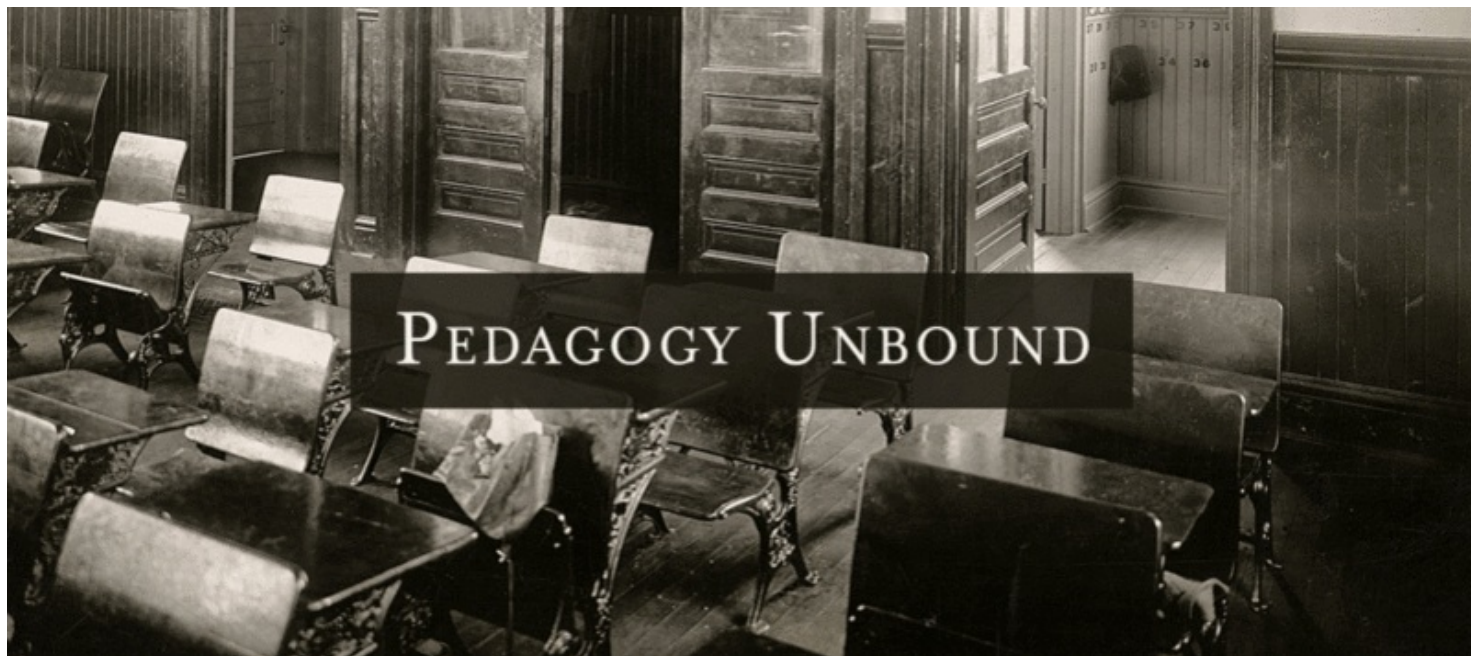


Can a Failing Grade Motivate a Student?

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It happens nearly every semester: I get a paper so bad I don't know how to grade it. I'm not talking about a late paper, or one that's been plagiarized, or is too short or off topic. No, I'm referring to a species of essay that checks all of the superficial boxes but is so poorly written, so shoddily done, that it seems to demand a special response.



It's actually hard for students to get a bad grade on a piece of writing in my courses. I do in-class workshops on topic choice, thesis construction, rough drafts, and revision. Students have many opportunities to find out that their essay is on the wrong track, and fix the problem. It's almost impossible for them to leave the writing to the last minute. But there's always one ...

