Extra Credit: An Undeserved Gift or a Second Chance to Learn?

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Presented by:
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I remember being surprised when I first read the results of a survey on extra credit published some years ago in *Teaching of Psychology*. Almost 20% of the 145 faculty (across disciplines) reported that they never offered extra credit and another 50% said they offered it only under exceptional circumstances. The two most common reasons for not giving extra credit were that it encouraged lax, irresponsible student attitudes and it was unfair to offer it to select students (say those doing poorly). I also think it is avoided because it means more work for faculty and most of us already have more of that than we can handle.

The question of giving students an extra chance is, like most pedagogical issues, less cut and dried than it might first seem. If the second chance is designed so that it represents a robust learning opportunity, if its completion means that a student who hasn't mastered the material finally does and if learning is our ultimate goal, then complete opposition to second chances or extra credit seems less defensible.
We also should be called to take a second look by some of the creatively designed strategies teachers use to give students a second chance. They are far removed from the ubiquitous worksheet that can be dashed off with little cerebral effort. For example, I was re-reading an article I haven’t read for sometime and had forgotten that it contained what the author calls a “second chance exam.”

Here’s how it works. The instructor attaches a blank piece of paper to the back of every exam. Students may write on that sheet any exam questions they couldn’t answer or weren’t sure they answered correctly. Students then take this piece of paper with them and look up the correct answers. They can use any resource at their disposal short of asking the instructor. At the start of the next class session, they turn in their set of corrected answers which the instructor re-attaches to their original exam. Both sets of answers are graded. If students missed the question on the exam but answered it correctly on the attached sheet, half the credit lost for the wrong answer is recovered.

The benefits of this strategy? Students reported that they thought they learned more having to look up answers rather than just being told the answers during the debrief. They also reported that the strategy reduced exam-related stress. The teacher felt the strategy put students at a higher cognitive level. They had to think about the question, determine an answer and then decide whether or not they had answered the question correctly.

Does a strategy like this contribute to lax student attitudes? They still suffer consequences if they don’t know something. They have a fairly short timeframe to track down the correct answers. And it isn’t a strategy offered to some students and not to others.

There is no question that students are hungry for extra credit. Often they seem more motivated to do the extra credit than the original assignment. Is that because they think extra credit is easier? Or, does the motivation derive from not having done as well as they expected on an assignment? It could be the latter. A few years back, someone wrote an article for *The Teaching Professor* which described a kind of insurance policy extra credit assignment. Completing sets of extra homework problems was optional, but if students turned them in on the designated date, points awarded for the problem sets could be applied to a subsequent exam. Surprisingly, only a few students took advantage of this “insurance” option.

I’m kind of left thinking that student attitudes about extra credit (which we probably have to admit derive from previous extra credit experiences) are not the best, and I’m not sure we help them learn when we succumb to what they want. But I also believe there are some viable ways to offer students a second change and some legitimate reasons for doing so.
Extra Credit Options Suggested in Blog Comments

Blog readers shared a variety of different ways extra credit can be offered. Here’s a sampling of their suggestions, some of which have been slightly condensed.

In my first-year composition course, I offer students an opportunity to re-write a previous essay in an attempt to raise their grade. This reassessment essay assignment comes at the end of the term and carries a couple of caveats. Students may not use this assignment to submit a paper they previously did not turn in. And the grade on the reassessment essay replaces that of the original assignment. This discourages students from turning in anything less than what they feel is their best (or at least better) work.

Suggested by Peter Dorman

I teach in a (baccalaureate-level) Medical Laboratory Science professional program. Our students must pass a certification exam after graduation, so mastery of the material is critical (both for certification and for professional practice). Students who pass an exam are allowed to use resources to submit detailed corrections of missed questions, for which they can regain partial (1/3) credit. A passing grade is required so that students sill study for the exam, instead of relying disproportionately on correction points. Students routinely tell us they learn a lot from correcting their errors.

Suggested by Karen

I teach Psychology and I feel that one of the best ways to help students see what others are feeling is through community service. As a part of my course assignments I give a community service project that all of the students are able to participate in if they choose. It is extra credit and there are rules. I don’t pressure them about it and after I talk about the requirements a couple of times in class, I don’t mention it any more. It is on their assignments sheet. Most of the students participate in it, and they really enjoy the community service. It is interesting, however, that the ones who need every point they can get, don’t participate in the project anyway.

