

## 5 Years Later: Assessment

*Investigating Our Practice*



I remember feeling pleased with myself as I posted spreadsheets full of marks, several years ago. The essays had been graded, missing assignments had been assigned zeros, and my students would be able to check their progress in anticipation of the upcoming "marks cut-off day." I occasionally heard a student exclaim, "Argh! She's giving me 36%!" as he or she examined the spreadsheet. That sort of comment always frustrated me. I was not "giving" the student 36%. Rather, he or she had not submitted assignments. I began to realize that, for some students, the grade on the spreadsheet was the grade that they identified with; they did not see opportunity to improve, but they saw their own "failure" in the course and, therefore, my failure as a teacher.

I am definitely not the same teacher I was five years ago, nor am I the type of secondary school teacher that I thought I would become. I hope to include a few reflections over several blog posts, as I look back at where I came from and where I hope to go as a classroom teacher. The most significant shift in my thinking is

in regards to assessment. In most elementary schools, grades are determined holistically. Teachers assign letter grades based on the most recent and consistent work from the student, formal assignments, and informal observations. I was very

comfortable with this in my practicum in a grade five class in Port Moody. For some reason, I began teaching secondary school with the impression that secondary school marks had to be entered into a spreadsheet. Perhaps the presence of BCeSIS had something to do with that. I agonized when a student was at 47% in my spreadsheet. If a student who consistently achieved Bs bombed a quiz, I entered the mark into the spreadsheet and let it "bring the mark down." I gave students zeroes if they didn't turn an assignment in, not considering whether or not the student had already met that particular learning outcome. Like most teachers, I made exceptions for students with extenuating circumstances, or

moved a 72% to a 73% so that the student would have a B, but I wasn't as flexible as I could have been.

My thinking has shifted significantly over the years as I have intentionally moved to more

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holistic assessment. This happened through conversations with my friends and colleagues [Matt](#) and [Michelle](#), as well as a number of professional development sessions, including one from several Rockridge Secondary teachers who use "numberless" assessment in their classrooms. I have come to realize that assessment is not about entering numbers into a spreadsheet; it is about determining the strengths and challenges that each student possesses, and identifying areas for focus and change in the future.

While many students, educators, and parents find it preferable to see a spreadsheet with marks, I do not believe that this is the best way to

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assess a student.

[This article](#) discusses assessment in a way that resonates with me; I have thought back to it often.

In all but one course last year, I didn't post spreadsheets on the wall; rather, I discussed marks with students throughout the term. I still track marks in spreadsheets for easy recordkeeping, but the spreadsheet does not determine the student's final mark; I do. Though I have no data to support this claim, I am convinced that students are more likely to turn in work when I tell them that they have three missing assignments than they are when they see three blank spaces on a spreadsheet alongside a disappointing grade. Something about seeing a grade in writing gives the impression that it is final, even if we are mid-way through the term.

When I posted marks, I could tell that some students turned in "enough to pass," but not enough to succeed. Conferencing with students has enabled me to increase my students' achievement and motivation. It also allows me to discuss alternatives with them, if needed. Instead of letting students feel satisfied with "zeros" and "enough to pass," they are occasionally told that I can't assign them a passing mark until these key learning outcomes are met. As I move toward "counting" summative assessment, and leaving formative assessment for practice, this becomes a concept which must be understood. I do consider the formative assessment for some students, but summative assignments generally demonstrate greater mastery of learning outcomes.

Below are a few questions which were asked of me, or I asked of myself, as I explored the rather daunting topic of assessment:

- What would the student's mark be if I had made that assignment/test/quiz worth twice as much?
- What would the student's mark be if it was worth half as much?
- Why did I say that the assignment was "worth" 10 marks? Why not 15? Or 20?
- What learning outcomes am I trying to assess through this assessment?
- Has the student met those learning outcomes in another way? (For example, did the student participate actively in the discussion but struggle with written work?)
- Can this student meet those learning outcomes in another way?
- Why am I counting formative assessment "against" a student? (For example, if a student struggled with a concept early on, but has now demonstrated that he consistently masters the learning outcome, why do I include poor marks in his assessment?)
- If I consider the student's achievement and mastery of course concepts overall, does the percentage in the spreadsheet reflect his or her ability? Why or why not?
- What is the difference between a mark of 80% and a mark of 82%?

Considering the students' overall achievement, and leaving room for them to redeem themselves is not "letting them off the hook." It is allowing them to learn and meet outcomes at their own pace. It is holding them accountable for learning outcomes, rather than allowing them to avoid work by "taking a zero" on the spreadsheet. That is definitely not something that I'd have said five years ago. I strongly believed that students needed to be held accountable for missed work through zeroes rather than insisting that they meet the learning outcomes. I believed that all students should complete the same assignments according to the same criteria.



As my assessment becomes more flexible, my students have more opportunities to succeed and, in turn, learn more. They don't learn anything about course content

from a zero. As they see success, I see their level of motivation increase. A student who sees that he or she is capable of success is more likely to try in the future. As well, when I say things like, "I haven't received enough work from

This shift in assessment is not an easy change to make. Many students and parents want to see spreadsheets. I was one of those students, so I understand this desire. I am working to communicate more with my

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you to assess your understanding," it seems more reasonable than a row of zeros on a spreadsheet which scream, "You're failing!"

This places me in the role of a coach, helping the student to develop a plan to meet learning outcomes, not the role of a dictator who says that they have failed simply because they did not try. Asking students to develop a plan for assignment completion puts the onus on them and shows them that the course doesn't disappear when they choose to avoid it. I hope to continue my shift toward portfolio-based assessment in the upcoming school year and have further discussions with students about how and assess why I am making these choices.

students about the fact that assessment is not like a video game; the goal is not to earn enough "points" to receive specific percentage. Rather, my job is to assess their strengths and areas in which they struggle and help them to develop a plan for future growth. 🌱

