Big Idea

Practice without penalty allows students to focus on growth and improvement rather than point accumulation.

Practice makes perfect. Whether throwing a baseball, riding a bicycle without training wheels, or jumping rope, most of us were taught that if we practiced long enough, in the correct manner, we would eventually master whatever we were trying to learn. The idea was simple: with proper instruction and enough time to practice, everyone will eventually learn. As we got older, of course, we realized that being perfect was not always possible. However, the idea of striving for perfection (or mastery) through appropriate practice is a concept we are unlikely to forget.

Yet, within our traditional routines in school, practice most certainly won't make perfect if the results of practice are overemphasized in the grade book. The only way practice could make perfect in school is if the first attempt is perfect and all subsequent practices are perfect as well. Since most traditional grading routines include the use of averaging (an issue discussed later in this chapter), *imperfect practice* makes it impossible for students' grades to reflect the perfection they may or may not eventually achieve. Being perfect may not be a realistic goal for many of our students, but in a sense, the term refers to students doing the best they can to achieve to the highest level possible. Therefore, if they achieve that highest level, it should be reflected more accurately in the grade book.

Practice versus Homework

Before going any further, it is important to clarify the difference between "practice" and "homework." Often these two terms are used interchangeably; however, for the purpose of this chapter, a clear separation of the two is necessary:

- *Practice* refers to those times where students make a first attempt and use or work with new learning. For most of us, this represents some of the traditional homework we used to do and, in some cases, still assign. For example, after teaching students how to add and subtract fractions, the teacher assigns a set of questions from the textbook so students can practice adding and subtracting fractions. Typically, practice assignments lead to the curriculum's big ideas and represent more of a means to an end.
- *Homework* refers to work completed at home that is either an extension or a deepening of the key learning outcomes, or work completed in preparation for a summative assessment. For example, students doing a project on the causes of World War I would likely not have sufficient time to finish in the classroom; therefore, they would complete the project at home.

With this new paradigm come new routines that make the use of practice more efficient and effective. Students who don't learn fast enough are often penalized in the grade book since their first attempt at a new skill is usually far from perfect. As a result, they may undergo a loss of confidence and feel despair since the results show that they didn't achieve a high score. Once we shift our focus, the students will shift as well. Instead of noting a student's first attempt to practice new learning in the grade book, the teacher should provide descriptive feedback on the student's work. Providing students with descriptive feedback is critical to their growth and understanding. With that feedback, provided *during* the learning, practice can make perfect and student grades will be more accurate.

The Limitations of Traditional Homework

The traditional routine around homework didn't typically make the distinction between "practice" and "homework" because everything counted. It also stressed compliance as much as it did learning. The need for homework was not only to provide practice, but to serve as a way to teach students responsibility. While typically not a learning outcome in most curriculum guides, responsibility was viewed as a moral outcome and one that was difficult to argue against. Fundamental to the task-completion paradigm is the notion of completing all tasks that have been assigned. That said, when assigning homework, teachers are making a few assumptions about their students.

> Inherent in the old paradigm are the assumptions that all students can do the work (not all of them can), that all students have the time to do the work (not all of them do), and that students should take as much time as is necessary to do the work (not all of them will). (Vatterott, 2009, p. 91)

These assumptions can make the results of homework, at best, misleading. At worst, if the results are in the grade book and factor into producing a final grade, they can be frustrating for students and subsequently deflate their grades and their desire to learn.

Most teachers are not intentionally deflating grades. The reason most teachers count practice and homework is they feel it will help a student's grade. The idea is that the scores will buoy a student's grade so there is less pressure when it comes to major assignments or summative exams that contribute much to the final grade calculation. In most cases, that belief is true. What is rarely considered, however, is that counting everything the student does could have the opposite effect. If a student is not clear on directions, doesn't understand the concept being taught, or doesn't have the time to complete it, the inclusion of practice in final grade calculations can make things worse.

If completion is overemphasized, students will be more focused on *getting it done* (as opposed to learning), and any grades assigned will distort their achievement. In other cases, as discussed in Chapter 7, the use of zeros or late penalties related to practice or homework can lead to grade deflation and distortion. Since homework in some classes is scored and counted daily, the cumulative effect can be devastating.

Rather than assigning homework from a task completion perspective, the relatively new focus of *practice without penalty* creates a natural extension of the lessons being taught. By our emphasis on the importance of practice, students understand that they can take some chances during the learning process without worrying about the impact on the grade book. By learning from their mistakes, students will be more prepared for their summative assessments, and their grades will be more reflective of what they have learned.

