Equitable Grading Unlocked



PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FROM THE CLASSROOM

HOWARD YANK

MAIKA YEIGH

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Sustainable school change is complex—especially when it challenges long-standing practices like grading. Although many recognize that traditional grading systems are inequitable, moving from awareness to meaningful implementation is a far more difficult journey.

This book exists because of the educators who have taken that journey. They've wrestled with hard questions, navigated pushback, and worked tirelessly to build systems that better reflect student learning and honor diverse strengths. Their skills as teachers have been honed along the way. These teachers remind us that changing grading practices isn't just a technical task—it's emotional and relational work rooted in deep commitment to equity.

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1

Practice Work

Uncoupling Practice from Grading

Have you ever found yourself overwhelmed by a mountain of student work that has accumulated on your desk or amassed in files on Google Classroom or Canvas? Not only are you daunted by the prospect of grading and recording all this work, but you haven't even started to plan tomorrow's lessons? If so, you are not alone.

The practice of grading student work has long been a cornerstone of education. However, as understanding of effective pedagogy evolves, so too does our approach to assessment. This chapter delves into the contentious issue of grading formative or practice work, challenging the traditional notion that all student efforts must be quantified and recorded. First, we will look at why grading practice work and class participation (despite its prevalence) may be harmful and counterproductive to the goal of education: fostering learning and growth. Then we will focus on the challenges facing teachers who want to move away from scoring everything students produce, presenting options for meeting these challenges and helping students and their families see the connection between practice work and assessment results.

The Pitfalls of Grading Practice Work

In 1986, Butler and Nisan demonstrated that grades can undermine intrinsic motivation and creativity in learning tasks. Grading practice work may seem to hold students accountable, but it can inadvertently create several situations that undermine the learning process. Let's delve into some of these.

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Student Stress

One of the most deleterious effects of grading practice work is the stress it places on students. When every assignment carries the weight of a grade, students may find themselves in a constant state of anxiety, fearing that each misstep will negatively affect their academic standing. The perception that the stakes are high creates a high-pressure environment in which students may become overly focused on achieving perfect scores rather than engaging deeply with the material to develop their skills and knowledge. Grading every assignment tends to reduce students' interest in what they are learning and discourages intellectual risk taking (Guskey, 2022; Kohn, 2011). Academic anxiety not only hinders students' ability to learn but also affects their overall well-being and can lead to mental health issues (Leslie, 2021).

Integrity

An emphasis on grading practice work also creates an environment ripe for unethical choices. When students feel that their worth is measured by every grade, including grades on formative assessments, they may resort to dishonest practices to maintain their academic standing. Traditional points-based grading practices can significantly influence the likelihood of academic dishonesty from students who feel they cannot complete practice tasks successfully (Talbert, 2023). When students believe they cannot take risks and make mistakes, it not only undermines the integrity of the educational process but also robs them of valuable learning opportunities.

Teacher Priorities

Grading every piece of practice work creates an enormous burden. Teachers find themselves drowning in a sea of papers to score or grade, leaving little time for activities such as providing meaningful feedback or planning engaging lessons. In their study on grading, Schinske and Tanner (2014) conclude that "the time and stress associated with grading has the potential to distract instructors from other, more meaningful aspects of teaching and learning" (p. 159). Grading every assignment creates a huge downside for both teachers and students, while also limiting the actual benefits of practice work.

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The Pitfalls of Grading Class Participation

Some teachers try to encourage student engagement by grading class participation, but this practice has the potential to introduce significant bias and create unintended negative consequences. Grading participation can disproportionately disadvantage introverted students, who may need more time to process information before speaking (Cain, 2012). As noted by Feldman (2024b), this approach can also unfairly affect students with disabilities (e.g., anxiety disorders, speech impediments, processing differences); students from historically marginalized groups who may have different cultural norms around verbal participation; and multilingual learners, who may be less confident in their English skills.

