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## Why I Offer Extra Credit and the Guidelines That Govern Its Use

Gary Stark • October 26, 2020

I'd like to begin with the main reason I offer extra credit. I offer it because I am an imperfect grader when it comes to assessing what is impossible to grade.

My academic discipline is organizational behavior (OB). Essentially, OB is the psychology of work, except I am a "wannabe psychologist" who teaches a research methods course in a college of business. One of the difficulties with research in the behavioral sciences is measuring "constructs," that is, concepts that don't physically exist but are used to explain phenomena. Job satisfaction is a great example. We use it to explain certain behaviors, even though we can't smell, touch, or otherwise directly sense what we're calling job satisfaction. We generally measure job satisfaction with "paper and pencil" tests that ask respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements about their job. These are contaminated measures because job satisfaction is not the only thing that affects one's answers on a job satisfaction survey.

Distractions, poor lighting, mood, concerns about anonymity, and countless other factors can all contaminate survey answers.

Learning (or “knowledge” or “understanding”, etc.) is also a construct. Since it is a construct, we’ll never get a perfect measure of how much our students learn. Maybe you have a student who has worked hard reviewing notes, rehearsing practice problems, and discussing the material in teams and *really does* know the material. But the contaminants prevent demonstrations of that knowledge—she has a migraine, he is distracted by the ill health of his partner, you gave poor directions on the assignment. As a result, the student fails to display a full understanding of the material.

While I pride myself on giving fairly accurate grades, it is only because I take special care to reduce all the contaminants that I can. But it’s an imperfect process, and some, often many, contaminants are beyond my control. As a result, a student may get a grade higher or lower than is warranted. I don’t really know which, so I humbly give them the opportunity to make up (through extra credit) points that they may have missed due to poor measurement.

I’m with my students: I like extra credit. Yes, I’ve heard the arguments against it, but I believe extra credit can be designed in ways that overcome most of the negatives. Here are the guidelines I follow. I think they provide a persuasive rationale for extra credit.

- *Don’t offer extra credit in the last few weeks of the term or semester.* This encourages hard work throughout the semester rather than a brain dump at the end and thus provides the paced rehearsal that maximizes learning. Additionally, this reduces the burden on the poor instructor already overwhelmed by regular end-of-course grading.
- *Require an essay from the student on why they need extra credit.* A little introspection may help the student consider better ways of studying.
- *Use extra credit as an opportunity for students to revise work.* In this way grades can serve as a means of formative assessment rather than the rather than the typical summative judgments of graded work.
- *Students must have completed all the work assigned in the course so far to complete extra credit.* For those who believe that school should more accurately reflect the “real world,” this makes sure that the most important work gets done.
- *Extra credit can’t save a student from failing.* Like the previous point, this ensures the most important work of the class gets done at least at a minimal level.
- *Extra credit must be in an area where the student has shown weakness.* This helps ensure that the student is well rounded in the course content. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich analogy may be appropriate here. Your sandwich may have the most scrumptious bread and tastiest jelly, but without peanut butter, it’s not a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.
- *Don’t allow make-ups on assignments. Have students earn those missed points through extra credit instead.* I am fond of telling my students that I am not a deity (though that is abundantly clear due to my absent-minded professor persona!) and thus am not in a position to judge the verity of their excuses. Rather than being put into that position, I ask that they show me their understanding of the material in another form (extra credit).

- *Late work counts as extra credit.* Late work receives zero out of X points possible. But students may earn some of those points through extra credit instead. I generally put a maximum limit on the amount of extra credit a student may earn so as not to encourage late submissions. Again, this approach keeps me from having to determine the worthiness of excuses for late work.

I believe these methods make grades fairer and help overcome some of the perceived problems of extra credit.

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