Redos and Retakes Done Right

Allowing students to redo assignments and assessments is the best way to prepare them for adult life.

Rick Wormeli

Jarrel plagiarized one paragraph in his health class essay on the dangers of secondhand smoke. Carla came to after-school review sessions and followed every direction, but she only scored a *D* on her English exam. Marco was distracted by other things when he did his history homework: It's full of incomplete thoughts and careless errors that he doesn't normally make.

All three students would like to redo their assignment or assessment properly, and they would like to receive full credit for the new versions they submit. All three cases put our instructional mind-set to the test.

Many teachers reason that they are building moral fiber and preparing students for the working world by denying them the opportunity to redo assignments and assessments—or if they do allow retakes, by giving only partial credit for redone assessments even when students have demonstrated full mastery of the content. These are the same teachers who set a deadline for submitting work and then give students who do not meet the deadline a zero, thinking that the devastating score will teach them responsibility.

In reality, these practices have the opposite effect: They retard student achievement and maturation. As hope wanes, resentment builds. Without hope—especially hope that teachers see the moral, competent, and responsible self inside them, waiting to shed its immature shell—students disengage from the school's mission and the adults who care for them. Our education enterprise is lost.

One Speed for All?

Schools that acquiesce to the factory model of schooling perpetuate an ineffective, age-based curriculum: "Eleven-year-olds learn this topic; 12-year-olds learn that topic"; "No, Shadnoosh, you can't learn that until next year"; "Mike, why didn't you learn this last month like the rest of your class?" When learning doesn't happen on schedule, these schools tend to blame students or circumstances.

Teachers do need schematics for moving students through the established curriculum. But as we apply sound pedagogy and respond to real students' individual needs, blind adherence to pacing mandates makes little sense.

The goal is that *all* students learn the content, not just the ones who can learn on the uniform time line. Curriculum goals don't require that every individual reaches the same level of proficiency on the same day, only that every student achieves the goal. Appointing next Friday as the official test date is an arbitrary decision made for clerical convenience. Teachers do this out of survival, of course: because we teach large groups of students, we sometimes subordinate effective practices because that appears to be the only realistic way to move students through the system.

Although we can't do it 100 percent of the time, allowing students to redo both assignments and assessments for particularly important standards and outcomes *most* of the time is highly effective. This approach reflects what we know about successful learning, and it better prepares students for the world beyond school.

Irresponsible, forgetful, and inattentive students need us to be in their face more, not less.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Consider the Olympic runner poised to begin the race for the gold medal in the final heat. The pistol goes off, and the runners push their bodies to the breaking point, all of them dashing across the finish line within seconds of one another. Our runner comes in fourth, however, so there's no medal for him.

Does he get a "do-over" of that race? No—and that's proper at this level of competition. Remember, he's not in the *learning-to-run* stage of development; he's in the *proficient-runner* stage.

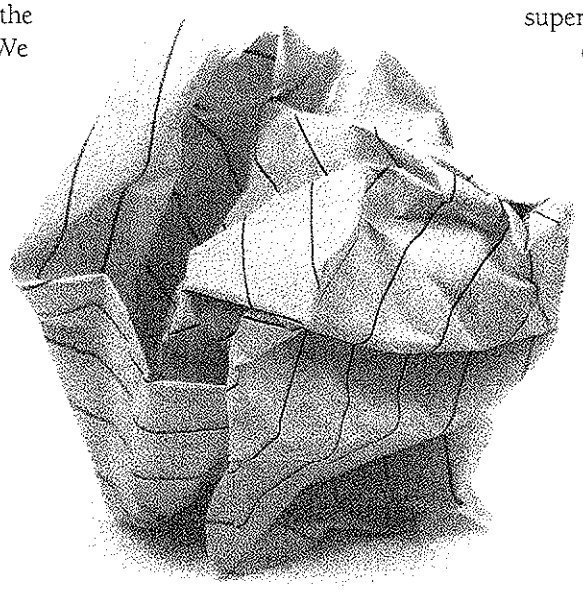
How did our runner become so competent at racing this event that he was found worthy of representing his country in the Olympics? He ran it dozens or even hundreds of times prior to today's race. And each time he ran it, his time was not an aggregated compilation of all his digressions (bad times) woven together with his more successful times. Can you imagine telling a runner that his earlier 68.74 seconds from two years ago would be averaged with his new and improved 51.03 seconds, and that this time mash-up would be his official label as a runner—that he would be evaluated as nothing more than the composite of his digressions and successes?