Moreover, the pressure to participate for a grade can inhibit students' oral processing and thoughtful contributions. Students may feel compelled to speak up even when they haven't fully formulated their ideas, leading to superficial comments rather than meaningful discourse (Brookhart, 2013). And as Hattie and Timperley (2007) note, anxiety can significantly interfere with a student's ability to process and respond to classroom discussions. Finally, grading oral participation does not account for less visible but valuable forms of engagement such as active listening or written reflections (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011).

One of the most insidious effects of grading class participation is that it is a form of extrinsic motivation. When students become accustomed to receiving grades for every task, their motivation shifts from a genuine desire to learn to a pursuit of external rewards. This focus on extrinsic rewards can lead to a shallow approach to learning, in which students prioritize short-term grade acquisition over deep understanding and long-term retention of knowledge. As Anderson (2019) stresses in his book on the connection between teacher language and student learning, "We don't want the tail of student desire to get a good grade to wag the dog of student learning" (pp. 112–113).

Science teacher Kim Haber, who has been transitioning away from grading every student assignment for five years, emphasizes the importance of authentic engagement over point tracking. She notes that the change hasn't resulted in any lessening of student participation in her classroom. "Students want to feel successful. If you're setting up really engaging ways to learn, students will want to participate—you don't have to track it. And then you can spend your energy

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on the students who are not engaging [with the lesson] and find out what is going on with them."

Maintaining Student Engagement and Motivation

The power of practice is thoroughly acknowledged in sports and competitive pursuits, yet we often overlook its importance in academic settings. Accomplished coaches or music conductors are unlikely to threaten point deductions to inspire their teams or ensembles, instead relying on the motivation of the desire to perform well on game or concert day. Although Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-hour rule may be an oversimplification of how to develop expertise (Gladwell, 2008), it underscores the crucial role of dedicated practice in high achievement.

The fear of losing the perceived safety net of traditional grading can be paralyzing. Educators who have moved away from grading practice work have discovered a surprising truth, however: Student productivity does not decline. In fact, many report increased engagement and a transformation of their teaching practice. Katherine Holden, who was a teacher and then associate principal at a middle school in Oregon that has endeavored to separate grades from practice work, shares that the school's results were surprising:

> Some teachers really believed kids were not going to turn in assignments in the new system, but we did a data analysis a couple of years ago looking at how many missing assignments there were currently compared with our former traditional gradebook system at the same time of year. The number had decreased by more than half.

Cultivating Classroom Culture and Routines

In a classroom environment that nurtures social and emotional learning, students feel safe to take risks and learn from mistakes. Teachers can foster collaboration through peer-to-peer processing, team problem solving and analysis related to the subject, and class discussions about essential questions or effective strategies. When students perceive that their teachers are passionate about what they teach and genuinely care about student learning, intrinsic motivation flourishes. As John Reafleng, a high school Spanish teacher, notes,

> When it comes to motivating students to be involved in participating in practice work, you really have to set the culture early on in the school

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year, where "this is just what we do." So, from the start, I don't grade practice. I stopped using participation as criteria for grades. Most kids say, "OK, I get it. It's practice." Others say, "How much is this worth in the gradebook?" But those questions diminish over time.

Foregrounding the learning process over grades helps address inequities in education and fosters an inclusive learning environment that recognizes that students come from diverse backgrounds and may have different starting points in their educational journey. By reframing practice work as an integral part of the learning process rather than a graded obligation, teachers can reignite students' natural curiosity and desire for improvement. Focusing on growth and improvement rather than just final outcomes creates a more equitable system that values each student's individual progress.

Cultivating Learning: Process over Grades

Shifting the focus from grades to the learning process relies on two key strategies: emphasizing the value of practice and incorporating reflection. Continual discussion of how practice leads to improvement helps students develop a growth mindset, teaching them that abilities develop through effort and strategies. Sharing stories of perseverance, especially ones relevant to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, demonstrates that challenges can be overcome. Providing detailed feedback on students' growth and skill development reinforces the value of practice and connects it to real-world outcomes.

Teaching reflective practices and incorporating them into lessons allows students to take ownership of their learning. When students set learning goals (e.g., "I want to understand photosynthesis"), it helps them articulate their aspirations and track their progress. Reflection enhances their understanding of individual learning processes and connects learning to personal experiences, making education more accessible. Reflection can take the form of learning journals, student portfolios, or exit tickets—even ones as simple as "What was the most surprising thing you learned today?"—to reinforce learning and connection to prior knowledge.

