overview

Some questions are so confusing to students that they are unable to respond in a way that accurately renders what they know and can do. This chapter explains how to design test questions that are important enough to ask and clear enough to answer.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- Identify three or more typical types of test questions, and list at least one advantage and one disadvantage for each.
- How can teachers be sure their tests assess what they want them to assess?
- What types of test questions were most comfortable for you as a student? Which ones created anxiety for you?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Design a quiz or test for an upcoming unit using at least three of the suggestions in this chapter that are fairly new for you. Analyze students' responses after they complete the test to determine whether this was a successful assessment format. Did students understand the test prompt and respond accordingly? Did you get the information you needed from their responses?
- With a colleague, describe how differentiated instruction principles directly affect test design.
CHAPTER 7

The Relative Nature of Grades and Their Definitions

Overview

Chapter 7 dives into the subjective, relative, and inferential natures of grading systems. It propels educators into discussions about how to define grades and asks teachers to ensure that grades are criterion-referenced.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- Should teachers be consistent in their marking and grading of students’ work? Should the practices be consistent across the school?
- How can grades be subjective? Relative? Inferential?
- What do we mean by criterion- and norm-referenced in assessment?
- Does a mark of “Incomplete” help or hinder students’ learning? How so?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- With colleagues from your department, come to agreement about what each letter grade or symbol in your grading system means. Realize that this may take ten minutes or ten weeks.
- Identify at least three ways you will keep your grades from becoming overly subjective, relative, or inferential. Alternatively, identify what you can change in your classroom practice to ensure that grades more accurately reflect what students know and are able to do in response to the curricular goals.
- With the insights gained from the book so far and your personal experience, design the ideal reporting system for today’s classrooms.
- Design a common assessment for a particular unit of study with colleagues from your department. Then identify the scoring criteria for the common assessment, coming to consensus about what each of you will tolerate as evidence of mastery for each learning goal.
CHAPTER 8

Why Do We Grade, and What About Effort, Attendance, and Behavior?

Overview

Chapter 8 focuses on the purposes of standards-based grading and the need to avoid factors that dilute grade accuracy.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- Do high and low grades motivate students?
- If you had to choose only one, which is more important: the student learning the material or meeting a deadline? What does your choice mean for your grading policies?
- Should music students be graded on attending an evening concert for the school band or orchestra? Alternatively, should an art student be graded on submitting work to a national art contest, or just on the artistic skill demonstrated in the work? Why do you believe as you do?
- What is the greater gift to the student in the long run: recording an F on the report card for not demonstrating evidence of meeting the learning standard, or recording a C on the report card because even though the student didn’t learn, he or she followed the rules and worked diligently throughout the unit of study?
- If a teacher is wavering on what to record on the student’s report card, should he or she consider the student’s effort and behavior? Why do you believe as you do?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Revisit any of the prereading questions in your postreading discussion.
- Identify three common but inappropriate grading policies within teachers’ classrooms, and link each one to a parallel perspective in the teacher’s adult world. For example, when a teacher shows up every day but fails to teach students well, are we paying that teacher to be present or to teach well?
- What are the possible consequences of using grades to motivate, reward, and affirm students?
CHAPTER 9

Ten Approaches to Avoid When Differentiating Assessment and Grading

Overview

Chapter 9 discusses many conventional grading practices that do not serve their intended purpose of revealing students’ progress toward subject mastery.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- Should nonacademic factors such as attendance, behavior, and effort be combined with the academic grade if the report card does not have a separate section for these attributes?
- Does using alternative assessment with students who learn differently dilute accountability?
- Is it okay for extra-credit points to change the grade on a test or the main grade for the unit of study?
- Should students who do more challenging work get more credit for doing so?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of grading on a curve?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Design an ideal report card reflecting the philosophy of standards-based reporting described in this chapter. Ask at least one other person to critique it. Alternatively, describe how you would change your school’s current report card to better reflect the standards-based grading practices presented in this chapter.
- Identify what you’ll accept as evidence that students have met one of your learning standards, and then identify at least three other ways students could demonstrate proficiency.
- Describe a situation in which a teacher who thought he or she was testing content mastery instead measured the process or format of learning.
- Design an extra-credit policy that the whole school can use. Ask at least two of your colleagues to critique it.
CHAPTER 10

