No Virginia, There is No Such Thing as Extra Credit

This is another one of those end-of-semester posts about teaching where I'm going to end up sounding like a big mean jerk. I know it. So can I first reiterate that I really do love teaching? And that I love my students and want them all to have bright futures in which they achieve their dreams of being nuclear physicists or heart surgeons or professional athletes or boat show models or boutique cupcake store owners or contestants on The Bachelor, or whatever goal they hope to fulfill? Because I do. I love them. I love everyone. Everything is wonderful.

Now then.

The semester has just ended, and right now I'm in the midst of grading final papers. Different classes had different final assignments, but everyone was required to turn in something. Sure, a few essays seemed to exude the faintest hint of spilled bong water, but I don't care. If it comes in before the deadline, I'll take it home and grade it.

I try to make things a little easy on students at the end of the term. They're tired. They're burnt out. My final essay assignment is rarely a gigantic, make-or-break project that can obliterate a student's grade. I usually scale things down for the assignment of the semester. In other words, if you've been working hard all semester, the last assignment won't knock you off your pedestal. On the down side, if you've been blowing off class all semester, the final essay will not save you. Bummer.

Here's the thing: no one ever worked their ass off in my class, and then failed. If a student finds himself looking down the barrel of an F after a semester with me, it's probably because he chose not to turn stuff in for four months.

And here we are, at the end of the road. Zero Hour. Defcon 1. And I do see that I have a few students who are failing my class.
Yes, due to the aforementioned Not Turning Stuff in problem.

At the end of a semester, failing students have three options on how to handle the situation:

1) Accept it. Accept the consequence of your actions, recognize that your failing grade is the result of specific and consistent choices, and learn from the experience. Take the class again, do the job right, ask the teacher for help when necessary, and take ownership of your situation. Then graduate and go make tons of money so that no one ever cares about your college transcript. Hell, become a young billionaire and tell friends how school was totally worthless to you. Be the next Mark Zuckerberg.

2) Build a TARDIS. Travel back in time to the start of the semester, and make different choices from the start. Meet your deadlines, get a passing grade and emerge from the course with your head held high — not just because you got a grade to be proud of, but because you built your very own time machine and can now go back and do things that benefit the world, like killing Hitler and persuading the Fox network not to cancel *Firefly*.

Or...

3) Come in to my office and ask for "extra credit."
Take a guess.

I'm not a big fan of Extra Credit. It just feels sort of ridiculous to me at the college level.

In general, passing students don't ask for extra credit. The ones who ask are the ones who blew off class for months, didn't turn in anything, never paid attention to their spiraling grade, and then woke up in May and realized (too late) that they're failing the class. They come in to my office with serious, contrite expressions, and ask if I have a secret reserve of extra assignments that maybe they could complete in two days, that might just make up for four months of non-work. Extra credit is the giant net they hope I'll throw out to catch them before they plunge into the icy cold waters of Big Fail Lake.

Three students came to my office with such requests last week. All three missed deadlines all semester, and in fact rarely attended class. But there in my office, all three were suddenly alert, conscientious, responsible, hand-wringing students who said that even though they knew they had, let's say, a 34% in the class, they were hoping that maybe I had some sort of extra credit essay they could write really fast, that would maybe help bump them up to a passing grade.

They had reasons for their lackluster semester, of course. Each student told a gripping tale of heartbreak, tragedy, and intrigue. Tales of break-ups, of exotic illnesses, and of family drama. At least one story had orphans.

It was all very *Les Miz*, minus the subtlety.

![Image](http://didactic-pirate.blogspot.com/2013/05/no-virginia-there-is-no-such-thing-as.html)

Very sad. Luckily, I am dead inside.

I listened to their stories, and when they were done, I could only say what I always say:

No. I'm sorry, but no.

See, I had to explain, if I were to give extra credit to students who are trying to do some damage control at the last minute, it would be patently unfair to those students who, yes, did the work all the semester and earned their passing grades.

Because the fact is, no one ever worked their ass off in my class, turned everything in, and then didn't pass. You don't fail because you worked hard and didn't see results. You fail because you chose not to do the required stuff. Maybe you chose not to do anything because you thought you'd instead come to my office hoping to receive a last minute failsafe, a reprieve, a bit of amnesty. You hoped that, despite all my big fancy talk about fair and equal treatment to all students, I was only kidding. You hoped you'd be an exception to all the rules and receive special treatment because you are, of course, special.