Such approaches to practice work empower students and can especially benefit those from marginalized groups. And engaging in reflective practices yourself can better equip you to address biases and adapt your teaching to meet diverse learner needs.

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Making Practice Meaningful and Relevant

Connecting practice activities to real-world applications or student interests is crucial to engagement. In a physics class, for example, problems can be framed around designing roller coasters or optimizing sports equipment to make abstract concepts more tangible and interesting for students. Tying practice to real-life situations helps students see the value of their learning. This can increase engagement and motivation, particularly for students who may feel disconnected from traditional academic content.

Explaining the purpose behind a practice assignment also helps students understand its value. In a literature class, the teacher might explain how analyzing poetry enhances critical thinking skills applicable in many areas of life. Taking this concept further, meaningful practice that addresses real-world problems helps students learn to identify and challenge societal inequities. For example, many teachers use the writings of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou to show how art can confront racial and economic disparities.

Allowing student choice in practice activities, when possible, caters to diverse interests and can enhance engagement. Offering options helps students take ownership of their learning, fostering independence and decision-making skills. In a social studies class, for example, students might choose between creating a podcast, writing an essay, or designing a mind map to demonstrate their understanding of a historical event.

By implementing practices like these, educators can create a more equitable learning environment that values individual growth, encourages reflection, and makes learning relevant to all students, regardless of their background or initial skill level. Moving away from a one-size-fits-all model of education toward a more inclusive, culturally responsive approach can help address systemic inequities in education, leveling the playing field and giving every student the opportunity to recognize and celebrate their own progress and achievements.

These kinds of strategies are especially crucial in secondary schools, where student inquisitiveness tends to wane as the emphasis on scores and grades becomes more prominent. As noted by Engel in *The Hungry Mind: The Origins of Curiosity in Childhood* (2015), the increasing focus on standardized testing and grade-based assessments in higher grades often comes at the expense of students' innate drive to explore and question. Relieving practice from the pressure of grades creates an environment that nurtures an intrinsic

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motivation to learn, encouraging students to engage with material out of genuine interest rather than for external rewards. This shift away from a transactional classroom can help counteract the trend of diminishing curiosity and foster a more authentic and enduring love of learning.

Collaborative Learning

A more organically felt benefit can be enjoyed by students every day from the process of learning together with their peers. Dewey's theories of learning (1916, 1938) emphasize interactions and communications focused on enhancing shared meanings. Viewing knowledge as socially constructed, he advocated for cooperative and collaborative learning environments.

Science teacher Kim Haber puts Dewey's principles into practice by having her 6th graders work collaboratively to develop their conceptual understanding. Students regularly organize into small groups to analyze scientific models, fostering active discussion and collective problem solving. Student teams engage in thorough dialogue, reaching a consensus before documenting their response to questions posed.

Kim plays an active role in this process, reviewing each group's work at designated checkpoints that prevent them from advancing before they have a solid grasp on the current concepts. To ensure individual accountability and prevent passive participation, she randomly selects team members to explain their group's reasoning. This encourages all students to engage fully with the material and be prepared to articulate their understanding. During these check-ins, Kim often poses probing questions designed to address any misconceptions she observes or to challenge students to think more deeply about the concepts at hand.

Strengthening Students' Skills

The iterative process of group work, instructor review, and further discussion creates a dynamic learning environment that promotes deep understanding and critical thinking. Kim Haber credits the process with keeping students engaged and accountable without the pressure of grades. To support students in working together, which may be a developing skill, it is important to establish team norms and team roles, such as facilitator, timekeeper, and

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reporter. Teachers can provide as added support a visual aid that defines or describes the different roles and responsibilities.

Protocols to Support Understanding

Collaborative skills are not intuitive. Without scaffolds, student teams may become dysfunctional, with one or two kids doing all the work and others left to their own devices. This less-than-ideal outcome may lead teachers to abandon group work entirely, which in turn results in students feeling more isolated and losing the motivation that is intrinsic in the collaborative process.