True competence that stands the test of time comes with reiterative learning. We carry forward concepts and skills we encounter repeatedly, and we get better at retrieving them the more we experience them. Why, then, would we impose on schools a policy that prohibits such an effective practice? Doing one successful compare-and-contrast essay in 8th grade does not mean we can do one in 10th grade, especially if we never practice writing such essays in the interim. We write a lot of essays in order to become proficient in essay writing. We become adept at analyzing politics by analyzing a lot of politics, and we get better at playing the guitar by playing the guitar a lot, not by playing it for a week and putting it aside.

It's only sensible, then, to expect different things of students during the learning process than we expect of them when it's time to demonstrate final proficiency or become fully certified. Applying expectations for a high level of competency to students who are in the process of coming to know content is counterproductive, even harmful.

Conveyer-Belt Learning

The problem, of course, is that teachers don't feel they have the luxury of revisiting content and skills to create that proficiency. We may believe the best we can do is to accept a superficial and fragile demonstration on



a single, snapshot test and convince ourselves that the score earned is an accurate measure of the student's long-term capacity.

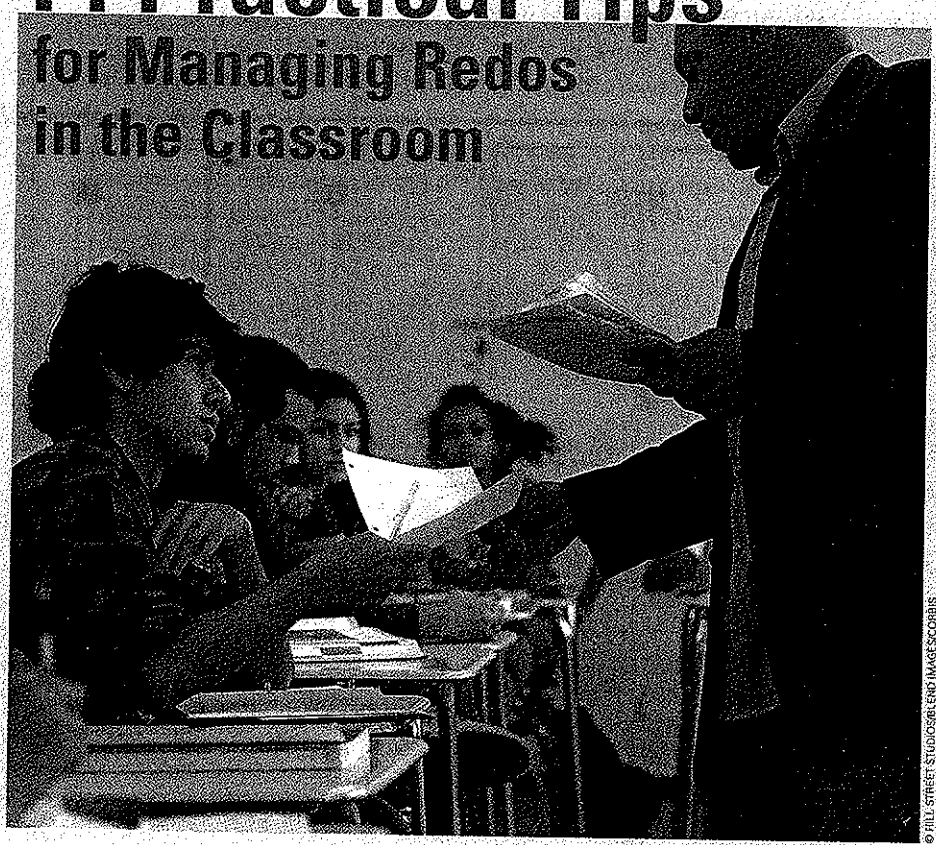
By some estimates,[1] it would take to grade 22 to teach the curriculum currently listed for grades K–12 in the United States. Anxious about this curriculum overload, we run our classes by alternating between admonishments: "Here's a bunch of stuff you have to learn; now take a test. Here's the next bunch of stuff you have to learn; now take the next test." When students fail to learn content on this conveyor belt, we tell them, "We don't have time to go back and teach it to you. Take the low grade and move on." This is no way to treat a child's future or conduct our profession.

