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

A Magna Online Seminar presented on October 25, 2011 by Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D., editor The Teaching Professor newsletter.

In Extra Credit: An Undeserved Gift or a Second Chance to Learn? you will learn how to use extra credit to enhance learning and not to reinforce procrastination or other irresponsible behaviors. In particular, participants will:

- Review legitimate reasons why some faculty offer extra credit while others do not;
- Consider several creatively designed extra-credit options;
- Reevaluate assumptions about the purposes and value of extra credit;
- Explore how terminology (simply using the words “extra credit”) affects attitudes about optional assignments or mid-term changes to syllabi; and
- Learn strategies to improve the efficacy of current extra credit practices.

Editor’s note:
This is a written transcript of an audio recording. Our policy is to edit only the occasional unintelligible phrase. Everything else appears exactly as it was spoken.

© 2011 Magna Publications Inc. All rights reserved. It is unlawful to duplicate, transfer, or transmit this program in any manner without written consent from Magna Publications.

The information contained in this online seminar is for professional development purposes but does not substitute for legal advice. Specific legal advice should be discussed with a professional attorney.

To make this program available to all your faculty and staff, contact Magna’s Customer Service department at 1-800-433-0499 Ext. 2 and ask about our Campus Access License.
Hello. My name is Maryellen Weimer. Welcome to this program on extra credit. We decided to do this program in response to a blog I posted on the Teaching Professor blog which appears in your supplementary materials. In that post, I wondered whether or not it might be possible to design extra credit options that were intellectually robust learning experiences for students and, if we did that, whether or not they might offer students a second opportunity to learn important material in the course.

The post generated all sorts of response. Faculty shared how they used extra credit. They offered arguments for and against. They provided references and asked questions. We decided if there was that much interest in the topic, we ought to do a program. I'm very happy that you're joining us for these 30 minutes and hope that during the program you'll revisit your views and ideas about extra credit.

Hello, and welcome to Magna's online seminar Extra Credit: An Undeserved Gift or a Second Chance to Learn? cosponsored by Magna Publications and Faculty Focus. I'm Kate Stover, Managing Editor of Magna Publications, and I'll be the moderator today. I'm pleased that you could join us.

Before we begin, I'd like to point out a few things about how the seminar works. If you have a question or a comment for our presenter, you can enter it in the chat box at the bottom of your screen. You can submit your question at any time. The seminar includes handouts. If you haven't already printed them, click on the file share box on the left of your screen, then click on supplemental materials. A PDF of the handouts will open after you click on save to my computer.

If you experience any technical difficulties during the presentation, please call our customer service staff at 800-433-0499, extension 2. And now I'm pleased to introduce Dr. Maryellen Weimer, Editor of the Teaching Professor newsletter, author of the Faculty Focus blog, and author of many books. Welcome, Maryellen.

Thank you, Kate. I'm really happy to be here and to be spending time with some participants who are my friends and people that I know. Welcome to the rest of you as well. I got interested in extra credit, while I'm always, when you do a blog, you're always looking for interesting topics to post, but I got interested in the whole idea of extra credit when I was re-reading an excellent article by Laura Deeter, you'll find a reference to this in the supplementary materials, in which she shared a fairly interesting extra credit option.
What she does is to attach a blank piece of paper to the back of every exam. And students go ahead and take the exam, but after they've finished, they may write on that sheet of paper any exam questions that they couldn't answer or questions that they weren't sure that they answered correctly. Students then turn in their exams, but they take this piece of paper with them and they have between that class period and the next to look up the correct answers.

They then come to class with the set of corrected answers which they submit and the instructor then reattaches to their original exams. She grades both sets of answers. Now if students miss the question on the exam but they answered it correctly on the attached sheet, then half of the credit that they lost for the wrong answer is recovered.

Now what I thought was interesting about this was that Deterer's students reported that they thought they learned a lot more by having to look up answers rather than just having the teacher go over them during the debrief period. They also responded very favorably to the strategy, indicating that it was a stress reducer for the whole exam experience.