Using structured protocols for teamwork offers significant benefits for a diverse range of students and helps create a more equitable and culturally responsive learning environment. Robust, structured talk formats encourage participation from students who might otherwise remain silent or passive (Hammond, 2020). This includes multilingual learners, shy students, disengaged learners, and those from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Incorporating such frameworks into lessons creates opportunities for what Hammond (2014) calls "cognitive chewing," allowing students to process information and formulate ideas in ways that align with their cultural backgrounds and learning styles. These frameworks honor the diverse knowledge base each student brings to the conversation, giving marginalized students greater access to the flow of discussion and more agency in directing it. Protocols are particularly effective in breaking the pattern of having the same students—typically those who are comfortable with English, possess mainstream background knowledge, or are more extroverted—dominate class discussions. Instead, protocols create entry points for a wider range of voices, making the learning experience more inclusive. By centering these practices around principles of youth culture and collectivist practice, teachers can further enhance the cultural responsiveness of the classroom, ensuring that all students feel valued and empowered to contribute to the learning process.

Priorities to Pique Student Engagement

When grades are no longer the main source of motivation, teachers must cultivate students' natural curiosity, encouraging genuine interest in their learning and deeper, more meaningful engagement with both their work and their peers. Collaboration and communication should be seamlessly

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integrated into daily academic activities, with assessments focused on students' ability to understand and apply essential concepts related to course content. It is equally important to cultivate habits of mind such as intellectual openness and communication skills, which are crucial for effective teamwork and bolster social and emotional learning. These habits of mind are skills that will position students in good stead for success in college and beyond (Conley, 2010). By prioritizing these competencies, even without scoring or grading students' performance of them, teachers prepare students not only for academic success but also for lifelong learning and adaptability in their personal and professional lives.

Cultivating a learning culture that is not tied to daily scores or grades represents a significant shift in pedagogical practice. Weaning students from a dependency on graded practice work is most effectively achieved through a phased approach. By implementing changes gradually, you can identify and address potential challenges or resistance early on, ensuring a smoother transition and greater acceptance over time. We suggest the following steps:

1. **Introduce the concept and set expectations.** Explain to students the value of practice in the learning process, discuss how disconnecting practice work from grades will benefit their long-term learning and skill development, and set clear expectations for participation and engagement in practice activities.
2. **Start with low-stakes practice activities.** Incorporate ungraded practice work into class activities, provide feedback focused on improvement (rather than score), and use ungraded formative assessments to gauge understanding.
3. **Reduce emphasis on grades for practice work.** First reduce the weight of practice work grades within the overall grade, then shift toward a completion-based system for practice work (rather than accuracy-based grading). Eventually, eliminate grading for all designated practice activities.
4. **Refine regular routines around practice.** Schedule daily or weekly dedicated practice time with rituals for starting and ending practice, and consistently reinforce the importance of practice in the learning process.
5. **Align assessments with practice focus.** Ensure that formal assessments reflect the skills practiced, allow students to use their practice work to prepare for assessments, and provide opportunities for students to revise work based on practice and feedback.

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Providing dedicated practice time and aligning assessments with practice ensures that all students have equal opportunities to develop skills and prepare for assessments within the school environment. This can help mitigate disparities caused by differences in home environments or access to tutoring. Overall, this promotes a more equitable learning environment by valuing effort, growth, and mastery over initial performance or external advantages.

Measured implementation benefits teachers as well, especially those who prefer to proceed cautiously with new methods. Kim Haber recommends that teachers who might be hesitant to embark on a dramatic shift take it slow: "If you are skeptical about students losing motivation because you're not grading everything or you're not incentivizing with a grade, give it a try. Take one small piece at a time." Phasing in or scaffolding new ways of working aligns with established principles of effective pedagogy. This approach allows for adjustment, reflection, and refinement at each stage, ultimately leading to more successful and sustainable changes in grading practices.

Katie Linklater, a science teacher at the same school as Kim, starts the uncoupling process with her students' science notebook.