Suggested by Dr. Audrey Ann Moses

I usually offer some sort of re-test since I teach challenging accounting classes. I NEVER allow work or rework outside of class since I don’t really know who is doing the work. The re-test option creates extra work for me to compose and grade the extra test, but I have found that the rate of learning seems to vary greatly and some students just need more time to absorb the material.

Suggested by Jim F.

I typically do two things that provides some extra credit in my composition courses. The first is that I offer a few points of extra credit for turning major essay assignments in early (1 point for one day early, 2 points for 2 days early, etc.). I usually cut it off at about 4 or 5 points. This not
only motivates them not to procrastinate, but it also helps me to get their papers back to them sooner.

The other extra credit opportunity I offer is usually in the form of an unannounced extra credit day. When the students show up I have a Jeopardy-like game prepared for them. Every who attends gets maybe 5 points of extra credit and the team with the highest score gets 10. All questions are taken directly from course material. It allows them to interact with the material in a fun way and it also allows me to see what they’ve retained.

Suggested by Andi

I use extra credit similarly to the “blank sheet” example—however, I offer the opportunity in-class only. Students complete their quizzes in my General Psychology course individually in blue or black ink. They then put those pens away, and receive a red pen from me. They have about 20-30 minutes to get into their learning teams (which are randomly set from the beginning of the term) to share and discuss their answers. I watch carefully to make sure that students are only using red ink during this group consultation. They use the red-pen time to consult with their group members, identify probably wrong answers, and write to me any new learning they take from discussing with their team. I grade the quiz based on their original answers, but give partial credit back for excellent explanations for new learning about wrong answers. The discussions during the red pen exercise are closed book, but very lively. Students love them because they not only get a chance to earn points back, but also because they value the immediate feedback on their quiz performance, and the discussion enhances their understanding of the material.

Suggested by drxina

After I have graded a test, I give the test back to students and give them 20 minutes to go back through the test with a textbook and their notes. They find the correct answers but also have to identify the page number or the lecture in which the correct answer can be found. They re-submit the test and I award up to 10 extra credit points for corrected answers.

Suggested by Yolanda W.

I teach various English classes. I don’t do extra credit per se, but you might say I have extra credit built into the curriculum. For example, for all assigned essays, students are instructed to submit a rough draft (which counts toward class participation) and a final draft. If the final drafts are basically in good shape but full of proofreading errors, I take off a point a piece, give the paper back to the student and say something along the lines of, “This is too good a paper to be getting a 22 because you didn’t bother to proofread.” They are then allowed to correct errors and resubmit for full credit. I rarely have to do this more than once. Also, I give 8 quizzes over the course of a term, but only the best 5 are counted. If they show up to class and do their work, they almost always wind up with an A or B and are amazed at what they can do.

Suggested by Marae
The follow-up blog post:

August 11, 2011

So What Did We Learn about Extra Credit?

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD in Teaching Professor Blog

The July 20 post on extra credit has generated a record number of responses; 42 at last count. I thought it might be useful to consider what we learned from our exploration of this topic.

Clearly it’s a topic of interest—one we care about deeply. I wonder why that is.

Based on the variety of different ways of awarding extra credit shared in the comments, I don’t think there’s any question that it’s possible to design ethically responsible extra credit options that can offer students robust opportunities to learn material, learn more of it or learn it at a deeper level. Hats off to the designers of these very impressive and creative strategies!

Not everyone is in favor of offering extra credit and those who are opposed object most strongly when it’s the students who aren’t working hard or who are hoping they won’t have to work hard in order to do well are the ones asking for it. They are also opposed to poorly designed extra credit options—ones that compromise standards and make students believe that deadlines can be missed and poor performance can be overcome after the fact. There also isn’t any question that extra credit can be used in ways that don’t result in more learning or contribute to the maturation of learners.

Your commentary further convinces me that nomenclature is an issue. There is a distinction between easy, after-the-fact extra credit options and legitimate second chances. A legitimate second chance is teacher designed and controlled. It engages students in robust intellectual work and increases the likelihood that material missed can be understood correctly or that necessary, inadequate academic skills will be further developed. Those opposed to easy, after-the-fact extra credit have far few objections to bona fide second changes.