Professor Deterer felt the strategy put students at a higher cognitive level because they had to think about the question, they had to come up with an answer, but then they had to decide whether or not they'd answered that question correctly. And it was that strategy that sort of got me interested in thinking again about extra credit and the terms and conditions under which we offer it to students.

So let me tell you what I have in mind for the program. Just three areas that I think we ought to take a look at. I want to start out by talking a little bit about the research that's been done on extra credit. And then I think we ought to sort of do an overview of the reasons faculty do and do not provide students with extra credit opportunities. And then I'd like to share a collection of other interesting and innovative extra credit assignments. I think looking at examples are probably going to be the best way for you to think about whether or not extra credit is an undeserved gift or a second opportunity for learning.

So let's go ahead and start with a brief overview of the research. And I got to be up front and tell you there really is not very much research that I could find that's been done on the topic. I'm going to highlight three studies.

The first one is a cross-disciplinary survey or 145 faculty and 525 students done at two different universities. In that particular sample, between 12% and 22% of the courses provided some opportunity for extra credit. And 21% of the faculty sample, sample in that faculty, oops sorry, said that all
wrong, 21% of the faculty in the sample indicated that they thought extra credit should never be offered. Only 3% of the students concurred with that opinion.

The second study, which was also done by Norcross, but this time with one different collaborator, was again a survey. This time the research team used phone interviews, and they spoke with approximately 287 faculty, again across a wide range of different disciplines and at two different universities.

In this study the results were quite different. Extra credit was offered in 13% of the courses, that was fairly consistent, but 60% to 70% of the faculty said that they refuse to offer extra credit. And a lot of those faculty were fairly adamant in their decision not to offer credit. Researchers found that there were few faculty in the middle, either people did or didn't do it. There wasn't a lot of sense of possibly under some circumstances and not others.

The third study was a survey, also a survey. This one was done with a cohort of psychology faculty. And those psychology faculty rated 39 different extra credit opportunities on three dimensions, whether or not they would use the item, its educational value, and the likelihood that students would be able to complete the opportunity. The highest rated item, in terms of its use for extra credit, was participating as a research subject, and I think this is probably a function of the cohort being psychology faculty.

The highest rated item in terms of its value was completing, a student completing an original research project. And the item that this faculty cohort thought was most successful in, was most accessible to students was answering study questions at the end of the textbook chapter, which I think is a pretty common extra credit opportunity.

The list of 38 different extra credit opportunities is included in the article. And in the supplementary materials, I extracted, extrapolated some things from the list, which we're not going to talk about in the program. But I think all three of those studies provide us with a kind of comparative sort of benchmark, or they provide a context for us to think about our own beliefs and practices with respect to extra credit. So I think that's a great place for us to start.

But I also think it's important for us to sort of overview, again, the reasons why we do and do not give extra credit. And I guess the place to start is, a good place to start would be with a review of the reasons why faculty do not offer extra credit. And please be welcome to use the chat area to list reasons why you don't offer extra credit. Or if you've talked to some
faculty members who don't offer extra credit and they've shared their reasons, you can put those in the chat box as well.

I'll start by talking about some of the reasons that came out of this research and some of the reasons which were found in comments that were posted in this blog conversation as well. The, basically the, probably the most common reason that people don't give extra credit is that it does offer students a, it sort of reinforces beliefs students have that they aren't, that they don't have to work very hard. And they don't work hard because they're thinking whatever they miss they might be able to make up in the sort of extra credit.

Another reason why students, that's frequently given kind of is the, a lot of faculty have sort of experienced this, that the students who are asking for extra credit tend to be those who aren't working very hard or they're hoping that they don't have to work very hard and are hoping that there will be some sort of easy extra credit options available to them.

A third reason is that students, and this I think is, you know, most faculty kind of think that students are, if they're doing extra credit, then they're not working on regular assignments in the course. And most of us already have plenty of regular assignments in the course and students don't need to be doing them.