> They ask, "Is this graded?" I'll say, "Well, that's part of your notebook grade." I do grade the first notebook check, so they see the value in it. Then, later in the year, we get to the point where I can say, "Your notebook is something that can help you and is a place where you practice." I talk about why it's important to do the assignment. It gets kids to want to engage.

Although Katie has moved away from scoring student notebooks entirely, other teachers continue to give students at least some credit for this kind of formative work. Science teacher Rob Ickes (2024) doesn't grade notebooks but allows students to use their "field notes" during tests, explaining, "This approach has decreased my students' anxiety and given them more incentive to 'practice harder,' knowing their practice will yield better results in their 'big game'" (para. 8).

The transition to a classroom culture of ungraded practice can be implemented through a phased, gradually progressing process that addresses the interplay of the variety of factors involved. Deeply ingrained expectations about grading held by students, teachers, parents, and administrators create resistance to change. Students need time to adapt and develop intrinsic

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motivation, and teachers must learn how to adjust their assessment strategies and teaching methods. Misconceptions about ungraded systems require ongoing education, and stakeholders often want to see evidence of effectiveness before fully embracing the change. Ultimately, the transition demands patience, persistence, and continuous efforts to shift not only practices but also deeply rooted mindsets and cultural norms.

Spotlight: Practice Work

Laura Mundorff, English Language Arts
Putnam High School, Milwaukie, Oregon

Over the years, Laura has learned that students in her English classes need to engage with lots of ungraded, low-stakes practice work to succeed. The students keep a structured composition book, she says, and "most days we work in that journal. I'm very clear about my expectations." One example of a practice assignment is the Prompt of the Day, in which students write responses to a poem, picture, or other prompt. The class knows the routine. "They're expected to fill the entire page if they can. It's informal. It's low-stakes writing. The idea is to get them to build their writing fluency." Laura's students have the opportunity to practice skills, try out ideas, and see how practice helps them with their learning. Students who routinely complete such exercises are more prepared for later summative assessments. Laura notes,

> The formative work that they do in their journals is to prepare them for the assessment. For example, the natural consequence of not doing the dialectical journal is that when it comes to writing the essay, the student won't have any evidence that they can use. Pretty much everything that goes into their journal is something that they're going to need to be successful on the assessment.

In Laura's class, this work is ultimately graded; a complete notebook is worth 30 percent of the overall course grade. However, the primary purpose is for students to take ownership of their own learning through self-assessment.

At the conclusion of each unit, students reflect on their work, set goals for themselves, and self-assess. They first review all assignments from the unit, categorizing each as "exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," "incomplete,"

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or "missing"; this encourages students to critically examine their performance throughout the unit. Next, in response to guided questions intended to prompt deeper reflection, students identify aspects of the unit they found enjoyable, note areas where they experienced growth, and set personal goals for future learning. This reflective process extends beyond academic performance to include class participation and engagement in discussion. As part of this self-evaluation, students assign themselves a score based on an overview of their work throughout the unit. This encourages students to consider their learning experience holistically rather than focusing on individual assignments. Laura reviews these self-evaluation journal entries and uses them to gauge student perceptions and progress.

This comprehensive self-evaluation system provides students with numerous opportunities to develop metacognitive skills, take ownership of their learning, and actively participate in assessment. It not only provides valuable insights for the teacher but also fosters students' ability to critically evaluate their own work and learning strategies. As Laura notes, "It's a very big time-saver for me, and I think it's better for them. I don't think I should be the only audience for all of their writing."

Because Laura spends less time on grading, she can devote her planning period to working with her professional learning community to develop lessons that meet the needs of her students. She also can provide feedback to students during class time. "If I'm not grading the work, they still need to know how they're doing," she explains. Her approach to practice work means "I'm able to spend my time giving feedback in class in person." When she needs to collect more information on student progress or skill attainment, she can either assign a relevant journal prompt or poll the class using a Google Form.

Laura has found that students are willing to complete practice work when they can see how it helps them succeed on the assessment. "It really does give them ownership over their learning in a way that collecting a paper from them every day does not. They have a lot of pride in their work when they walk away with a full notebook. There's a lot of power in them seeing their practice pay off."

