

Issues and Trends in Assessment

The Use of Zero: Not the *Real* Issue

Conversations on the topic of the use of zero often centre on only a portion of the issue, and that is whether or not a mark of zero should be used. The more important part of the conversation is in regard to the premise on which the practice of not using zero is based. Simply put, it is as follows:

Students should not be given a zero for work not completed; *rather, they should be required to complete the work.*

When taken in its entirety, such a position provides the opportunity for students to be more responsible than if they are able to opt out of doing the work by ‘taking a zero’. Parents and teachers are able to work together to support students as they *learn* to be accountable – by *doing* the work.

Not doing the work is a behaviour issue. Student marks or grades on the other hand are intended to communicate information about student performance against curriculum outcomes. When behaviour is confused with performance, the resulting mark becomes an inaccurate representation.

Teachers must have a credible body of student work in order to make an informed professional judgment as to the student’s level of performance. If a student has not completed sufficient assignments to allow the teacher to make this informed judgment, then a code of Incomplete is an accurate way to communicate the student’s current level of performance.

Student behaviours that get in the way of student learning can be dealt with through other means as teachers, administrators, parents and the student work together to first understand the problem and then to develop solutions aimed at helping the student become responsible – and thus accountable.

The debate becomes emotional, partly due to the perspectives that adults bring to the conversation. The familiar practices that were in place when they were students seemed to work at that time. However, the world is a decidedly different place now and practices that originated several decades ago must be examined carefully. Simply because a practice has been in use for an extended period of time is no longer sufficient reason to continue its use. Daniel Pink states that “...if you really want high performance, particularly on those 21st century tasks, those old 19th century motivators aren’t going to get you there...The big thing is getting beyond the folklore of what motivates people into the science of what motivates people” (2010, pp. 5 – 6).

Forward thinking school and jurisdiction leaders and teachers in Alberta have been working towards improving classroom assessment practices that strive to document the results of student learning through fair summative assessment practices and also to support student learning through effective formative assessment practices. A world-wide research base confirms the positive impact that sound formative classroom assessment practices can have on student achievement. The use of zero is a practice that must be examined in light of current research – not against familiar past practice.

The goal is *learning*, and we need to remember that students are in school because they are *still* learning. It’s our job to help them. Sound classroom assessment practices are an important way to accomplish this goal.

References

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