Looking at some of your comments and seeing that first of all, students don't, someone is saying they don't offer it because students might cheat to earn it. I think that's a design issue, and I think most of the, a lot of the examples that we're going to talk about in the end of the program really make it almost impossible for students to cheat. But certainly the second question down there is that extra credit is extra work for faculty. There's just no question about that, and, of course, that needs to be sort of balanced against some of the other things.

A lot of faculty sort of, moving on to, back to my list, is that another concern that faculty have is that extra credit lowers academic standards. And that goes right along with the next reason which is that it's inherently unfair. I think it lowers academic standards because it means that it's too easy to get an A, and that really is inherently unfair to students who work hard and get it right, get it done right the next time. And then the last one that I have is one that we have already discussed. So that's a range of reasons that I think do justify or can be used to justify a reason not to give extra credit.

Let's turn to the other side now and talk about some reasons why we might go ahead and give extra credit. And again be welcome to suggest some reasons in the chat box why you do it. And I'll start out by talking about
some of the reasons that are in the research. I think probably the most common one is that it really does reduce student anxiety and helps to build their confidence. In fact, all of the reasons why faculty do it are somehow, are in some way sort of related and overlapping.

The second reason is that if learning, you know, if students don't learn the material the first time, a well-designed extra credit assignment offers them a second chance to master the material. And that relates to the third reason, which is that students don't all learn it the first time. Sometimes students need a second opportunity to get the material. And one of the things that we often say is that, you know, when you have learned something, usually people don't ask you how long it took you to learn it or how many times you had to try before you get it. Once you've learned it, that's kind of the important thing.

And finally I think another reason that people often give for offering extra credit is that students are motivated to do it. And if they're motivated to do it, that gets them involved with the material, which is something that every faculty aspires to.

So there's a range of reasons on both sides. And I think kind of looking at a collection of those is a good way to sort of revisit why we do or don't give the extra credit. If you have more thoughts about the reasons, certainly be welcome to write those in the chat area.

But in the meantime, let's move on to the third, and I would say the best, part of the program in which we'd like to share a variety of interesting and we think fairly innovative ways of offering extra credit. And we do that asking that you will consider the question that the program raises, whether these are second opportunities to learn with a certain amount of intellectual robustness or are these still the kind of extra credit options that are really undeserved lists.

Fortunately, we have some faculty members who are going to describe the extra credit options that they give. And we'll be starting with Joyce.

Joyce:

When I'm teaching a class where I have, especially when students are a little bit nervous because there's a lot of information, I teach Introduction to Linguistics, I will put at the end, ask and answer a question that you expected to be on the exam but wasn't.

And it's interesting to me, because a lot of students, what they'll do is, I don't prepare them for it because I think it relaxes them. Some of them look at the exam ahead of time before they start answering, and say, oh, I can do that. I can get some extra credit if I don't do well on some of the questions.
And it doesn't take me long to grade. I usually, holistically I give them a maximum of three points because I've found any more than that is a little bit too much. And holistically I just look at it and I can see, just from a glance, is this a one pointer, a no pointer, a three pointer.

**Dr. Maryellen Weimer:**

I think that what Joyce says at the end there is that she gives a maximum of three points and that she can tell quite quickly, just by looking at the question and answer, whether it's a one, two, or three point option. I think you could also use this extra credit option kind of before the fact as well as after the fact.

You might consider having students submit questions that they expect to see on the test. And then if you could use one of those, perhaps with a little bit of editorial massage, the student who submitted it would not only get it right, but you could maybe offer a modest amount of bonus points.

I think the value here is getting students to frame questions, I think that's an important skill, but also it's a way of helping them understand or figure out or try to figure out what kind of questions you're actually going to use on the exams as well. So I think that's an interesting option. Next we're going to hear from Loretta.