Conditions for Redoing Work for Full Credit

Overview
Chapter 10 probes the practice of letting students redo assignments and assessments, and it suggests strategies to ensure that students don’t abuse the policy.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- What’s your policy for redoing class work and homework? How, if at all, does your policy change for major grades such as scores earned on tests, projects, presentations, writings, and summative performances?
- Is there anything you would never let a student redo? Why or why not?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Compare your redo policy with that of your team or department. Note what is different and the same, and then present your observations to the team or department, discussing whether or not everyone should have the same policy.
- Consider four test questions or tasks from a recent or future unit of study, and identify at least two other ways you could assess students’ mastery of these same standards if you had to retest on the same material.
- What do successful teachers do when a student gets a lower grade on subsequent attempts at tests and projects?
- Identify three scenarios from the adult world in which we’re allowed to redo a task if we do it incorrectly the first time around.
CHAPTER 11

Six Burning Grading Issues

Overview
Whenever school districts move to standards-based grading, as often happens in differentiated classes, conventional practices long considered appropriate are threatened. Chapter 11 provides constructive responses to issues that arise.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- What is the purpose of changing zeros on the 100-point scale to 50s or higher? Why do some teachers refuse to do this?
- How should late work be recorded in the gradebook?
- Should we grade students with individualized education plans (IEPs—or individual progress plans [IPPs] in Canada) the same as we grade students who have not been identified for special education services?
- What’s the difference between automaticity and concept attainment? Should a grade be higher for one of these? Is one preferred over the other?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Write a rationale for parents and colleagues to explain why zeros should be turned into 50s or higher on the 100-point scale. Alternatively, present a rationale for how use of the 100-point scale distorts the accuracy of a letter grade tied to a standard.
- Create a system that better responds to the dilemma posed by Roxanne, secondary teacher, on page 143 (sidebar). How would a developmentally appropriate school report her daughter’s performance?
- After reading pages 145–147, identify and explain elements of the curriculum that you and your colleagues consider necessary for students to learn to an automaticity state. Then identify at least three strategies you can use to create that automaticity in students and how you would assess students’ performance.
Identify one advanced concept in your curriculum that you could teach successfully to students even though they have not yet mastered all the smaller “stepping-stones” to the concept. Next, design at least three test questions that would assess students’ knowledge of the advanced concept accurately without distorting the final score (grade). Be very specific in how you would design these assessments to get at the essence of the standard.

Draw connections between your current classroom policies for handling students’ late work and policies for evaluating teacher and principal performance. Consider every aspect, not just some. Once you’ve done this, consider whether or not it would be a satisfactory system for all stakeholders. If not, explain what would need to change for it to be satisfactory, and whether or not that reconsideration of adult policies will result in any change in your classroom policies for students.

Examine the progress report that accompanies one of your special education students’ individualized education plans. Note what is reported there and compare it with what a regular report card reports. Get a clear picture of what each report card can and cannot report.
Overview
This chapter reveals the arbitrary and ineffective nature of many conventional grading scales and provides practical tips for resolving these issues.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- Which scale do you prefer, 100.0 (points and percentages) or smaller scales, such as 4.0, with worded descriptors? Why do you believe as you do?
- Can the commonly known 4.0 scale limit or distort successful communication with parents?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Inter-rater reliability refers to consistency among raters (teachers) in their assessing. High inter-rater reliability means that an A in one teacher’s class indicates the same level of performance (mastery) as an A in another teacher’s class. These teachers are consistent with one another in how they score students’ papers. Low inter-rater reliability means that there is little reliability from rater to rater. For example, a particular level of student performance in one teacher’s class is reported as an A, but the same level of performance in another teacher’s class is reported as a C. In standards-based classrooms, high inter-rater reliability is beneficial. How do smaller scales create higher inter-rater reliability, and is this preferred?
- Do you agree with Tom Pollack’s opinion (page 153) for why mathematically determining grades puts educators “in bad shape”?
- Is it inappropriate to hold students’ earlier digressions against them in the final grade?
- Create a 4.0/100.0 scale correlation for you and your team, department, or school to use, similar to the one on page 154. Add a fourth column: a thoughtfully worded descriptor for performance in relation to the standard.
CHAPTER 13