Putting It into Practice

Teachers should be sure to provide descriptive feedback before grading any of students' attempts at practicing new learning.

Implementing the *practice paradigm* led me to adopt this idea as a fundamental belief. As both a classroom teacher and school administrator, I had to focus on some fundamental questions and dispel some myths about why practice was important and why emphasizing the grading of practice was misguided.

Exposing the Flaws of Grading Everything

As I began to implement practice as a routine in my own classroom, the flaws of the *grade everything* paradigm were exposed. While some teachers predict that if work isn't graded, then the students won't do it, that wasn't my experience. On the contrary, more students began completing their work as the stress of completion was removed and replaced with a more appropriate focus on learning. Rather than being met with a penalty for incomplete work, students were met with more support to move their learning forward.

Before my decision to implement practice in my classroom, I asked myself some fundamental questions that brought the issue of practice to the forefront.

Whose work was I grading?

When everything counts, the incentive to cheat or deceive is high, especially for struggling students whose primary goal can be to accumulate enough points to offset any future disasters. In this case, the goal of learning becomes secondary to the goal of finishing. When at home, students have access to parents, siblings, friends, the Internet, and other sources to find answers to the questions they are working on. While many students complete their work, little independent learning occurs, rendering the assignment pointless.

I began to see students whose anxiety around the potential loss of points overruled any desire to learn. Once I took away the

grade or points, the incentive to cheat was diminished. Students in my classes quickly realized that cheating had no point if learning and practice were the goal, and the grade from the practice did not factor into a final grade. While some students still copied other students' work, it was much easier to convince those students that cheating was pointless. They came to realize that if there were no points to accumulate, they might was well learn as much as they could, figure out where they were through practice, and receive specific feedback on how to improve. Once the desire for a score is removed, the motivation to learn and practice increases.

Was my instruction really that flawless?
When everything, including practice, counted, what I was really saying was that my instruction was flawless and that I needed to teach a new concept only once to have 30 diverse learners master the content simultaneously. One lesson on any topic without some descriptive feedback will not lead to content mastery by all students in the class. Even a master teacher isn't good enough to think that every skill, idea, or section of content requires only a single lesson to take an accurate measure of how much students have learned. I believe I am a good teacher, but I'm not that good. I've learned that I need to give students the chance to process their initial learning and receive some descriptive feedback from me before I judge whether they have mastered the intended learning outcomes of the lesson.

Were my students clear on directions?
Many times, students have an adequate understanding of a lesson before their first attempt at practice; however, they are not clear on what they are supposed to do. I had to improve in this area, especially with my struggling learners. When assigning practice, I began to see how crucial it was that students were clear on directions. When some of my students were not clear on directions, two results became common: (1) They simply didn't do the work, which meant they didn't practice or enhance their learning and so became further behind; or (2) They completed the practice, but it was incorrect. With this latter result, I started to see bad habits form, which made it more difficult for the students to get back on track. Too often, the assigning of work happens at the very end of a lesson—even sometimes after the bell has rung—leaving little time to explain how to complete the work correctly. When I realized that being clear on directions is important, I took the time to ensure that those students who struggle with directions were clear before they left my classroom.

Should students learn with or without their teacher?
The lack of clarity and directions led some of my students to find other sources to relearn the lesson taught earlier in the day. Clearly, students benefit most if they do most of their learning in their teacher's presence. Only when a teacher is sure that the lesson has been learned and the students are clear on directions should students be left on their own to *show what they know.*

In this area I had to be more strategic about the types of assignments I was sending home and whether or not students were ready to work independently. We know feedback matters—especially timely feedback—which makes it more vital that students do most of their learning in our presence. Students should and can practice at home, but they should not be learning a new skill or section of content on their own. Once I knew they "got it," I felt more comfortable about assigning independent practice.

Work completed at home for summative purposes is a different matter. This work is intended to measure learning and should not have any influence from the teacher. Again, it needs to be an accurate portrayal of what the student knows. Before those summative moments, however, teachers need to remain actively involved through descriptive feedback on practice assignments designed to advance student learning.

Where were my nongraded moments?
While I often encouraged students to be risk takers, to stretch their thinking, my students were more likely to play it safe if everything counted. I became aware that asking students to take an academic risk when it might cost them in the grade book was unrealistic. If everything counts, students, especially struggling learners, are more likely to stay within themselves and not risk a disaster. With the practice paradigm, academic risks become more common because students know that taking them will not affect their grade.

Once my students were given feedback on their new learning, I might count any subsequent assignments on the same content.