Spotlight Questions

- What key insight can you gain from Laura's approach to using practice work?

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- Can you identify a task that your students regularly complete that could be more beneficial as ungraded practice work? If you've already implemented ungraded practice, what strategies do you use to encourage students to take greater ownership of their work?
- If you were to stop grading practice work, what valuable activity could you dedicate more time to?
- How do you incorporate self-reflection in your teaching to give students more agency in their learning?
- What specific ideas about ungraded practice work would you like to share or discuss with your colleagues?

Tuning into Practice

Eliminating grades from practice work also helps teachers focus on student needs and progress, whereas grades can sometimes get in the way of improvement. Collin Stegner, a middle school band teacher, focuses on skills practice according to the student needs he sees and hears:

> When kids struggle with making connections, it's often because they're having difficulty with the listening aspect or they simply need more practice and development. If the connection isn't happening, we can do practice exercises the next day or incorporate games and activities focused on improving audiation skills. This approach makes it easy to identify their weaknesses and specifically work on those.

Uncoupling grading from informal assessments and practice work, as Collin does with his students' listening skills, may seem daunting to many educators. However, it's worth noting that this approach has been successfully employed by music teachers for years. This long-standing practice in music education may provide teachers of other subjects with confidence and inspiration to implement similar strategies.

Ungraded Homework

Uncoupling grading from practice work can also be applied to the culture around homework. Rachel Veto, head of a modern languages department,

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has helped her students approach homework differently. Their homework is optional and not graded; instead, she says, students have options such as "either complete two homework assignments during the week or take a quiz on Friday. Neither affects their grade." Her choice board of assignments is divided into categories of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, which allows for student choice about what practice might benefit them the most and bolsters ownership of their own learning (see Figure 1.1 for a sample from an introductory French conversation class).

FIGURE 1.1

French I Assignment Choice Board

Read the text and answer the questions	**Watch a video on edPuzzle**	**Explain**	**Create**
Charlotte	*Introducing the Family*	What are your family's preferences?	Instagram post (minimum three sentences with vocabulary)
Tal's Biography	*I Introduce Myself*	Describe a celebrity	Create a puzzle (word search, crossword, etc., with vocabulary)
Harry Potter	*Teenagers' Sports*	Explain a famous complicated family	Practice with vocab cards or Quizlet
Email from Senegal	*Descriptions*	Describe a photo of a group of friends	Write a description of activities you do with your friends
An article on the internet that you understand and can explain	A grammar video from the list	Respond to a classmate	Create a family tree with seven sentences of explanation

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The Turning Point

Getting to a point of inflection, when teachers realize that the culture around grades has significantly changed for the better, is a journey with a long arc. Emily Longnecker, a middle school history teacher, has been collaboratively refining assessment practices with her grade-level teams for three years. The progress has been more pronounced with her 8th grade colleagues, a smaller group, compared with the larger 7th grade team. This difference in advancement illustrates one of the challenges mentioned earlier: the time-consuming nature of aligning all stakeholders with new education approaches. Despite the varying rates of adoption among her colleagues, Emily reports that the transition has successfully taken root in her own classroom:

> Students are now focusing on their learning rather than just chasing points. Instead of asking why they got 96 points instead of 97, they're asking what they need to do to improve their understanding. In my class, the emphasis is on what knowledge they need to acquire and what standards they need to meet, not on making up missed work or stressing about grades. This approach allows struggling students to experience success through effort and persistence, which is a significant part of their learning journey. It's a stark contrast to other places, where students are still fixated on points and grades for every assignment.

Engaging Families in the Process

It's not just the students who need time to adapt to a different pedagogical approach; other stakeholders need to be brought on board as well. High school teacher Alex Doucette finds that families respond positively when he keeps communication open, describing the goals of his approach as a continuous cycle of instruction, practice, and feedback. He tells students, "It's like shooting free throws in basketball; it's all about consistent practice." Alex says the open communication "has significantly shifted the culture around grades."