I asked a few colleagues in my department what they do in such situations. A surprising number echoed my usual practice: A 70 is the lowest score we give a paper without some clear infraction.

But one of my colleagues — who shall remain nameless — suggested that a really low grade, particularly on the first major assignment of the semester, can be a wake-up call. A properly bad grade might serve a pedagogical purpose in motivating the student to straighten up and fly right. I wondered: Could giving a D or an F actually be the right thing to do?

Research on [extrinsic and intrinsic motivation](#) suggests that we shouldn't expect a bad grade — in and of itself — to be very helpful in motivating students. Extrinsic motivation can actually have a [negative effect on intrinsic motivation](#), so dangling the prospect of a terrible final grade might make a student even less engaged. To the extent that students are motivated to get better grades, they'll do what they think will get them those grades, which won't necessarily align with what you're looking to see (i.e., real evidence of learning). Extrinsic motivation encourages shallow engagement — or "[satisficing](#):" doing just enough to get the desired external reward, and no more.

But as most students *do* care about grades, I think there's still room to acknowledge that they can be a tool in producing intrinsic motivation.

In an [exhaustive review of the literature](#) on formative assessment, two researchers at King's College drew on a number of sources who have documented a phenomenon familiar to many faculty — that is, students' "reluctance to be drawn into a more serious engagement with learning work." Such students, for a variety of reasons, do not primarily aspire to learn as much as possible. Rather, they want to get by with minimal effort, avoiding any disasters along the way. For those students (and it's fair to say my student who wrote a poor essay falls into this category), a properly bad grade might be just such a disaster. A bad grade might be the jolt that lets those students know their current approach is not working.

But if we acknowledge that grades might be able to help in our efforts to motivate students, we also have to understand that we can't rely on grades alone. The King's College study defined successful formative assessment as including two actions: "The first is the perception by the learner of a gap between a desired goal and his or her present state (of knowledge, and/or understanding, and/or skill). The second is the action taken by the learner to close that gap in order to attain the desired goal." So students first need to see there's a gap between what they've achieved and what was expected of them. Then they can devise a plan to close that gap. Instructors have a role in encouraging both of those actions.

Two academics at the University of Auckland, [in an analysis of instructor feedback](#), divided the process into three questions:

- "Where am I going? (What are the goals?)"
- "How am I going? (What progress is being made toward the goal?)"
- "Where to next? (What activities need to be undertaken to make better progress?)."

That approach reminds us that students need to understand, not just their own shortcomings, but what the actual goal is. Too often, we just tell students what they've done wrong, without making sure they understand what "doing right" consists of.

In my situation, giving a D to that sloppy paper would only communicate that my student performed poorly. It wouldn't do anything, on its own, to communicate what the student should have done differently — how his paper could have met my criteria. And a failing grade certainly does nothing on its own to communicate what the student should do differently going forward. If we think of formative assessment as having three components — showing students that their performance isn't good enough, showing what they should have done, and showing what they need to do in the future — a bad grade really only helps with the first one.

Is it possible that a bad grade will jolt students out of complacency, make them investigate a better way to approach their studies, and turn their performance around? Yes. But that's unlikely without further feedback. We need to provide context with a bad grade — specific reasons why the student did poorly and specific tasks to improve.

In the end I decided to give this particular student a D on his paper. It really was a poor effort, and there were a number of C papers in the class that were miles ahead in terms of quality. But I made sure to spend extra time giving feedback about his assignment. I wanted to make sure the student understood what he did wrong, exactly what I was looking to see, and what he missed out on through his superficial approach. I also emphasized concrete ways he could get better results on future assignments, both in terms of process (he needs to more fully engage with the prewriting activities I have students do leading up to their drafts) and in terms of specific aspects of composition (he needs to make sure each paragraph has a point). In the end, I'm hoping that this extra attention will serve — even more than the bad grade — to convince this student that engaging more fully with the course is in his own best interest.

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