The assignments had to be directly connected to the intended learning outcomes and have a summative purpose. Otherwise, the emphasis was on practice and creating the nongraded moment, allowing students to relax and try without penalty.

Practice: Implementing a New Routine

Two big myths often enter the discussion about practice: (1) Students don't have to complete any work at home; (2) students won't do the work if it doesn't count. In fact, students are held more accountable for the learning because the results of their practice are more authentic and their responses are more relevant. As my implementation of the practice paradigm evolved, I settled into a routine in which most students completed their practice and took ownership of their learning. This practice routine brought clarity of purpose to many of the practice assignments I was asking students to complete.

1. **Assign practice with purpose.** While much practice is completed in class, link any practice that has to be completed at home directly to the learning outcomes for that day. In other words, be purposeful about why the students need to complete the practice at home; the students themselves also need to recognize the connection. I found that assigning relevant tasks for practice became important to advance my students' abilities to understand and perform the necessary learning.

2. **Always check practice for completion and correctness.** Take the opportunity to check that the practice has been completed and review it in class. By doing so, I was able to see whose first attempts were successful and who needed more support, more instruction, and more practice. I was also able to provide feedback to ensure greater success next time and even use the practice as a formative tool to determine my next steps in instruction. In some of my classes where the practice assignments focused on a specific skill (e.g., adding and subtracting fractions), I got to a point where students chose whether they would complete all of the practice assignments or not. As they became more proficient and accurate at self-assessment, they determined when no further practice was necessary. Teaching students to self-assess and take ownership, as discussed in Chapter 6, empowers students to monitor their progress.

3. **Record and track the results of the practice.** When students are allowed to monitor their own learning, there is always the risk that their self-assessments are inaccurate. As a result, always record and track the practice results. This information becomes most relevant at those summative moments throughout a unit or teaching cycle. Periodically, I would assign a quiz or an assignment that was intentionally summative, designed to verify that learning had occurred. By tracking and recording practice, I was able to compare the summative assessment results with the practice results. When I had a student who had not completed all of the practice assignments but scored high on the summative assessment, I knew that the self-assessments were accurate and that the practice was unnecessary. On the other hand, I had students whose summative performance was low despite their perception that they understood the material and deemed the practice to be unnecessary. It was obvious to me that their self-assessments were inaccurate and that I needed to spend some time correcting their understanding. The discrepancy in results allowed me to have an authentic conversation with a student about the need to complete the practice assignments: I had information showing the student that the completion of practice assignments was critical to learning and not simply an issue of compliance. This is yet another way to differentiate and personalize learning.

4. ***Never* count the results of the practice in the grade book toward a final grade.** As discussed, the major shift in my classroom was that practice didn't count. While I favor a grade book organized around learning outcomes and most recent evidence, teachers using a more traditional grade book organized by task type can still implement a practice paradigm within their classrooms. Most electronic grade books will allow different tasks to carry "zero weight," allowing them to be present without factoring into final grade calculations. This way, both formative and summative assignments can be compared to ensure accurate self-assessments by students and to enable teachers to determine next steps in instruction.

Dealing with Practice That Counts

As a high school administrator, I have seen firsthand the stress and anxiety that surrounds the final exam experience and the role that *practice that counts* plays in distorting achievement. Now more than ever, the classroom and the final exam are two completely different experiences for students. The exam is a one-shot deal, whereas the classroom, by and large, is becoming a place of growth, multiple opportunities, and differentiated learning. As such, I have seen many variations in how students perform in the classroom and how they perform on a final exam. The difference is even more significant in skill-based courses such as math and English, where learning the skill, rather than learning content as in social studies and science, is usually transferable to any variation of the questions.

The variation that intrigued me the most was when a student performed well on a provincial exam yet had an extremely low classroom grade. One example was a student in my school who entered the provincial exam with a low classroom grade (47 percent) but scored 78 percent on the provincial exam. How does that happen? Clearly, the classroom grade didn't reflect the student's ability to meet the learning outcomes of the course. While I'm not espousing the virtues of final exams, skill-based ones can offer a fair reflection of a student's ability, provided the setting, questioning style, and other "exam" factors are controlled for. That said, when a gap such as the one presented in the example appears, it presents a great opportunity to dig deeper.

In the case of the student mentioned above, discussions with the teacher established that the classroom grade was deflated through a combination of late penalties and zeros assigned to missing homework assignments. Since homework in this student's class was scored and counted daily, the cumulative effect was devastating. The 78 percent that the student scored on the provincial exam was an accurate reflection of the student's performance on other summative tests. The classroom grade was low as a result of incomplete practice.