Although Alex has not encountered significant pushback from parents, other teachers may find that families have substantial concerns about academic standards and expectations. Many parents, accustomed to traditional grading systems, may perceive the absence of grades on practice work as a lowering of academic standards or a reduction in rigor. This misperception

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can lead to resistance and skepticism about the effectiveness of ungraded practice, even as research and experience show that removing grades from practice work can lead to improved performance on summative assessments and a deeper understanding of the material.

Grades are often viewed as a clear indicator of a student's progress and academic standing. The familiarity of letter grades and percentages provides a sense of security and a seemingly objective measure of achievement. When these recognizable markers are removed from practice work, it can create anxiety and uncertainty. How will families know if a student is making progress? Will students be motivated to complete work that isn't graded? Are teachers lowering their expectations by not grading every assignment? How will this practice affect students' college applications or future opportunities?

Grading is "deeply ingrained not only in education but in our culture" (Vatterott, 2015, p. 6) as the primary measure of academic success; it often goes unquestioned by those who experienced similar systems in their own schooling. The community may be accustomed or conditioned to have everything students do count in their grade. Making a shift in grading practices calls into question these assumptions. Therefore, it is incumbent upon educators to communicate how ungraded practice work can lead to higher standards and improved student performance and to allay apprehensions and highlight the benefits of ungraded practice work. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Provide clear explanations.** Clearly communicate the rationale behind ungraded practice work, emphasizing its connection to improved learning outcomes and performance on summative assessments.
- **Offer detailed progress reports.** Provide students and families with regular, detailed feedback on student progress, including areas of strength and opportunities for growth.
- **Demonstrate the link to summative performance.** Communicate how ungraded practice work translates to improved performance on graded, summative assessments. Share research findings that highlight the benefits of ungraded practice work on student learning and achievement along with data from a class in the school or area that has made this transition to underscore its effectiveness.

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- **Highlight real-world connections.** Explain how ungraded practice echoes real-world learning and problem solving, where the focus is on improvement and solutions rather than arbitrary scores.

Grade Inflation Versus High Standards

Sharing research with parents and families is crucial to communicating the validity of alternative grading practices and addressing concerns about the issue of grade inflation. Both educators and families want grades to accurately reflect student learning and mastery of content. However, traditional grading practices, particularly the grading of practice work, can lead to inflated grades that do not accurately reflect student performance.

Practice assignments are designed for learning and making mistakes, not demonstrating mastery—yet teachers frequently grade these assignments based on completion or effort rather than understanding. Students may seek help or collaborate on these tasks, which—although beneficial to learning—may result in higher grades that do not represent their independent abilities. The accumulation of high marks on numerous practice assignments can outweigh lower scores on more comprehensive assessments, skewing the overall grade.

Grading practice work can also shift students' focus from deep learning to the shallow pursuit of correct answers, leading to superficial understanding that is not up to more rigorous evaluation. Teachers might also grade practice work more leniently to encourage participation, inadvertently inflating grades without a corresponding increase in actual learning.

Collectively, these factors create a significant disconnect between assigned grades and students' true level of understanding or ability to apply knowledge independently, particularly when compared with performance on standardized tests or real-world applications of skills. This discrepancy becomes especially apparent when comparing course grades to standardized test scores like the ACT and SAT, knowing that both grades and test scores are often crucial for college admissions.

Feldman (2024a) found that nearly 60 percent of grades did not match students' standardized test scores. Approximately two-thirds of these mismatched grades were inflated, while about a third were depressed. This inconsistency not only creates confusion but also leads to unrealistic expectations and potential

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disappointment when students face standardized assessments or college-level work. Focusing grades on summative assessments rather than practice work reduces inaccuracy and addresses grade inflation while providing a more realistic picture of student achievement.

The transition to ungraded practice work may initially cause concern among families, caregivers, and other stakeholders. It is important to emphasize that this approach leads to higher standards and better academic outcomes. By focusing on the learning process, providing meaningful feedback, and encouraging risk taking and creativity, ungraded practice work prepares students more effectively for summative assessments and real-world challenges. Students and their families need to understand that the absence of grades on practice work does not equate to a lowering of standards. Instead, it represents a shift toward a more effective, equitable, and meaningful approach to learning. By clearly communicating benefits and addressing concerns, we can encourage families to engage with the learning process by reviewing feedback and discussing progress, rather than focusing solely on grades.