Preparing Students for the Real Adult World

The teacher who claims to be preparing students for the working world by disallowing all redos forgets that adult professionals actually flourish through redos, retakes, and do-overs. Surgeons practice on cadavers before doing surgeries on live patients. Architects redesign building plans until they meet all the specifications listed. Pilots rehearse landings and take-offs hundreds of times in simulators and in solo flights before flying with real passengers. Lawyers practice debate and analysis of arguments before litigating real cases. Teachers become much more competent and effective by teaching the same content multiple times, reflecting on what worked and what didn't work each time.

LSAT. MCAT. Praxis. SAT. Bar exam. CPA exam. Driver's licensure. Pilot's licensure. Auto mechanic certification exam. Every one of these assessments reflects the adult-level, working-world responsibilities our students will one day face. Many of them are high stakes: People's lives depend on these tests' validity as accurate measures of individual competence. All of them can be redone over and over *for full credit*. Lawyers who finally pass the bar exam

14 Practical Tips for Managing Redos in the Classroom



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1. Ask students who redo assignments to submit the original attempt with the new one and to write a brief letter comparing the two. What is different, and what did they learn as a result of redoing the work?

2. Reserve the right to give alternative versions of the assessment if you think students will simply memorize a correct answer pattern or set of math answers. Don't be afraid to make the redone versions more demanding.

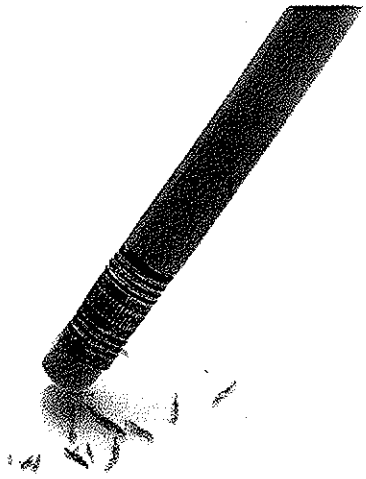
3. Announce to students and parents that redos are permitted *at teacher discretion*. This means that students and parents may not take the redo option for granted.

4. Require students to submit a plan of relearning and to provide evidence of that relearning before work can be redone. This includes creating a calendar in which students list day-by-day what they will do to prepare.

5. If a student doesn't follow through on the relearning steps he or she promises

on their second or third attempt are not limited to practicing law only on Tuesdays or only under the watchful eye of a seasoned partner for the duration of their careers. If an assessment of competence is valid, achieving its passing scores grants the assessed individual full rights and privileges thereof.

How pompous is it for a teacher, then, to declare to students, "This quiz/writing assignment/project/test cannot be redone for full credit because such a policy prepares you best for the working world." This teacher doesn't have a pedagogical leg to stand on. The best preparation for the world beyond school is to learn essential content and skills well.



Students hope that teachers see the moral, competent, and responsible self inside them, waiting to shed its immature shell.

The recursive nature of successful learning shouldn't be discarded because it's inconvenient or we haven't figured out how to do it logistically. (For suggestions on tackling the logistics, see "14 Practical Tips for Managing Redos in the Classroom.") It's too important to our society: We improve with practice, descriptive feedback, and revising our practices in light of that feedback, followed by more practice, feedback, and revision. It's the way authors write great books; it's the way scientists discover; it's the way machinists solve problems. Why would we deny these opportunities to the next generation? Providing feedback and asking students to redo assignments until those assignments

to do, ask the student to write a letter of apology to you and to his or her family for breaking the trust.

6. Require parents to sign the original, poorly done versions of assignments so they're aware that their children have required multiple attempts to achieve the standard. (If there is neglect or abuse in the home, of course, remove this requirement.)

7. After two or three redo attempts, consider shelving the push for mastery of this content for a few weeks. Either the student is not ready to reach the standard, or we're not creative enough to figure out how to teach him or her. Take a break and pursue this content in a later unit of study.

8. If the same student repeatedly asks for redos, something's wrong. The content is not developmentally appropriate, there are unseen issues at home, or perhaps there's an undiagnosed learning disability. Investigate.

9. Choose your battles. Push hard for students to redo anything associated with the most important curriculum standards and less so with work associated with less important standards.

