

## Test Retakes and Developmental Learning

As a student, I remember showing up to class for a physiology test feeling a little anxious. I was generally a good student. I did my homework, showed up to class and participated, took notes, and studied for tests. For this test, I had followed all of my usual routines that had been successful so far, but this day was different. The night before, I had learned that my dad's company was going out of business, which would mean that we would lose his income and have to move. Knowing that we already didn't have much money, I hadn't slept well that night worrying about the future of my family – and as a senior in high school, my future as well. I woke up with an upset stomach and didn't eat breakfast. By the time I got to my physiology class, my brain was feeling a little fuzzy, my stomach was still upset, and I knew that today's test results weren't going to look very good. I managed to pass the test, but it was a score that did not reflect my learning. Back then, there was no opportunity and no other way to show that I had actually learned at a higher level than my score reflected. If I had taken the test even a few days later after I'd processed through things with my parents, I would have been able to demonstrate a higher level of learning.

In college, I took a class on early English literature. We had to read Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which is a collection of 24 tales running over 17,000 lines written in Middle English. It was the most difficult reading I'd done to that point. I spent hours poring over the reading assignment, studying late into the night. The day of the exam for the readings came and I knew I was still confused about some of the readings despite the study guides our professor had given us. Nevertheless, I took the test and something surprising happened. There was a series of essay questions that I had to complete. As I completed each essay question, I knew there were holes in my reasoning simply because there were holes in my understanding of the text. On the very last essay question, the professor included an excerpt from the text and worded the question in such a way that my loose understanding of the text suddenly clicked. I was able to finish that last essay question, but ran out of time to go back and fix my previous answers. Again, we were not allowed to try the test again – even though I finally understood the readings at my professor's level of expectation. Ironically, it was the test itself that tied it all together!

These two scenarios, one from when I was a senior in high school and the other from when I was a sophomore in college, are prime examples of the problems with one-shot, high-stakes assessments...and I was an older, more experienced learner than the middle school students we currently work with. 12-15 year olds have bad test days for a variety of reasons such as personal baggage like mine, social anxieties or issues, testing anxiety, procrastination and poor study habits, learning disabilities, and the list goes on. Ken O'Connor, an educational researcher on grading and assessment, said, "Students learn at different rates and are able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in different ways and at different speeds. This is part of our acknowledgement of individual differences, which encompass learning styles and multiple intelligences, as well as a more general understanding that students are different in many ways. As we acknowledge differences in learning, it is logical – and critical – that we provide varied opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills" (O'Connor 143). Learning is developmental and we all learn at our own pace, in our own way, and in our own time. Therefore, the

assessment and measurement of learning should take individual learning differences into consideration and provide varied formats of assessment as well as second and even third chance opportunities.

Thomas Guskey and Rick Stiggins, two preeminent and recognized experts on assessment research, have interesting points:

Thomas Guskey:

To become an integral part of the instructional process, assessments cannot be a one-shot, do-or-die experience for students. Instead, assessments must be part of an ongoing effort to help students learn. And if teachers follow assessments with helpful corrective instruction, then students should have a second chance to demonstrate their new level of competence and understanding (Guskey 10).

Rick Stiggins:

Learning requires a collaborative partnership, with both partners fulfilling their part of the bargain... As a teacher, you must set limits on your contribution... Let's say a student...performs poorly on an assessment that counts for a grade. As a teacher, how do you respond? One option is to say "I told you so" and let it go. Another response is... "I value your learning experience whenever it occurs. Do you want to practice now and redo the assessment? If you do, I will reevaluate your performance – no penalties. But the reevaluation will need to fit into my schedule (Stiggins 426).

Both Guskey and Stiggins recognize the importance of second chance opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning, but they emphasize that the teacher *must* play a role in supporting the student's preparation and learning prior to that second chance opportunity. At South Hills, students are allowed to re-take any quiz or test for any reason. If left to their own devices, many students will simply re-take a test without any additional study or consultation with a teacher and expect to get a better score. Most of the time, their score does not improve and sometimes actually gets worse. To remedy this, each of our teachers have a checklist of prerequisites that students must complete prior to becoming eligible to re-take a test or quiz. The idea behind this isn't to create more red tape. While more work will be required, these checklists may ask that students do a variety of things like a test correction, meet with the teacher during FLEX time or after school to receive additional instruction or tutoring, turn in missing, incomplete or low quality assignments that will prepare the student for the re-take, create and use flash cards or some other study device, etc. *The idea behind these checklists is to help students prepare beyond their previous study and preparation so that they can demonstrate a higher level of learning.*

Now, some will say that we aren't preparing students for high school, college or the real world as an adult. Here is my response:

1. If we care about learning – and as educators, that is our biggest priority – then our measurements of learning must both recognize that learning is developmental and that it occurs at its own pace for each student.
2. Even high schools and colleges are recognizing the value and truth of the above statement and the research that supports it.

3. While there are situations in the real world that do not allow for second chance opportunities, there are many situations that do. And students aren't in the real world yet; they are in a state of preparation for it where they will realize that adequate preparation up front makes for less work and time on the back end.
4. Finally, 12-15 year olds are not adults. School systems and parents together must teach and train and yes, sometimes assess consequences, while allowing students to do the work needed to demonstrate a higher level of learning. In essence, we must help them learn to become adults without the expectation that they have already become one.

As always, if you have any questions about South Hills' implementation of standards-based grading or the individual structures that it entails (like second chance opportunities to demonstrate learning), please feel free to contact me at any time!

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References:

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Guskey, Thomas R. "How Classroom Assessments Improve Learning." *Educational Leadership*, 60(5), 2003 p. 6-11.

Stiggins, Rick. *Student-Centered Classroom Assessment*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall, 1997.