Study Guide

This study guide is a companion to the book *Elements of Grading: A Guide to Effective Practice*, by Douglas Reeves. *Elements of Grading* looks at the current debate over grading practices, examines in depth four criteria the author believes are essential for effective grading—accuracy, fairness, specificity, and timeliness—and proposes strategies for beginning a conversation about grading reform in your school.

We thank you for your interest in this book, and we hope this guide will be a useful tool for individual teachers or administrators, or for groups of educators working together.
Introduction

1. What forms of feedback are known to be more effective than grading in bringing about student improvement?

2. Name three factors in addition to student performance that influence grades.

3. Why does personal experience often outweigh evidence in many areas of educational policy?

4. Name the five levels of certainty that can be used to distinguish between personal experience and evidence.

Chapter 1

Grading Is Feedback

1. Through his research, John Hattie found a number of teaching and leadership practices that, with regard to their impact on student achievement, are more powerful than personality, home, and demographic factors. Name four such factors.
2. Compare the standards in your school for feedback to students against standards for feedback to teachers and leaders. Which are more rigorous? Why do you suppose this is the case?

3. What example does the author use to show the indifference of many educators to evidence and research?

4. What surprising conclusion did Linda Darling-Hammond draw from her study of educational systems we commonly think of as strongly test based?

5. What is the difference between factual and contextual accuracy?

6. Describe ways that unfairness may be injected into the grading process as a result of good intentions.

Chapter 2

The Grading Debate

1. What did the author’s research into the relationship between class grades and performance on an external test covering the same subject matter reveal?
2. What factors other than performance are frequently involved in determining student grades?

3. What arguments are commonly given in support of awarding a grade of zero on a hundred-point scale for missing work? How would you respond to those arguments?

4. Explain, using a mathematical model, why it is unfair to grade missing or incomplete work with a zero using the hundred-point scale.

Chapter 3

How to Improve Accuracy in Grading

1. Using the example of the arithmetic mean, explain the author’s point that numerical precision can create the illusion of accuracy.

2. This chapter lists four strategies that one eighth-grade teacher adopted to improve grading accuracy. What were those strategies? Would they work in your classroom?

3. What are the advantages of collaborative scoring? Describe the protocol discussed in this chapter for collaborative scoring.
4. What is the “fifty minimum” option? In the face of strong resistance to eliminating the zero, what other means of avoiding mathematical distortion does the author suggest?

Chapter 4

How to Improve Fairness in Grading

1. Given that students’ backgrounds, preparation, tools, responsibilities, and degree of support vary widely, how can a grade ever be fair? How does the inclusion of context improve fairness in grading?

2. What are some of the consequences of a perceived lack of fairness in grading policy?

3. Girls tend to get better grades in high school but perform more poorly than boys on external tests, while boys get poorer grades than girls but perform better on external tests. What accounts for this phenomenon?

4. How was Orlando Griego’s La Familia project able to improve the performance of Latino students?

Chapter 5

How to Improve Specificity in Grading

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1. Describe a formula for arriving at grades that has greater specificity, yet also encourages and rewards work ethic, respect, and determination in students.

2. What is the “coward’s F”?

3. What method does the author suggest for obtaining student feedback regarding grading policy changes in a way that ensures anonymity and confidentiality?

4. What did Herbert Marsh’s survey discover with regard to teachers’ fears that they will lose popularity if they make too many demands on their students?

Chapter 6

How to Improve Timeliness in Grading

1. What is the point of Atul Gawande’s *The Checklist Manifesto*, and how does it relate to the issue of timely feedback? Name several items you would place on a checklist if you were developing one for use with your students.

2. In sports and music, participants routinely receive constant and highly differentiated feedback. Name specific ways that this model could be successfully applied to your classroom or school.

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3. Describe how the three-column rubric works. How does it save time in articulating and delivering feedback?

4. What features in the design of assessments support the effort to ensure that the results are delivered in a timely way?

5. What should administrators look for when monitoring teacher responses to student achievement data? What can they do or say to reassure teachers who find this process threatening?

Chapter 7

Time-Saving Strategies for Busy Teachers

1. What are some of the consequences for teachers’ time management of giving students who fail assignments a zero?

2. Name some alternatives to the “quick zero.”

3. What is the “menu system,” and how does it work to support students who have done poorly or failed to complete an assignment in the classroom?
4. How does the menu system also support the goals of teachers? What are common misgivings teachers have about the menu system, and how can they be overcome?

Chapter 8

Leading Change for Effective Grading Practices

1. According to the author, the evidence of the need for improved grading systems has been around for nearly a century. What have been the obstacles to achieving reform?

2. There is substantial evidence that other variables, besides punishment and rewards, are far more motivating to students. What are some of those variables?

3. Name three unintended consequences of rewarding teachers for high test scores.

4. Can you think of any examples of a promising educational policy that failed to be implemented because school leaders waited for buy in?

Conclusion

Leading Change in Grading Systems

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1. When beginning a discussion of grading policy, why is it best to begin with an explicit vision?

2. There is, in almost every complex educational matter, a range to successful implementation. What is the range with regard to grading policy?

3. While sometimes there is active resistance that accounts for some differences in implementation, what is a far more common cause?

4. What are the differences between an explicit and an implicit evaluation system for teachers and administrators? How do these differences make the case for systemic alignment of change initiatives?

5. What is the three-level decision making typology, and how can it reduce disagreement?

6. What issues do special education students present with regard to the four criteria for effective grades—accuracy, fairness, specificity, and timeliness?