

Grading and Student Motivation

As schools' grading and reporting practices change to align with provincial guidelines, parents, educators and students have raised questions about how these changing practices will impact student motivation. The shift away from marks and percentage grades toward other forms of feedback requires a change in thinking about how learning is measured. Will students complete assignments to the best of their ability or even at all if these assignments are not for marks? What will students work to achieve if percentage grades are taken away? It is important to first ask the question – Do percentage grades motivate students to learn?

Research has demonstrated time and again, the importance of feedback to the learning process. Specific, descriptive feedback allows a learner to identify their strengths as well as areas requiring further learning or improvement. According to O'Connor (2009), feedback in the form of words can be very motivational. However, once a mark such as 8/10 has been put on an assignment, not much more can be said. The learning conversation stops. If the teacher instead identifies specific strengths and weaknesses, a discussion can follow to help the student improve their work. "Words open up communication, whereas numbers close it down – prematurely at that" (O'Connor, 2009). Once a piece of work has received a grade, there is no motivation for a student to analyze their errors and make adjustments.

Marks are frequently used to compare and rank students. Students who receive good grades may enjoy receiving comparison information and thus be motivated to continue working hard. Poor grades, however, have no motivational value. Frequently students who receive poor grades do not know what the grades mean or how to improve. As a result they often become frustrated and quit trying (O'Connor, 2009). Other students will only do enough work to "pass" a course or assignment. Fifty percent becomes the goal for these students rather than a bare minimum expectation. These students do not perform to their full potential because they are motivated by grades rather than mastering curriculum outcomes. Likewise, a grade of 90% is traditionally equated with excellence. This however, is not always the case as "it depends on the difficulty of the concept as well as the difficulty of the assessment" (O'Connor, 2009).

Students must be encouraged to work for the satisfaction of learning. They must know the value of the information they are being taught and how it will help them in the future. Valuing the process of learning and the progress of individual students rather than marks or percentage grades is critical to encouraging student motivation.

O'Connor, D.K.B. (2009). *How to grade for Learning*, K-12 (Third Edition), Corwin Press.

