Royce Sadler is internationally recognised for his assessment expertise. This recent publication argues against the practice of including ‘non-achievements’ – tutorial attendance, time on task, effort etc - in grading decisions in order that grade integrity be upheld.

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Abstract

If a grade is to be trusted as an authentic representation of a student’s level of academic achievement, one of the requirements is that all the elements that contribute to that grade must qualify as achievement, and not be something else. The implications of taking this proposition literally turn out to be far reaching. Many elements that are technically non-achievements are routinely incorporated into grades and thereby act as contaminants. A variety of credits and penalties are often included with the intention of helping shape student behaviours or improve their learning. Reversing the situation has ramifications not only for assessment and grading practices but also for the ways in which curriculum and teaching are conceptualised, designed and engaged in (p. 727).

Keywords: grading; academic achievement; fidelity; validity; continuous assessment

Introduction

The paper is based on the premise that assessment grades are of high importance because of their consequences for students in relation to program progression, future study or employment and mobility and because of the capacity of grades to support investigations such as the predictive power of entry scores, or to determine the quality of particular approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Key concepts are outlined in the paper as follows:

- ‘Achievement’ is the attainment of an identifiable level of knowledge or skill as determined through evaluating performances on assessment tasks, or through observation of relevant behaviours in specified settings (p. 730).
- ‘Grade integrity’ implies that grades represent learners’ attained levels of academic achievement, either in a course, or in relation to an extended response to an assessment task, and that each grade should be strictly commensurate with the quality, breadth and depth of a student’s achievement (p. 728).
- ‘Fidelity’ is the extent to which elements that contribute to a course grade are correctly identified as academic achievement and its realisation requires that the assessment evidence used as a basis for grading be of a logically legitimate type (p. 728). The assessment property of ‘fidelity’ is compared with the related property of ‘validity’ and illustrated as:

  In training aircraft pilots and astronauts, fidelity refers to how closely the training simulator reproduces the characteristics of real craft in flight. ....... In medical and social intervention research, fidelity refers to how closely the treatment given to
each patient, client or subject follows the specified regimen or protocol, or how faithfully an implementation of a programme follows the original design (p. 729).

**Practices which undermine grade fidelity**

Sadler’s key argument is that achievement has an outcome or product orientation and that grades should reflect student achievement only rather than incorporating events leading up to that achievement such as the processes, speed, conditions, and student experiences of learning (p. 730). While it is important to encourage students in productive learning behaviours, grading practices which take into account input variables - effort, persistence, time on task, coping with failure and so on – raise equity problems for (1) the student who strives but fails to achieve and (2) the student who demonstrates high levels of achievement without the amount of effort required by other students. Though student pathways to achievement are important factors to consider when designing curriculum and teaching, they are not relevant to the assignment of grades.

The paper identifies and discusses a number of practices which undermine or compromise assessment grade fidelity through crediting or debiting marks or grades for behaviours other than final program or course achievement. These include what are termed ‘transactional’ and ‘bestowed’ credits and debits and progressive or continuous assessment.

**Transactional credits and debits**

Transactional credits are marks or points awarded for:

- attendance at, or participation in, a minimum proportion of classes, group discussions, laboratory sessions or e-learning chat rooms, including contributions that enhance the learning environment for other students;
- completion of specified activities, including practice exercises, log books, reflective journals on the learning experience, posts to online forums and discussion boards;
- inclusion of a specified component in a work submitted (such as ‘at least 20 references’) ...
- completion of interim drafts or project stages, with emphasis on passage through fixed points in a preset sequence (believed to be the most effective learning path) (pp. 732-3).

Transactional debits are marks or points deducted for:

- late submission of a response to an assessment task (perhaps on a sliding scale according to lateness);
- non-conformity with regulative specifications, such as maximum word length (for an essay);
- plagiarism (the alternative approach suggested later in the paper is to treat plagiarised work as non-compliant and require it to be resubmitted until compliance is reached) (p. 733).

**Bestowed credits or debits**

‘Bestowed’ is a second category of credits or debits Sadler uses to describe non-achievement behaviours that compromise integrity when influencing student grades.

- conveying tangible praise for exceptional effort and persistence, as an indirect way of increasing motivation; or conversely, of conveying disapproval of uncooperative behaviour or apparent laziness;
- rewarding significant improvement in performance to boost self-esteem, confidence or the student’s sense of accomplishment;
- acknowledging risk taking, lateral thinking or new ideas, even when these are off target;
- compensating for under-performance that is attributable to exceptional circumstances, such as acute health events, bereavement or computer failure;
- filling in missing data resulting from non-completion of some assessment tasks that would have provided clear evidence of learning (achievement) had they been available, a common method being to extrapolate from work completed to (hypothetical) performance on the whole;
- obtaining a more acceptable distribution of grades, so as to maintain their perceived value, or to compensate for poor teaching or assessment;
• improving the retention rate, or in other ways achieving a satisfactory throughput of students;
• making a concession based on comparative disadvantage, such as limited competence in mathematics or the language of instruction;
• forestalling negative personal consequences for the student, such as cancellation of a sporting scholarship, liability for additional fees or delay in graduation; and
• facilitating access to advanced studies, or enhancing career prospects (pp 733-4).

Continuous, progressive and cumulative assessment
A detailed section on continuous assessment makes the point that this practice also poses a risk to grade fidelity through a potential for final grades to reflect different pathways to achievement rather than final achievement itself. For example, students who begin a course (subject) with advanced understanding or prior knowledge of the area may be advantaged through relatively high performance on tasks completed early in the semester while students who reach comparable (and sometimes superior) levels of achievement late in the course may be disadvantaged when their end of course achievement cannot offset low marks awarded for poorly performed tasks completed earlier in the semester.

Formative assessment
While this discussion is primarily concerned with summative assessment (that which counts towards a final grade), the paper also cautions against the incorporation of ‘non-achievement’ into formative assessment (that which develops learning or achievement) in order to avoid providing students with misleading messages regarding how final grades will be awarded.

Conclusion
The paper concludes by pointing out that the adoption of an achievement only approach to grading may not be without difficulty as some of the practices that have been described may be entrenched in institutional assessment policy and some are uncritically accepted as normal or desirable by both teachers and students and advocated in numerous conference presentations, educational journals and assessment handbooks. However, continuance of these practices cannot remain unchallenged without compromise to the fidelity and integrity of assigned grades.

This series of briefs on assessment topics has been prepared by the UQ Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) for UQ teaching academics. “UQ ASSESSMENT BRIEFS” of journal articles, book chapters, reviews, websites, reports etc are distributed to Faculty and School Teaching and Learning Chairs in a form designed to encourage wider distribution.

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