

From Myron Dueck, *Retesting*,
in *Grading Smarter Not Harder*, pp. 93-95
For Silent Discussion Using 4 A's Text Protocol

Problems with Traditional Classroom Testing Systems

Traditional classroom testing systems are built upon the flawed notion that tests cannot be revisited. As best as I can recall, my own schooling experience was totally devoid of retests. I would imagine that this is the case for most teachers, suggesting that we tend to replicate the systems from which we advance. Since adopting retests in my classroom, I have had a lot of people inform me that retests don't prepare students for "the real world." As one friend told me very early in my retesting venture, "You have to understand, Myron: I own a small company, and in the real world you only have one shot at things, so you'd better get them right the first time." Having worked in schools all my life, I was clearly in need of some enlightenment, so I asked my friend to give me an example of a situation in "the real world" where someone might take a formal test and not be allowed a retest. After a long silence, my friend admitted that she couldn't think of one. Certainly, there are testlike moments that can't be done over—sports tournaments, for example. Still, I have yet to hear of an instance in the real world where a formal test cannot be retaken. As Rshaid (2011) puts it,

Our educational system is supposed to prepare students for real life, and it is easy to see that this artificial assessment model has little resemblance to reality. In real life there are almost no one-chance do-or-die scenarios, and whenever anybody has to demonstrate proficiency in any field, the timing for demonstrating that competency is chosen by the candidate rather than being an arbitrary date set in stone. (p. 26)

Tests Are Snapshots in Time

The standard unit test is an indicator of someone's ability at a single moment in time. As such, outcomes can be affected by variables totally unrelated to the learning targets. Sometimes these factors are self-imposed, and sometimes they lie entirely outside of students' control. Students have little control over test times and dates, for example, so if they happen to have a fight or experience some other type of emotional disruption before a test, they may end up performing poorly through no fault of their own. As noted previously in this book, negative emotional factors can be particularly consequential for students living in lower socioeconomic conditions. A student of mine who attempted to exit the class early during a history test summarized these stressors very candidly: "Mr. Dueck, my girlfriend and I broke up today, I got kicked out of my house last night, and after school I think I'm getting my ass kicked. Today is not a good day for me to take a test on World War II." To ignore these factors and insist that the student take the test regardless would be like asking a sprinter to perform despite a twisted ankle.

Outside factors can negatively affect typically high-performing students as well. A student-athlete just through a week of grueling volleyball playoff matches, or an academically motivated student facing multiple tests on the same date, could easily stumble on a test. A testing approach that insists on rigid time lines and forbids retests may reflect reality—just not the reality of what a student has truly learned.

Traditional Testing Approaches Discourage Mastery

For too much of my teaching career, I discouraged student mastery of learning—at least in the classroom. This was not true on the volleyball court. As a competitive coach, I approached our season of play with mastery as the ultimate goal. I had the team practice for hours each week, and I'd set up exhibition matches to hone their skills. After each game, I would highlight what we needed to practice to improve

for the next game. I videotaped games so that we could examine the footage frame by frame to determine how to better spike the ball.

My colleague Chris Terris is both an English teacher and a basketball coach. He recently shared with me the following epiphany:

It took me a long time to act more like a basketball coach in my English classroom. The tools I used for encouraging the passion and excellence in sport for my players were not the tools I transferred to the classroom for my students. Thankfully, I reached this epiphany moment before I reached the end of my career.

When it comes to classroom tests, we too often send the message to students that *they must get it right the first time*. If we reflect at all on the tested content, it is by telling frustrated students what they should have done once the testing is over. Yet in nearly every other area of the real world, we embrace and celebrate mastery through repeated effort. The underdog in the movie who tries and tries again despite overwhelming adversity inevitably triumphs in the end. In our own hobbies and passions, we reap emotional reward by repeatedly doing the same things and showing improvement, even if in the smallest of increments. Perhaps our students would learn better if we put systems in place to truly support and celebrate student mastery in the classroom.