Gradebook Formats
for the Differentiated Classroom

Overview

Many conventional gradebooks that teachers create for themselves do not reflect responsive teaching or standards-based grading. This chapter provides examples of gradebook formats that support differentiated instruction.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- Does your current gradebook provide helpful information for lesson planning? Does it provide helpful information for students’ parents?
- Is it okay to adjust the weight or influence of some scores/grades for individual students?
- If a student demonstrates mastery of a concept, does the medium used to represent that mastery matter?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Modify what you consider the most useful gradebook for you and your discipline using any of the insights gained from this chapter, and then present the revised version to your book study group for critique.
- Explain how your gradebook is responsive to differentiated practices.
- Research “electronic gradebook” on the Internet. Visit at least three sites and identify three or more differences. Then, either with these three choices or moving back to the main search list, find an electronic gradebook that most closely reflects sound differentiated instruction and standards-based grading practices. Be very specific in what you identify as supportive of these two approaches. Present your findings to your study group. This presentation is key: articulating your defense of concepts increases the likelihood of regular reference to them in your daily thinking. A format I’ve used in the past is based on the ideas of Robert Marzano and others:
### Summative Assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standards/Outcomes</th>
<th>XYZ Test, part 1</th>
<th>PQR Project</th>
<th>EFG Observ.</th>
<th>XYZ Test, part 2</th>
<th>GHI Perf. Task</th>
<th>Most Consistent Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 [Descriptor]</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 [Descriptor]</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 [Descriptor]</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 [Descriptor]</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 [Descriptor]</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overview

Chapter 14 begins with a call to make report cards responsive to all stakeholders (teachers, parents, students, and the community) but recognizes that not all formats will succeed. The chapter suggests some alternatives and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- Design the ideal report card. What are the features that make it so valuable?
- What is the educational role of report cards, progress reports, and interim reports?
- What would you change about your current report card to make it more effective and clear to everyone who sees it?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Design a report card that clearly separates academic performance from character and work habit evaluations.
- Is it better to grade students in comparison with commonly accepted standards, in terms of their personal progress over time, or both? Explain your response.
- Regular school and district report cards report students’ performance against regular standards only. Explain how we can adjust the regular report card to report work done below or above grade as well.
CHAPTER 15

Thirty-Six Tips to Support Colleagues as They Move Toward Successful Practices for Differentiated Classrooms

Overview

Many of the ideas in *Fair Isn’t Always Equal* ask teachers and administrators to change their philosophy and behavior regarding instruction, assessment, and grading. This chapter offers strategies to guide the process.

Questions to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- What motivates teachers to change their thinking about an educational philosophy or practice?
- How can colleagues challenge and help each other grow without alienating each other?
- Identify two or three ideas from other chapters that would create controversy if enacted school-wide. What would make the transition to these ideas smoother for everyone involved?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Choose five questions or ideas from the list on page 183 and try them with your colleagues or faculty. Report the results to the book study group.
- What keeps teachers from fully embracing new ideas, and what can we do, specifically, to remove these roadblocks?
- What skills do teachers need in order to discuss controversial topics with each other? If teachers don’t have those skills, what can be done to make sure they get them?
CHAPTER 16

Putting It All Together: How Do Differentiating Teachers Assess and Grade Differently?

Overview

How does an educator pull together all the perspectives and strategies presented in *Fair Isn’t Always Equal* and use them daily in the classroom? Chapter 16 suggests how this can be accomplished.

Question to Consider Before and After Reading the Chapter

- How do teachers assess and grade appropriately in a differentiated classroom?

Practice and Application to Further Understanding

- Write your own version of this chapter. Based on the insights gained from reading the book and sharing ideas with your study group, answer the question clearly: how do teachers assess and grade appropriately in a differentiated classroom? Compare your response with the responses from other members of your group. Remember, it’s the discussion that most affects our thinking, not the genesis of the product.
For further reading in differentiated instruction, the following resources are highly recommended:


For professional development in differentiated instruction, the two best companies with terrific trainers are Staff Development for Educators (www.sde.com) and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (www.ascd.org). For more information on leading the professional development for differentiated instruction, the following books are highly recommended:


Muhammad, Anthony. 2009. *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.


For further reading in assessment and grading, particularly when focusing on standards-based grading and differentiation, the following resources are highly recommended:


For good videos (or at least great launching points for finding good videos) on assessment, the following resources are recommended: the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (www.ascd.org), Dylan Wiliam’s Web site (www.dylanwiliam.net), Grant Wiggins’s Web sites (www.grantwiggins.org and www.authenticeducation.org), Jay McTighe’s Web site (www.jaymctighe.com), Rick Stiggins’s Assessment Training Institute (www.assessmentinst.com), and the Educational Testing Service (www.ets.org).