

No, You Can't Do 'Extra Credit'

By [Starr Sackstein](#) on December 8, 2014 8:40 AM



Among the bevy of broken parts in the [traditional educational system](#) is the notion of extra credit.

The mere suggestion of it causes an angry shiver and frustration that is hard to verbalize in an appropriate manner.

Although I appreciate the conscientious student, who is watching his/her own progress and is desperate for those extra points, I can't help but get a little annoyed by the notion that their learning can be accounted for in additional "credit", when we have already identified that this is NOT what [learning is about](#).

What do points represent in learning?

In the current system, learning has largely become a game of numbers. Sometimes it is the accumulation of points based on:

- when work gets submitted,
- how well students followed direction,
- student compliance within the learning time period, or
- how many problems were solved correctly on an exam.
- Let's not forget homework and how often and how well that is submitted,
- in addition to participation grades and
- any other number of very subjective, hard to measure factors.

If not just an accumulation of points, learning is then later 'averaged' to develop an aggregate score that is supposed to communicate with precision how well or how much a student is learning or has learned already.

The system, whether straight numbers are used or letters, doesn't often communicate learning at all and this is where the struggle develops.

When a child asks for '[extra credit](#)' or 'extra points', essentially they are just looking for an additional grade to bolster what they think they are 'getting' right now. Unfortunately, extra credit is then used like a favor.

- "If you help me clean up the classroom, I will give you extra credit." or
- "If you do an extra book report, you will get extra credit."

Usually these "extra" tasks aren't aligned with any kind of standards and are often just an extension of the where students are and don't show any great improvement of learning.

Learning is NOT about numbers or averages

In a classroom that focuses on standards based grading or no grades at all, it's not about how much a student is able to jump through hoops, it's about mastery. It's about practice until there is evidence that learning is mastered and then able to be applied or transferred as needed.

Mastery learning shows a depth of knowledge and skills and requires practice to achieve. So I have no issue providing more opportunities for students to practice skills or develop understanding, so long as they understand that they aren't doing it for points; they are doing it to improve and progress.

The challenge with current grading system is that it prizes numbers or letters and gives the wrong impression that the end tabulation is more important than what that number is supposed to represent.

Transcripts and College

All students and parents are concerned about college. There is a basic understanding that to be admitted into a competitive institution, grades and test scores matter and perhaps in the traditional sense they do. Transcripts are made of those scores. However, what those scores mean and what colleges interpret them as are different.

As a matter of fact, you can be an "A" student in your high school, do terribly poorly on the SAT and then end up in remediation in college. Just being able to get into an institution doesn't mean you will be able to perform or stay there. Mastery learning would be a better predictor of success in college as it will have assured students prepared with a certain skill set before attending.

Final thoughts about extra credit with possible solutions

Providing extra work just to boost grades will not improve student learning. If a student is really invested in improving his/her achievement, allow them to continue to review and revise older assignments with multiple opportunities to reflect and grow.

Another possibility would be to allow the student to suggest or design an assignment that specifically targets a skill area that has been a challenge for them. While designing the project, they bear in mind the feedback they've received and then work to show mastery and application of those skills. When a student can do that, then and only then will the data change.

Essentially, it isn't about how many assignments you can do, as learning isn't about compliance or busy work, it's about growth. Summative grades will follow once the skills are mastered and goals attained.

Do you offer extra credit in your classroom? What does it look like to you? What do you offer in its place?