

Preface

There are two aspects of the teaching profession that I find incredibly draining: grading and communicating with parents. I know students need to receive regular feedback, so they know where they are excelling and where they need to focus their time and energy to improve. I also want to be clear that most parents are lovely and supportive, but there are always a handful of parents each year that are aggressive and demanding. Ironically, these two challenging aspects of my job—grades and parents—are often linked.

Parents are frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of communication from teachers about how their students are progressing. On the other side of this tension are teachers with anywhere from 30 to 150+ students. Many teachers are still employing a teacher-centric approach to their jobs. They deliver and facilitate lessons during the actual school day, but the rest of their responsibilities—designing learning experiences, grading student work, attending meetings, and communicating with parents—happen outside of the school day, invading their lives beyond school. It is exhausting and robs teachers of the time they need to relax and recharge.

Three years ago, I made two important decisions. First, I was not going to take grading home anymore. Second, I was going to have students track their progress and communicate directly with their parents on a regular basis. These two shifts changed my teaching reality and led me to re-evaluate (yet again) my role and my students' role in the classroom as well.

For the last 10 years, I've been using blended learning models and technology to shift control in the classroom from me to my students. However, it was not until I changed the way I approached feedback, assessment, and parent communication that I had an epiphany. Teachers must partner with their students! If teachers and students work together to assess, track, and reflect on the learning happening in the classroom, teachers will have the time and energy to innovate and personalize learning.

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The goal of this book is to provide teachers using blended learning models and technology with the resources, strategies, and tools necessary to partner with their students on assessment. Grades are not something that should happen *to* students. Grades and academic progress must be an ongoing, two-way conversation between the teacher and the learner. The more transparency we create around student progress, the more effectively students can take ownership of their learning and articulate that progress to their parents, keeping them in the learning loop.

I wrote this book primarily for secondary teachers; however, elementary teachers can take and adapt many of these principles, strategies, and ideas for their classrooms. Elementary teachers do not have as many students, and their students do not typically generate the same volume of work as secondary students, but teaching elementary students strategies that encourage them to be active and engaged learners will benefit them as they progress through school. Regardless of the grade level, teachers are drowning in work and need concrete strategies they can use to shift the traditional workflow in their classrooms to be more effective, efficient, and energized.

This book will present ideas and strategies that may initially feel lofty or unrealistic given your particular teaching assignment. I want to reassure you that I have done this in a public school with class sizes of approximately 30 students. It did not always go smoothly. It required time, practice, and fine tuning, but it worked. You don't need to do everything all at once. I certainly didn't. I would encourage teachers reading this book to try one strategy at a time. You will make mistakes, you will hit bumps, and then you will find a way to make it work for you.

My goal is to inspire a mind shift in the way teachers view both their role and responsibilities in the classroom as well as their students'. This is a process. It took me 4 years to get to the point where I was truly partnering with my students in our classroom. I hope that this book inspires teachers to approach their work in a more sustainable way that prioritizes their relationships with students. I am confident that the more of these strategies teachers can incorporate into their classrooms, the more rewarding they will find their work.