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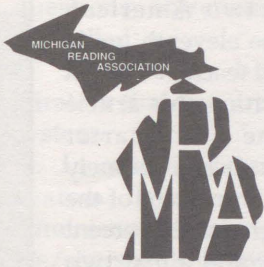
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Using A, B, I Grading to Improve Student Achievement

by Ken Krause

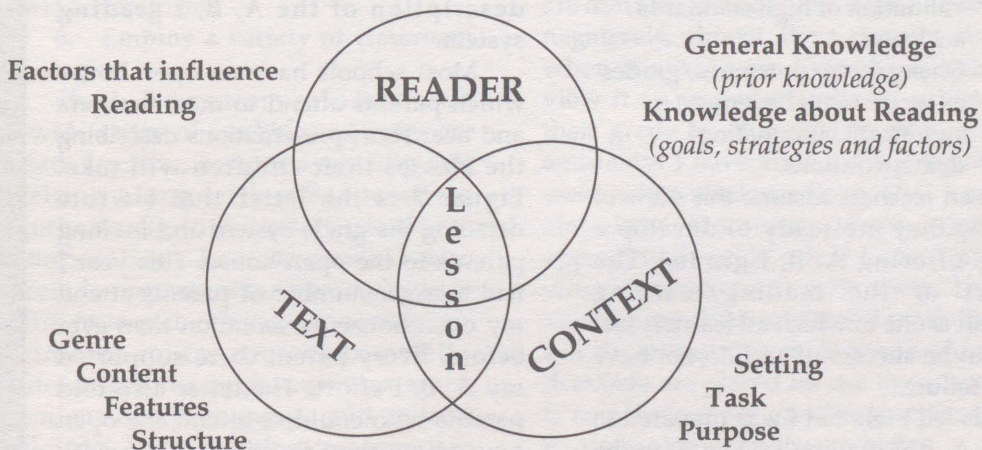
The Interactive Reading Model involves three essential components: the reader, the text and the context of the reading situation. When diagrammed in concentric circles, the lesson is at the point where the circles intersect (Figure 1). This model implies that all parts impact lessons equally. However, the one that seems to receive the least attention is the context in which reading is done.

The environment in which reading, writing, and for that matter, all learning

occurs is as important as the text and the ability the learner brings to the task. Student learning is enhanced when motivation is internal. The child knows that he will get something for his effort. An A, B, I (Incomplete) grading system offers powerful motivation to succeed.

An A, B, I system fits into the Outcomes Based Education (OBE) perspective. OBE is based on the premises that (1) All students can learn and succeed, (2) Success breeds success and (3) Schools control the conditions of

FIGURE 1



success (Spady 1990). The third premise might be changed to read "Classroom teachers control the conditions of success." The A, B, I program increases the probability of higher levels of achievement while providing students with some guarantees.

In order to implement this system in the classroom, teachers must accept the Student Success Paradigm. The traditional mindset that a certain number of students must receive an A, B, C, D and F grade must be set aside. The concept of the normal curve of random probabilities (i.e. bell-shaped curve) must be abandoned. Adapting the new grading system means shifting ideas about achievement, success and standards. Change is based on five beliefs (Spady 1990)

1. Forget that some students are winners and others are losers. Teachers must know what they plan to do and tell the student what is critical to learn.
2. Abandon the notion of time as a determiner to one of time as a resource and organizer.
3. Realize that aptitude is not the ability to learn but the rate of learning.
4. Change from grades as relative judgments of quality to a validation of high standards achieved.
5. Change from outcomes/grades as accumulated averages to significant culminating demonstrations.

When teachers assume this view of teaching, they are ready to develop a course offering A, B, I grades. The context of the reading/learning situation is one in which all learners feel they can be successful and do not have to fear failure.

This fall I felt that I was prepared to use an A, B, I grading system with the

124 students in the two American Literature and the three eleventh grade English Survey classes I teach at Howell High School. I am writing this article three weeks after the first quarter ended. The program has been extremely successful. Seventy-seven percent of the students received "A" grades, 21 percent received "B" grades and only two percent ended with Incompletes. Due to excessive absences, two students refused to attempt to make up assignments and to stay after classes for extra help. In any event, a 98 percent success rate isn't bad.

A, B, I grading will work in any class. The system can be adopted by following these steps.

1. Clearly identify what you expect students to do, know and be like.

These statements are called outcomes of significance (Spady). They identify demonstrations of student learning. These outcomes should be listed in a syllabus that is given to all students. Note the copy of the American Literature syllabus in Figure 2. All unit and lesson plan outcomes and classroom activities are directed toward developing these outcomes.

