



Expert Insights: Reducing Bias by Focusing on Academic Achievement

Joe Feldman, EdM; Author & Consultant; Crescendo Education Group [00:00:11] Implicit biases are unconscious or subconscious decisions or perceptions that we make that influence the way we see the world and the way we interact with the world. As teachers and faculty, we all have implicit biases based on our own upbringing, the media, our own personal experience, our own cultures. And one of the things we want to do in our grading is find ways to prevent those biases from infecting the grade. They're always gonna be there. But how do we prevent as much as possible our biases from getting into and influencing our grading? So many of us have thought of ways to do this. We have students write their names on the back of tests, or we assign students ID numbers. Because we know that we may have biases toward certain students because of our relationships to them, and so we want to protect against that. What we haven't done as much is think about how many of our traditional grading practices actually invite those implicit biases.

Ken O'Connor, MEd; Author and Consultant Assess for Success Consulting, Inc [00:01:19] Faculty shouldn't include behaviors in grades because of the purpose of grades. The purpose of grades is to communicate achievement. And if we include behaviors, we distort the the meaning of the grade. And really, it's about accuracy. If we include behaviors, we do not have accurate information about students' achievement.

Joe Feldman, EdM [00:01:44] So one example is when we include aspects of student behavior or how they comport in the class. Participation, for example. When teachers are deciding that they're gonna give points or include in the grade how much a student participates in a discussion, for example. What that is doing is saying, I have this particular archetype of what an effective student is or what learning looks like, and I am going to award students points for matching that archetype. And if students don't have, match that archetype, I am not gonna award them points, or I'm gonna subtract points. And when so much of what we think it is to be out a student, a successful student, is so influenced by our own backgrounds and our own biases, when we use traditional grading, we include all of those biases into the grade. And what we want to do is make sure that we take steps, just like assigning numbers to students or having them write their names on the back, is to do things in our grading so that we do not include elements of a student's behavior or added perceived attitudes in our grade calculation.

Ken O'Connor, MEd [00:03:02] One of the main grading practices that can distort achievement is including participation. Because whether students participate or not very often has a lot to do with their, their personality. I mean, if we just think about extrovert/introvert. Sometimes, whether they're feeling well or not, having a good day, a bad day. I know it's often been said that if we include participation in grades, we're giving students points for making the teacher's job easier. And that's, that's not what grades are about. Grades should be about achievement.

Ken O'Connor, MEd [00:03:42] Faculty shouldn't include attendance in grades because it also is a behavior. But, maybe more importantly, because it doesn't fit with the purpose. The purpose is achievement. And I don't think our courses, the learning, is about seat time. It's about what do the students know? What do they understand? What can they do, whether they showed up every day, or every second day, or whatever? And I think it's also an equity issue in the sense that sometimes there are very good reasons why students cannot attend to do with their personal life. And so we have issues with equity and we have issues with accuracy, if we include attendance in grades.

Ken O'Connor, MEd [00:04:35] Yes, there are some things that are absolute deadlines. It's perfectly legitimate to say, you must be here for this. And, you know, sometimes it's reasonable to set those sorts of requirements. I mean, one year I had the opportunity to teach phys ed in the school that I was in, but the school had a pool, so I had to be certified for life saving. I had to do a Red Cross course. And up front, it said that if you missed more than 2 hours, even if you demonstrate everything, you will not get the certificate. And so, you know, if you don't attend the CPR, you know, even if you get 100%, you don't get the credit.



ACUE

Student Success
Through Exceptional
Teaching

Joe Feldman, EdM [00:05:26] One common grading practice, a very traditional practice, is when teachers include concepts of effort or growth in a grade calculation. And it comes from a really important, valuable, empathetic place. I know that the student has been working their tail off. I maybe know something about their previous circumstances or current circumstances. I know everything they're overcoming. I know that they've made tremendous progress, even though they still aren't up to the level they need to be. They've come a long way. And so what we often do in traditional grading is that we bump up those grades, right? And there's a problem with that. A big problem. If I go to the doctor, and the doctor tells me that I have high blood pressure, and she says to me, you've got to change your diet, you've got to start exercising, you have to do all these things. And I say, okay. And I go, and I do those things. I keep a log. I am the ideal student of what she asked me to do. I go back three months later. I show the doctor all the great work I've done. I brought my log book and she's so impressed. And she takes all the measurements, goes, you know, does the test. And she sees that I still have high blood pressure. I do not want that doctor to think, wow, Joe has really worked hard. If I tell him the truth that he still has high blood pressure, it will be so demotivating to him. And I want to make sure that I recognize how hard he's worked, because he's done such a great job. I don't want the doctor to not tell me the truth. Because I want the dignity and honesty from that doctor. And our students deserve the same thing. They need to know exactly where they are in their learning. And when we add for growth or effort, we are essentially inflating the grade, and we are deceiving our students around where they are in their learning.

Ken O'Connor, MEd [00:07:25] Grades and not or shouldn't be about whether they've worked hard or not. I mean, for many students, it's important they work hard. And again, whether our perception of how hard they work might be something that we want to communicate separately. But the grades should be about the achievement, because we want them to be accurate. Rick Wormeli, who does a lot of work around grading, talks about the idea that grades should be communication, not compensation. And I think if we say it's about how hard you work, it's about compensation.