Here's the thing. My students are special. I seriously do think they're great. Even on my crankiest days, I actually do pretty much love them. I see my former student self in them all the time. Whether or not they do the work they're supposed to, I still think they're pretty much wonderful, in so many ways. My students are consistently funny, dynamic, and lovable. And smart? Hell yes, they're smart. They're often smarter than they think they are. I'm convinced many of my students have been told they're strictly mediocre for so long, that they were psyched out of being Amazing. So many of them could do something so important in this world if they just decided to exert the effort and do it. And I'm sure that many of them will. Many of my students will graduate, and soon afterwards school will fade away in the face of their many accomplishments, and my class won't even be a blip on the radar of their memory. Someday I'll read an article about how one of my former students did something stupendous like invent a car that runs on grass clippings, and I will feel very proud, whether they did well in my class or not.
But right now, at the end of this semester, in the interest of fairness and equal treatment for all, I must be the mean teacher, the bad cop. I am the one who says: No. No, I cannot and will not give you special treatment in the form of extra credit. If you don't want to fail this class, you should've thought about that a lot earlier. I take no pleasure in this. But it's part of the job.

See, I told you I was going to be a jerk in this post.

You might also like:

This Is How Students Say "Thanks for a Great Semester!"
Honesty.
From a Student, to the Rest of the Students

14 comments:

Irish Gumbo May 7, 2013 at 2:18 PM
A jerk, you say? Hmm. Hardly. The solution to their problem was right there in front of them, the whole time: simply do the assignments when they are assigned.

Ah, kids these days, whaddayagonnado?

If I could push a glass over the Interwebs, I’d spot you a cold one and raise a toast to doing things right the first time :)  
Reply

JW Moxie May 7, 2013 at 6:18 PM
I teach 8th grade, and this most definitely is my philosophy regarding extra credit. “So you want to go to high school? You’ll get all the ‘extra credit’ you need when I see you again here next year, buddy. I’ll save you a seat.”

Reply

Vinny C May 7, 2013 at 6:48 PM
I know those students all too well. In fact, I had the pleasure of being put into two separate class project groups where no less than 2 of the other 4 members were those students.

Two (one from each class) were even kind enough to drop out of the classes a few weeks in & increase the workload of the others (mostly my workload).

Reply

Homemaker Man May 8, 2013 at 6:03 AM
And dominatrixes think they know something about the pleasure/pain principle. They should try teaching. Leather bound wusses. Dominatrixes that is, not teachers.

Ok, some teachers.

Reply

Jane May 8, 2013 at 8:23 AM
Yes, yes, YES! I will be dead inside with you.

Reply

Mandy_Fish  May 8, 2013 at 8:55 AM
Former high school teacher here. I had the same policy. No extra credit. No late papers. No partial credit. Nope. None of it. Just do the work and turn it in on time. The end.

I was trying to prepare them for the reality of work and college!

Reply

Rebeka  May 8, 2013 at 12:14 PM
I think it's totally fair (this coming from a student who always worked my butt off and turned everything in on time). If someone could slack all semester then do some paper at the end to get a passing grade that would be TOTALLY unfair. Good for you for staying tough.

Also I loved this: "I'm convinced many of my students have been told they're strictly mediocre for so long, that they were psyched out of being Amazing." So, SO true. Thank you for that insight.

Reply

Iilkittin  May 8, 2013 at 12:37 PM
I'm going to have my daughters read this. I work hard to try to instill a good work ethic in them but I think it would be helpful for them to see things from a teacher's perspective.

Reply

Anonymous  May 9, 2013 at 7:51 AM
Agree with you 100% on this. I've failed a class from lack of interest in doing the work and didn't go begging for extra credit. Hell, I've abused make-up quiz policies from my professors and they reluctantly allowed me to exploit the policy (mostly missed due to a boss that would schedule me during classes). If I didn't do the work, it was my own damn fault, not the teacher's. I don't get why other people wont take responsibility for their own actions, or lack thereof, when it comes to doing work.

Reply

Servetus  May 9, 2013 at 8:41 AM
I can't tell you how often I've said this the last few days:

"See, I had to explain, if I were to give extra credit to students who are trying to do some damage control at the last minute, it would be patently unfair to those students who, yes, did the work all the semester and earned their passing grades."

I want to write an essay about what the request says about the worldview of undergraduates ...

Reply

Andrea Jones  May 9, 2013 at 8:57 AM
Do you mind if I add this to the packet I give out to all students with the syllabus, etc.? I promise I'll give you full credit. My students must read this!

Reply

Servetus  May 9, 2013 at 12:11 PM
Go for it, Andrea -- with my blessing!

Reply
Mama Badger May 9, 2013 at 12:10 PM
Nice. I am actually the idiot who would take kids aside at the half way point, discuss the no extra credit policy. Guide them towards doing something right then, or failing. It almost never worked...

Reply

Replies

Didactic Pirate May 9, 2013 at 12:17 PM
That's not idiocy, Mama. That's you WANTING them to do well, and giving them as much opportunity as possible. I've done the same thing on occasion myself.

Reply

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