2. Send parents a copy of the course syllabus that includes a description of the A, B, I grading system.

Most schools have an open house which parents attend to meet teachers and hear short presentations describing the classes their children will take. Figure 3 is the letter that I wrote detailing the grade system and inviting parents to the open house. This year I had a larger number of parents attend my open house presentation than ever before. Every parent there supported my A, B, I effort. The letter also told parents who couldn't attend the open house how they could reach me with

questions, objections or concerns. No one called.

3. Inform building administrators that you are using the A, B, I system.

In case a parent challenges the system later in the year, the administrator's support may be needed. He/she should know the standards set and the means for assigning grades. They can also objectively view the plan and offer suggestions.

4. Offer students multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they learn.

People usually aren't successful at tasks the first time they do them. If students perform poorly on an assignment, I work with them to help them learn what they didn't know. They then have an opportunity to gain the credit they lost. On a poorly written essay, this can mean additional drafts. On a shorter assignment, it can mean completing a parallel assignment that teaches the same concept or skill.

5. Show students that whether they learn something well is more important than when they learn it.

Not all students complete assignments at the same rate. Some students will need more time. Make time adjustments, but be sure students fulfill their commitment.

6. Employ a variety of classroom strategies.

The A, B, I system works best when a wide range of teaching strategies are used. Lecture, assigned reading and writing along with other teaching methods fit into lesson planning. Cooperative Learning strategies provide opportunities for students to learn from each other and to review and reinforce course content and skills. Interactive reading strategies assist student comprehension and critical thinking. The writing process approach

permits students to improve their work through revision, peer editing and conferencing with the teacher.

7. Assess student learning by a variety of techniques.

Objective tests that require one correct answer per item will not fit all situations. Authentic, performance assessments and even portfolios are more appropriate measures of student learning that fit the A, B, I system. Using the A, B, I system may mean that a student who performs poorly on a test may need to have the information or skill re-taught and then be given another opportunity to demonstrate mastery by retaking a part of the test or a different form of assessment. As an additional inducement to perform well I told my classes that students who receive "A" grades for the first two quarters will not have to take the midterm exam. I will offer the same opportunity during the second semester for final exams.

8. Plan to spend additional time working with students after classes.

Since some students may not master new learning during the class period, it will be necessary to work with them after school. Since instituting the A, B, I system, I have discovered an interesting phenomena. In the past, students viewed time after school negatively, almost like a penalty even when it was to get help. Now, some view it as an opportunity to enhance their grade by obtaining more teacher assistance. I have arranged one night a week when students know that I will stay late. However, several have approached me to ask if I could stay other nights to work with them. They also inquire about additional work they can do to improve their grades. More demands are placed on my time, but it is somehow more gratifying when the requests come from the students.

9. Inform students about their grades regularly.

A mid-term report and then a quarter grade may not allow students enough feedback on their classroom performance. I use a computer grading program. Once a week I calculate student grades and distribute them. Students who have missed assignments or didn't realize that their grade slipped will ask what they can do to raise them. That is where parallel assignments can be used. If students haven't completed a base assignment that is important, I tell them it must be completed along with another "reinforcing" assignment to raise their grade. Surprisingly, a number of students this quarter did twice the work on some assignments to raise their grade.

10. Prepare for more parent interest and support.

At times I find it necessary to call home about some students who aren't keeping pace with classwork. After introducing myself, I remind parents that I am the teacher who sent the letter about using the A, B, I grading system. The several times that I made calls this quarter, parents were complimentary, spoke about their youngster's new attitude about their English class, and said they will insure the work is completed. In most situations so far, students met assignment deadlines after parents were contacted.

Due to constant failure, school is not a pleasant place for some students. Some have been able to slip through classes with C and D grades that reflect little learning. The guarantee of a high grade for quality work that meets clearly identified standards motivates students. Knowing that success is within reach and that the teacher cares enough to encourage, support and validate success offers students new opportunities. The A, B, I grading

system can impact student achievement by giving the context of the learning situation a new meaning.

WORKS CITED

Spady William (1990). **The High Success Program on Outcome-Based Education Summer Implementation Seminars.** Howell.

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is a high school English teacher in the Howell Public Schools, Howell , Michigan, and is the MRA Secondary Reading Committee Chairman.

