


Retakes Do Not Promote Laziness. They Exemplify Compassion

By Lisa Westman

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Editor's note: For a counterpoint to this piece, see Baptiste  [Back to Story](#)
Delvallé's opinion essay, "[Why I Give Students Only One Chance on Tests.](#)"

Even though it was 23 years ago, I vividly remember the countdown calendar I created for my 16th birthday. I marked April 5, 1993 with a giant set of keys and a convertible. I was going to get my driver's license, and it was going to be the best day of my life.

During the year leading up to that fateful birthday, I diligently practiced and prepared for the written and performance components of the exam. I applied feedback from my driver's education teacher and my parents. I practiced driving the course I would later navigate. All the evidence from these formative assessments pointed to my mastery of the open road.

However, when I went to take the actual driver's test, I successfully completed the course but made a silly, yet critical, error on the written assessment. I pleaded with my evaluator to make an exception and pass me anyway. *It was only one little mistake.*

I felt completely defeated. All of that practice, and still, I had failed. But then my evaluator told me we all have bad days. "Go sit in the waiting area and think about the reasons why you made the error you did, and how you can avoid errors like that in the future," he said. "I'll come find you in one hour."

An hour later, he let me retake the test, and the license was mine.

Responding to the Unexpected

There is rarely, if ever, a reason to deny a student an opportunity to retake an assessment. In fact, to do so actually negates the importance of the concepts we aim to teach. Additionally, the purpose of retakes is not to give students a reason to procrastinate in their studies, but to give students the benefit of the doubt and offer them multiple chances to show mastery.

In my work with teachers in school systems across the country on differentiation and standards-based grading, I have found that test retakes are a hot button for many educators. I often hear teachers say things like, "Students don't study because they know they can just retake the test."

In response to this perceived lack of effort by students, some teachers refuse to let students retake a test or require them to perform a variety of tasks (worksheets, online lessons, test corrections) or come in during recess to qualify for a retake.

We should never just assume that students are lazy. Retakes aren't about students being unprepared, but about letting them respond to the unexpected hurdle. I help educators define how to use retakes in helpful ways: for those occasions when there are discrepancies between formative and summative assessment results.

When teachers give smaller assessments for learning—or formative assessments—correctly and with fidelity, a student who unexpectedly bombs a larger evaluation of student learning at the end of a unit—or a summative assessment—should be a rarity. By using evidence from students’ formative assessments, teachers should have a solid grasp on whether or not individual students are ready for the end assessment.

If formative data shows individual students are ready to take the final test, but they still perform poorly, this discrepancy calls for talking with students to determine what happened, offering reteaching if necessary, and letting them retake the test.

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What's more, if a large number of students did not show mastery of the learning, that is indicative of one of three things: 1) The formative assessments a teacher give did not correctly identify where students were in their learning; 2) All students took the summative on the same day regardless of readiness; or 3) Many students, for a variety of reasons, simply had an off day.

Our ultimate goal as educators is to ensure students learn, which is why we should offer students a second chance to show us their skills.

Being an Educator, Not a Judge

Some educators also argue that if students showed mastery on earlier assessments and not on the final, then they didn't master the material at all. This statement begs us to think more about what "mastery" truly means. Is the process fixed or is it fluid?

I would argue that mastery is indeed fluid. Case in point is Gabrielle Daleman, an Olympic figure skater who competed this year for the Canadian women's team. Gabrielle proved she had the skills required to qualify for the Olympics many times. But in February, after winning a gold medal in the team figure-skating event, Daleman **fell multiple times on the ice** and dropped to 15th place in the overall competition. But can anyone really argue that because Daleman failed her performance she had never shown mastery in the first place? I don't think so.

There are no retakes in the Olympics. Many will still argue that there aren't retakes in real life. But lucky for our students, we have the opportunity and, moreover, the obligation to give our students second (and third) chances. There will always be a few students who work the system. But I'd argue that it's not the student who is flawed—it's the system itself.

In addition to the daily assessments we give them now, students will take many tests over the course of their lives, such as a driver's exam, the SAT, the LSAT, and the MCAT, to name a few. All of these examples allow retakes. The way school prepares students for real life is by ensuring they learn the content and skills necessary to live a full, productive life. Part of real life is determining next steps when life doesn't go as planned.

Why not give students the same courtesy and opportunities to learn and grow now?

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