As illustrated with this topic and so many others, teachers are wonderful about sharing strategies. We do so without hesitation and without caring if someone uses a strategy we’ve developed. In fact, if someone “borrows” something we’ve designed, it feels more like a compliment than a theft of intellectual property. I love this aspect of teaching and hope we never forget how much there is to learn from and with each other.
I also think your commentary demonstrates the great diversity in our instructional practice. The options for extra credit range from none, never, under any circumstances to variety of test, quiz, assignment and attendance possibilities. I hope the commentary has encouraged you to revisit your beliefs and practices. As with so many aspects of teaching, few extra credit options are absolutely right or wrong. What makes a policy “right” is that it fits with a philosophy of teaching, that it is thoughtfully crafted and that its effects on student motivation and learning have been carefully assessed.

Do we have anything left to learn about this topic? I think so. Very little in the commentary offered in response to the blog post unpacks, organizes or explores the premises on which these extra credit strategies rest—what they assume, in this case, about who’s responsible for what in the teaching-learning process. The comments opposing extra credit come closest to articulating beliefs. “Students need to learn to meet deadlines.” “Tests are for demonstrating what you know. They are like life where don’t always get a second chance.” Those who give extra credit do so because they want students to learn—they believe they have a responsibility to do things that help them learn.

But there are more beliefs and assumptions inherent in these policies. Here’s a set of questions not answered by the commentary: Does it matter how long it takes a student to learn? What if it takes three tries or even more? Are the bright students, the ones who work hard and get it the first time disenfranchised by policies that aid those who take longer to learn? Why? How? When you were a student what did you believe about extra credit? How would you characterize the responsibility teachers have for student learning?

**Are there other topics that would generate this kind of rich exchange? Please let me know what else you’re interested in reading about and discussing on this blog. I’d love to write more posts that motivate you to share your opinions, insights and good ideas.**
Discussion Questions

1. Mark Palmer writes in a blog comment, “extra credit and an extra chance are two very different things. There are many ways to be flexible and reasonable without offering extra credit. I never offer extra credit; but do my best to accommodate each student’s circumstances.” Do you agree? How are extra credit and extra chances difference? Are these real differences or nothing more than semantic distinctions?

2. D. Smith responds, “College is time to grow up, and preparation for tests is part of that. Encouraging students to look up incorrect answers and letting them make the choice to learn or not to learn without offering additional rewards is critical to their assuming responsibility for their own learning and adult lives. Repeating some of the material on future tests is a way to reward those who accept this responsibility without adding additional work to the teachers already overwhelming workload. Let’s stop expecting teachers to rescue students and start expecting students to hold themselves to a higher standard!” Do you agree? What does offering extra credit in ways suggested in the blog comments teach students about the responsibility for learning? Does offering extra credit compromise professional preparation?

3. The survey research conducted by Hill, Palladino and Eison and highlighted in the program contains a list of 39 possible extra credit opportunities. Here are some not suggested by blog readers or discussed in the program. Are any of these legitimate extra credit opportunities? Have or do you use them?
--participating as a research subject
--making an oral presentation to the class on a topic related to course content
--doing an exceptional job on an assignment
--attending an event outside of class such as a lecture or play and writing a summary of it
--tutoring fellow students
--answering study questions at the end of the chapter or doing extra homework problems
--finding spelling errors on the exam or catching the prof making a mistake

4. Should extra credit opportunities be offered to all students or only to those experiencing special circumstances such as an illness or family emergency?

5. If an instructor is opposed to giving extra credit and students ask for it, what’s the best way to respond to their request? Or, a different but related question: is giving extra credit because students ask for it a good reason for using it?

6. After listening to the program, reading these materials, perhaps discussing the topic with colleagues, how would you answer the questions that started this discussion: is it possible to offer extra credit options that constitute intellectually robust learning experiences? If so, does that justify the use of extra credit?
Articles Referenced in the Program


Links to the presentation’s four YouTube video clips

Joyce Milambiling
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3a_GB-M0CMA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3a_GB-M0CMA)

DeAnne Larsen
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVYq2nluUxA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVYq2nluUxA)

Donna Flint
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCo1ZaCdLvI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCo1ZaCdLvI)

Loretta Driskel
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rw-xT1bypo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rw-xT1bypo)