FIGURE 2

September 11, 1991

Dear Parent:

Your youngster is a student in one of the 11th grade English classes that I teach at Howell High School. Since the grade system that I am using is different from that used by most teachers, and would be considered an innovation by many, I want to tell you about it. The enclosed sheet describes the course and the grade procedure. It was given to my students the first day of classes and explains the grade system. You will notice that students can receive only an A, B or I (Incomplete) grade in the class.

I have adopted this system for a couple reasons. Some students choose to get C or D grades because teachers make them available. Achieving 60% to 70% of the information from a class to get a C or a D doesn't show mastery of much learning. I believe that a student who attains 80% mastery of the information and skills taught has demonstrated success. Secondly, traditional grading systems that use a random grade distribution (called a bell-shaped curve) dictate that a large percentage of students will get average grades and a certain number will fail. I believe that all students can learn what is important and be successful in the classes I teach.

There are several measures that I will take, while maintaining high standards, to insure that your child gets an A or a B grade.

1. I use a computer grade program to figure student grades. Each week (or two at the most), students will receive a progress report. If a grade has dropped below 80%, the problem will be addressed or supplementary work provided.
2. Assignments that are poorly done will be redone. As needed, alternate assignments that get at the same content will be provided.
3. Students who lose partial credit because an assignment is late will be given supplementary make up assignments.
4. If a test score is low, students will complete supplementary assignments targeted at the information they don't understand.
5. I am usually available in room U-1 until 3:00 p.m. daily. In addition, I have told students that I will be available on Thursdays for an hour after classes to meet with them.
6. If your youngster gets behind and doesn't try to make the work up, I will call you.

If the student has less than 80% of the required grade at the end of the quarter, they will receive an "I" (Incomplete) grade. I realize that some students take longer to learn, so we will establish a reasonable time limit to accomplish the necessary work. When that work is submitted, the student will receive an A or a B grade. If they refuse to do the work, they will receive a failing grade. If they exceed the ten absences allowed each semester by the school attendance policy and an appeal isn't granted, they also will fail. I realize that there are some circumstances affecting failure that I cannot control.

I wish to invite you to the high school open house September 17 from 6:45 to 9:00 p.m. to meet with me as well as your child's other teachers. I will answer questions about the grade policy and describe the class more completely. If you are unable to attend and you have questions, call me at the high school 548-6201 or send a note.

I believe that the A, B, I grade system can increase student learning. At times I may need your support to make it work. Together we will insure your youngster's successful learning experience.

Sincerely yours,

Ken Krause
Teacher, Howell High School

FIGURE 3

COURSE TITLE: American Literature

GRADE: 11

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

American Literature provides college preparatory experience in communication skills for juniors with advanced skills in language arts. The emphasis is placed on written and oral analysis of genres and trends in American literature from the seventeenth century to the present. Research skills are further developed through a required research paper on an American literary topic.

OUTCOMES: The student will:

1. Analyze and interpret American literary selections through a variety of written and spoken activities.
2. Identify and define the basic structural elements/literary terms in American fiction and poetry.
3. Describe the major literary periods, works and persons in American literature and explain their continuing significance.
4. Describe relevant social and cultural issues reflected in the writings of American authors and interpret their continuing significance.
5. Identify a thesis in fiction and non-fiction selections and devise a defensible thesis in personal writing.
6. Demonstrate research strategies through the production of a literary-based research paper.
7. Identify and list key ideas through the use of notetaking strategies.
8. Demonstrate personal management and organizational skills.
9. Apply appropriate analytical and problem solving strategies when reading selections that vary in content, difficulty and style.
10. Delineate an author's arguments presented in fiction and non-fiction selections and formulate defensible arguments in personal writing.

PRIMARY TEXTS: *The American Experience*, published by Prentice Hall. *The Crucible*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Great Gatsby*

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Maintain a notebook/folder containing all writing assignments and handouts given in class.
2. Read all assigned selections.
3. Complete written responses to selections read.
4. Research a thesis, write the research paper, and deliver an oral presentation of it.
5. Complete projects demonstrating knowledge of major selections read.
6. Participate in class and small group discussions and activities.
7. Successfully complete periodic exams demonstrating new learning and skills.

GRADING:

A = 90% - 100% Mastery of the material

B = 80% - 89% Mastery of the material

I = Incomplete: Assignments not completed, assignments lacking in quality, low exam grades

Students must complete assignments, re-do them if necessary, or complete alternate exams demonstrating knowledge of the material. Students will receive weekly or bi-weekly updates on their grades. After school sessions will be available to students who need additional help. The only failures will come from lack of attendance or a high number of tardies.