Practice needs to be practice, especially when it comes to new learning—it should not play a role in final grade calculations.

Ben Arcuri, a high school chemistry teacher with whom I have worked for several years, takes a unique approach to practice. Ben's continued shift away from what many would consider "traditional practices" has brought about improved achievement results for his students: results significant enough that he would find it unthinkable to return to how he used to do things. For example, in 2008–09, 95 percent of the students from Ben's classes who wrote the Chemistry 12 exam achieved a passing score—3 percent higher than the provincial average for British Columbia. Further, the students in Ben's classes are developing the confidence to write the exam. In British Columbia, the Chemistry 12 exam is considered optional, so students are not required to write the exam upon completing the course. As Ben has introduced many changes within his classroom, more students are choosing to write the exam. Ben's high school is one of three in School District No. 67. In 2008–09, 80 percent of the students in that school district who wrote the exam were from Ben's classes. Results matter, and the results for the students in Ben's classes indicate that the shift to practice has been a major influence in this upward trend.

The biggest shift for Ben was the introduction of a system of requizzing. After teaching a few introductory lessons on a topic in chemistry, Ben has the students write a quiz on that topic. When the students return to class the next day, they go through their quizzes to see which aspects of the topic they have mastered and which ones they need further study on. Ben then assigns the students further practice activities based upon each student's needs. A day or two later (or more depending on the breadth and depth of the topic at hand), Ben offers students a requiz to check whether or not their further practice has produced a greater understanding. Although this requiz is optional, most take it.

Ben's entire teaching load is senior chemistry (Grades 11 and 12). Ben knows that the composition of his classes is more homogeneous than the groupings found in the younger grades in most high schools. Most of his students are motivated by grades, want to achieve at a high level, and will likely attend a college or university upon graduation. The practice Ben uses is specific to his senior chemistry courses, and he would not implement it the same way if he were teaching a Grade 9 science class.

Ben notes that if he were teaching younger students, he would use the same system but likely implement it in a slightly different way. His comment emphasizes the point that systems are universal, but that practices need to be age appropriate. For his senior students, the quizzes count in the grade book; however, Ben estimates that each quiz is worth only about 0.2 percent toward a student's grade since he gives more than 20 quizzes in a semester. When students write the requiz, only the higher of the two scores counts. This approach allows the first quiz, in theory, to be a practice activity. It is assumed that most students' scores will significantly improve on the requiz.

Any homework that Ben assigns in his classes is optional. Ben emphasizes to his students that they should do the homework if they believe they have not mastered the learning at hand, as evidenced by their quiz scores. Some students do all of the homework, others only work on what they need to, while others do very little. What Ben emphasizes is self-assessment and self-management. The students know that Ben is always available for more intensive support. However, the age appropriateness of Ben's system puts the students at the center of the decision-making process because he believes they are mature enough to take that on.

For students who experience repeated failures or whose requiz results show no improvement, Ben takes more of a hands-on approach to determine where things are going wrong. Doing this could involve the parents to make sure that they understand what is necessary to keep their child on track. If a large number of students show poor results, then Ben will go back and reteach the lessons in a way that makes more sense to the students. He recognizes that adjustments to the lessons will be necessary.

While Ben's approach might not be a traditional approach to practice, the results for the students in his classes are compelling. Practice serves as a great opportunity for students to take some risks by stretching their thinking without it costing them on their report cards. If everything counts, there is no margin for error, leaving no room to grow. While Ben's quizzes do count, the impact on the students' grades is so minimal that students are more focused on their potential for improvement. Most students would rather play it safe than risk their opportunity to pass; Ben has found a system that creates an environment where risk taking and personal ownership are maximized. Practice can make perfect—or at least a lot better—if we create the right routine and atmosphere that will encourage students to go beyond their own potential.

Tips for Communicating with Parents

- Clearly communicate information to parents to help them distinguish between practice and homework using your website, course outline, or open house when parents come to meet their children's teachers.
- If you use a lot of handouts or blackline masters for practice, copy them on different-colored paper to help parents know right away that the handouts don't count. Furthermore, if students self-regulate their work by determining when practice is no longer necessary, then the colored paper lets parents know that it is okay for their child to stop at question 9 when 14 remain.
- Identify practice activities on your website or blog, or in an e-mail to parents.
- Distinguish between which assignments are essential (i.e., will count in the grade book) and which assignments are for practice.

Guiding Questions for Individuals or Learning Teams

1. What routines have you established around practice?
2. What new routines do you think you might add?
3. What is the most positive outcome in allowing authentic practice as part of a student's learning experience?