**Loretta:**

In my classes, I like to offer at least a couple types of extra credit. As an online instructor and an instructional designer, I know that students can be overwhelmed and intimidated at the start of the semester, not just by my online class, but by the whole college experience as well.

So once they understand how my class works, they often feel disappointed with themselves for their performance in the first few weeks. So this extra credit opportunity gives them a chance to recoup those lost points and to feel good about the rest of the semester and the course.

Now this extra credit option is supplemental to what they learn in the material we cover in class. So if they choose to complete it, they have mastered an additional skill, they have new knowledge. This option I offer approximately halfway through the semester, and it's not due until the end of the semester. Students know about it in advance and if they choose to do it, they can take advantage of it anytime.

**Dr. Maryellen Weimer**

Loretta also offered an interesting option in the blog post, which she has kind of a neat name for, she called it the trap door extra credit option. What she does here is that she is, at the bottom of her virtual . . . remember she's an online instructor, she asked students who are still reading to give her an example of how they would use what's just been in
the lecture material in their own life and to do that by sending her an e-mail. If they do that, she gives them a gold star and a poor grade on a previously, on a previous assignment that was weighted lower, she changes that grade.

I’d also like to finish with a comment that Loretta wrote in the blog which I think is very insightful in this, on the topic. She writes, very few of our students are fully mature when they attend college for the first time. Life is about maturing, and we as teachers are there to help them grow. I make mistakes all the time, and I sure do appreciate when someone says forget about it and gives me another chance.

Okay. Let's move and hear from Donna.

**Donna:**

Hi, I'm Donna Flint. I have an extra credit opportunity that students seem to really like that I wanted to talk to you about. This is for after students have taken the test, I give them the opportunity to correct their test for extra points. Now this is really something not just for the extra points, but it's to help students understand how to study for a test. Because really most of the students that get stressed are stressed because they don't know if they've studied right for the test or if they're ready for the test.

So what I ask them to do is for each problem they missed, I first ask them to figure out why they missed that problem. I give them examples like I thought I knew how to do it, but I really didn't know how to do it, or I didn't think that would be on the test so I didn't study that, or I made a mathematical error, or I didn't know what the question was asking. And for each of those I give them suggestions on how they should correct that for the next test.

After they've done that, the next thing I ask them to do is to figure out where the test question came from. A lot of times they don't know how to study because they're just not sure where the questions are going to come from. So if it's a problem that I did in class and it's in their notes, I want them to identify that. If it's a problem I picked from the review sections or from the homework sections, I want them to figure out where the problems came from, and that will help them next time for their next test know where to look for problems to study.

Of course, the last thing I ask them to do is to solve the problem, to redo the problem very completely. I do actually tell them that it may be that I'll ask them about it, so that tries to encourage them to do it on their own instead of get somebody else to do it. Oftentimes I'll say, well, how did you get this solution, and most of the time they actually can tell me. They understand that this is a helpful tool for them and they really do like it.
As far as giving back points, I usually have a set amount of points I'll give back, and they'll earn a percentage of that based on how complete their corrections were. And that's essentially my extra credit opportunity.

**Dr. Maryellen Weimer:**

Yeah. I think that's a really great strategy. One of the things that I think is particularly commendable about this is that not only is Donna giving students another chance to learn the material, but she is trying to teach them some important things about how to study and sort of develop their confidence in being able to figure out where the problems are coming from.

A few years ago, somebody wrote a great article for my newsletter in which they had developed an assignment which was sort of like an extra credit assignment, which was sort of like Donna's only it was a before the fact option. They called it an exam insurance policy. And what they did was to give students a problem set, really a very challenging problem set, some of the, like some of the hardest problems that were on the set, on the exam, and these were due several days before the exam. And the instructor graded them, and the number of points that they earned on this assignment they could then apply those points to the exam.

But this is another kind of activity which is trying to help students understand how difficult the content is going to be, the sort of level of difficulty in the content, and the kind of problems that they're going to need to prepare for the exam. So I think that's a great option as well.