10. Allow students who get *C*s and *B*s to redo work just as much as students who earn *D*s and *F*s. Why stand in the way of a student who wants to achieve excellence?

11. If report cards are coming up and there's no time to redo something to change the grade, report the lower grade and assure the student that he or she can learn the material the next marking period. If the student demonstrates improved mastery, submit a grade change report reflecting the new, more accurate grade.

12. For the sake of personal survival, you may choose not to allow any retakes or redos the last week of the marking period as you're closing down the grade book and doing report cards. For eight weeks, you're Mr. or Ms. Hopeful, but for that one week, it's OK to protect your sanity and personal life. You can allow students to learn the material and have their grade changed later.

13. Replace the previous grade or mark with the most recent one; don't average the two attempts together. The *A* that a student earns on his fifth attempt at mastery is just as legitimate as the *A* earned by his classmate on the first attempt.

14. Unless an assessment is complex and interwoven, allow students to redo just the portions on which they performed poorly, not the entire assessment. (To assist with this, consider standards-based grading on your assessments; record the standards or outcomes being assessed at the top of the assessment and provide a separate score for each standard.) Separating standards in this way saves time for both the teacher and the students. Some redos can be a 10-minute interview at the teacher's desk while the rest of the class works on something else.

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match the standards set for them are not optional luxuries saved for when we have time; they're the keys to thriving classrooms.

Not Soft, but Tough

When we graduate from school, we gravitate toward those things we are good at doing. When we're hired, we have a skill set that matches a job's skill needs. We don't have to be good at everything the company does. To be considered successful in school, however, we have to be just as good at all subjects and skills as everyone else is, and on the same schedule. We have to be good at graphing inequalities, conjugating irregular verbs, setting up websites using HTML, identifying literary devices in Dante, playing the concerto with the right timing, determining valence, recognizing nuance between artists, offering pithy insights in the cafeteria, and dealing with hormonal issues while navigating the hallways—and that's all by lunch on Tuesday.

It's no wonder that, in order to meet the needs of increasingly diverse students and the demands of an overloaded curriculum, teachers sometimes need to adjust the pacing of lessons and allow students to make repeated attempts at mastery. It makes sense to grade students according to their performance on standards, not the routes they take to achieve those standards. Some students need more time building background knowledge before they learn new material, and others need a graphic organizer to help them make sense of text, but all grades at the end of the unit should be based on whether they understand oxidation, for example, not on how they learned about oxidation.

Suppose a teacher allows retakes frequently. Will colleagues, students, and parents consider that teacher soft in some way? No—quite the opposite. In the hallway just outside my own classroom years ago, one of my students, unaware that I was nearby, announced to a classmate, "Mr. Wormeli makes you do it over and over again until you learn it. It sucks!" (Pardon the vernacular.) My reputation was not one of being soft, but one of "Slackers, beware."

Making students redo their learning until it meets high expectations demands far more of both students and teachers than letting them take a failing grade—but it also results in far more learning. Maturation occurs in the fully credited recovery from unsuccessful attempts, not by labeling those attempts as failures. If our mission is to teach so that students learn, we don't let their immaturity dictate their destiny. Irresponsible, forgetful, and inattentive students need us to be in their face more, not less.

The Supreme Goal

When it comes to deciding whether to allow a student to redo an assignment or assessment, consider the alternative—to let the student settle for work done poorly, ensuring that he or she doesn't learn the content. Is this really the life lesson we want to teach? Is it really academically better for the student to remain ignorant?

This practice is not acceptable. To be adequately prepared for college and career, students need to learn the content and skills that society identifies as important. Whether a student was initially irresponsible or responsible, moral or immoral, cognitively ready or not is irrelevant to the supreme goal: learning.

There are far more effective strategies for teaching responsibility than to simply label a student as immature and deny that student learning. We can honor Carla's effort by giving her the extra time and attention she needs to master the content. We can handle Marco's sloppy homework and Jarrel's plagiarism wisely by demanding that both of them redo their work properly. These students will then realize that they get more of what they want in life if they pay attention, keep up with the work, and do the assignments well the first time around. Scholarship dawns; there's hope. EL

[1]Florian, J. (1999). *Teacher survey of standards-based instruction: Addressing time.* Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement; Kendall, J. S., & Marzano, R. J. (1998). *Awash in a sea of standards.* Denver, CO: McREL.

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