Student and Family Feedback

Although most teachers regularly provide feedback to students, they do not often *seek* feedback from parents, caregivers, or the students themselves regarding the changes they implement in the classroom—particularly those related to grading practices. Seeking feedback on grading reforms such as not grading practice work is crucial to ensuring the success and acceptance of these changes. Engaging with these key stakeholders provides several benefits that can enhance the effectiveness of grading reforms and foster a more supportive education environment.

First, feedback from students can offer valuable insights into how grading reforms affect their learning experience. Students are the primary recipients of these changes, and their perspectives can reveal whether a new approach fosters deeper understanding and engagement or causes confusion and anxiety. Conducting student surveys is an effective way to gather this feedback systematically. A survey might include questions to gauge whether students' feelings of stress have decreased with the uncoupling of grades from practice work, whether student motivation has changed with the increased focus on learning, and whether grades based on summative assessments feel more "fair." Teachers can analyze the results and share them with students (e.g., via Google Forms,

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SurveySparrow, Typeform), facilitating discussion about effects of the new protocols on practice work, addressing concerns, or adopting suggestions students might have. This transparency promotes student voice and buy-in.

In addition, involving families and caregivers in the feedback process can play a significant role in supporting a student's education. The understanding and acceptance of grading reforms on the part of the people surrounding students is vital for successful implementation. Sharing student feedback with caregivers can provide a clearer picture of how these changes are perceived by those directly affected. This dialogue helps build trust and transparency between educators and families, fostering a collaborative partnership that benefits student learning.

Data-Driven Approaches

Using data to highlight the connection between students' completion rate of practice assignments and their assessment performance can be a valuable tool for engaging stakeholders. This includes regularly analyzing and sharing classwide and schoolwide trends (using anonymized data) to show how students who consistently complete practice work tend to perform better on summative assessments. Teachers can also encourage individual reflection by having students track their completion rates alongside their assessment scores, which helps them visualize correlations over time. Providing specific examples of how practice assignments directly relate to sample assessment problems, prompts, or questions can illustrate the practical benefits of completing these tasks. By fostering this understanding, teachers can motivate students to engage more fully with practice work as a valuable tool for improving overall academic performance, not just busywork.

Pause and Reflect

Take a look at the following prompts and select a couple that are relevant to you based on where you are in separating practice work from grading. Reflect on your own, discuss with colleagues one-on-one, or start a discussion with your team.

- Among the various drawbacks to grading practice work discussed in this chapter, which do you find most convincing as a reason to modify your teaching approach?

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- What strategies are you currently employing to encourage genuine student engagement in your classes without relying on external rewards?
- Which of your existing formative assessment practices do you think could benefit from further development or refinement?
- How crucial is it for you and your colleagues to implement grading practice reforms in concert? How could you initiate or continue discussions with your peers about these topics?
- How might you incorporate student feedback and parental involvement in the process of reforming grading practices?

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Howard Yank, faculty emeritus at Portland State University's College of Education, brings more than 25 years of secondary teaching experience across California, Oregon, Washington, and international schools in Latin America. He earned his bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and holds a master's in history from San Francisco State University. From the outset of his career, Howard has been committed to social justice and inquiry-based learning.

He pioneered and taught in a dual-language Spanish secondary program in Eugene, Oregon, and played a pivotal role in establishing similar programs in Vancouver Public Schools, Washington. As a curriculum administrator, instructional coach, and teacher mentor, Howard has advanced equitable practices in schools throughout the United States and Mexico. In addition to his work at Portland State University, Howard has also trained teachers at La Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca, the University of Oregon, and Washington State University, Vancouver.

Internationally, Howard taught in Mexico, Costa Rica, and Chile, gaining specialized expertise in International Baccalaureate diploma programs. His articles have appeared in the Feminist Press, *NEA Today*, *California Monthly*, *Oregon Education*, and ASCD. As an equity grading coach, Howard supports teachers nationwide and remains deeply involved in professional development, mentoring, and equity-driven initiatives.

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