And our last example is provided by Deanne.

**Deanne:**

My name is Deanne Larson, and I'm a Nursing Professor at Dixie State College in St. George, Utah. And my extra credit activity I do with my students has to do with their test. I think tests are a great evaluative process, but I also like them to be learning experiences for my students.

So after we do a really brief test review, where we go over just quickly the answers to the questions, the students are allowed to take five of those questions that they got wrong and do a little bit of research on the right answer. So they can go to any resource they can find and cite the information that is the correct answer.

They give me a citation and a brief synopsis of what they learned. And then once they've turned that in, they can get up to half of the points that that question was worth as extra points for their class totals. It only takes about an hour, even less than an hour, for me to just briefly review what they wrote, make sure they have a valid source, and I really think it's a
great opportunity for them to reinforce information that they didn't have before. So that's what we do for extra credit.

**Dr. Maryellen Weimer:**

Thanks to Deanne for sharing that. It's another test option. I like this one in the sense that for, because students are not only just finding out the right answer, but they are also finding some additional material, they are citing that material, so I think that makes for a strong reconnection with the material.

I'd like to thank all four of the faculty members who were willing to be videotaped and share their experiences. You know, these videotaped inserts don't always put us in our most beautiful light, but it's really nice to hear in the first person some of these extra credit options.

Most of the options that we talked about have to do with providing some sort of bonus or extra credit points within the context of an exam. I think there are other ways of dealing with extra credit options on say written assignments, papers, or various other kinds of written work. Some of those you will find in the supplementary materials.

But one of the ones that I have heard about, which I think is an interesting idea, especially for beginning writers, is the faculty member targets an area or maybe a couple of areas for improvement. And, you know, with beginning writers this might be something simply, simple as spelling or proofreading, looking for identifying editorial kinds of errors. And in the next paper, if students show improvement in that sort of target area, there might be some bonus points that are given to them for doing that.

Other options are, with written assignments, are if you're having students say construct an argument or a paper that presents, you know, takes a position and is using evidence, to have the students do a kind of a line item analysis of the paper possibly with a rubric or possibly with some criteria. And have them sort of identify the aspects of the paper which might be weak or need improvement to sort of find their mistakes before the teacher finds their mistakes. And maybe they lose a bit less credit if they're able to sort of identify their mistakes before the teacher can.

And then on quite another realm, there are a variety of people who use, sort of tie some extra credit points with attendance in class. Rather than sort of penalizing students for not being in class, we try to reward good attendance in the class. So in my courses, I used to on five unannounced days take attendance, and anyone who was there got two points of extra credit.
Now I think that particular option probably doesn't qualify as a robust intellectual activity, but it's a way of showing students that we value their attendance on all days in class, particularly those days that are hard to attend, like a beautiful spring afternoon or Friday afternoon in the fall during football season.

So those are options as well. I do hope that you'll take a look at the supplementary materials, because there's more ideas and options there as well as references to the research studies that I identified. As I always say about these sort of simple, straightforward educational policies or instructional policies and practices, they're seemingly simple and straightforward. But once you really start considering them, there's a lot of interesting assumptions, in this case about teaching, about learning, about students, and about motivation. And it's a good opportunity to revisit some of these larger beliefs that drive the decisions we make about specific policies and practices.

So thanks for your good attention, and we appreciate your participation in the program.

Kate Stover: Yes, and thank you, Maryellen, and thanks to those who participated in the chat box. I see that we've had a few more comments giving other ideas for extra credit, including for peer tutoring and the bottom one about series of ten quizzes but only uses best mark from six or seven of them.

So thank you, Maryellen, for joining us and thank you for, the audience, for participating in this online seminar. Your campus has received an e-mail evaluation form from us. We hope that you'll fill it out and tell us what you think of today's program and what programs you'd like to see in the future. Complete information about our upcoming seminars is available at MagnaPubs.com. Thanks again for joining us, and we hope you have a great day.