Design gradebook categories in such a way that they will yield the most useful information to educators and learners.

Examples from the Field

Hunter’s Point Community Middle School (HPCMS) in Long Island City, New York, a member of New York’s Mastery Collaborative, has created an instructional model based upon three attributes: scholarship, creativity, and community. Eight schoolwide standards define these attributes. (The model and standards can be found in the curriculum design section of this page). When teachers enter students’ scores in JumpRope, each content-area standard is nested within the category of one of these eight schoolwide standards. In this way, the organization of the gradebook makes clear how every piece of work done by the student is intended to strengthen the eight essential skills described in the instructional model. This approach has resulted in such strong results for students that HPCMS was named as a “Recognition School” by the state of New York in 2019.

At Noble High School in North Berwick, Maine, teachers worked together to create graduation standards with the lists of skills and knowledge that comprise each one. The teachers’ gradebooks are organized by these graduation standards so that each time a teacher scores a piece of student work, they will enter a grade for each of the graduation standards assessed by that piece of work. This system allows teachers to see where students are struggling or succeeding and also allows them to see gaps in their own curriculum. Work habits are graded separately, so the gradebook yields a clear picture of the level of a student’s skills and knowledge within each standard. This approach enables teachers to design projects that are authentic and integrated while still giving students very specific feedback on standards and skills.

At The Young Women’s Leadership School of Astoria in Queens, New York, a member of New York’s Mastery Collaborative, the teachers use a JumpRope online gradebook to record each student’s progress towards the school’s ten learning outcomes. The targets within each class are aligned to these outcomes, and so when teachers enter grades for assignments, those standards grades will always be entered within the categories of the outcomes: Argue, Be Precise, Collaborate, Communicate, Plan, Discern, Conclude, Create, Innovate, Investigate. This means that by looking at the gradebook, a student or teacher can get a sense of how the student is doing both in the specific academic skills of the class and the larger outcomes of the school. This approach has enabled the school to achieve an impressive level of achievement, with 84% of students completing the Regents successfully. Additionally, post-secondary enrollment is far above that of surrounding schools.

At each of these schools, the teachers have worked together to design gradebook organization strategies that will best organize the information in the gradebook into a coherent picture of each student as a learner. And all teachers at each school are following the same process.

What We’ve Learned

The organization of a teacher’s gradebook plays an important role in establishing and keeping track of the course’s priorities. Gradebooks that are organized using only traditional categories (tests, homework, projects, quizzes, participation, etc.) convey little specific information about a student’s learning or in what areas support, remediation, or extra challenge may be needed. When the gradebook is organized by the central competencies or standards being taught and assessed, then the student’s strength, weakness,
avoidance of a particular type of work, or potential for growth become much more apparent and can become the focus of parent-teacher conferences, teacher meetings, and student reflections and planning.

As schools discuss how to organize gradebooks, teachers should be given the chance to determine the categories that will enable them to see a clear picture of student skills. Too few categories will deliver a vague picture; too many categories will be confusing or overwhelming for students and parents, may cause teachers to spend too much time on data entry, and may push teachers to craft simplistic assessments that are focused on discrete skills rather than crafting assessments that push students to apply sets of skills to complex tasks.

As in all areas of grading and reporting, consistency across teachers in the organization of gradebooks is very important. Teachers need time with their colleagues to craft a system of organization that is manageable and that will help them make sense of each student’s progress and needs.

Quotes from the Literature and Resources

“...categories like Class Activities, Participation and Engagement [when factored into an omnibus grade, rather than reported separately] are more subjective and undefined…. Research has found that in classrooms taught by white teachers, black students “are typically rated as poorer classroom citizens” - meaning the kinds of behaviors that often included in Participation and Effort categories - than their white peers (Downey and Pribesh, 2004). When we create a Participation or Engagement category that is populated nearly entirely by subjective judgements of student behaviors, we are inviting our biases to infect our judgements, particularly when we’re white and our students are black or brown.” Feldman, Joe. Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms, 2019: Corwin Press, California.

“What Is Mastery-Based Learning?” Video by the Mastery Collaborative of the New York City Department of Education. In this video, students and teachers from Frederick Douglas Academy in Brooklyn, NY, talk about why the organization of grades and instruction by standards has been so helpful for them.

Resources from the Great Schools Partnership

- Grading Principles and Guidelines