



ACUE

Student Success
Through Exceptional
Teaching

Expert Insights: Structuring Opportunities for Retakes to Improve Performance

Joe Feldman, EdM; Author & Consultant; Crescendo Education Group [00:00:10] Redemption is a really important part of more equitable grading and it's really tied to hope. For so many students, the ways that they've experienced learning has been, "You don't get something right. You're going to lose points." Or, "You don't do well on this assessment. That's included in the grade." And especially when there are low grades that happen early in someone's learning, it can demotivate them because all of that performance is included in the grade calculation. And when students feel that they can always continue learning, or that their prior mistakes aren't going to be held against them, that those mistakes are actually part of learning and aren't going to be penalized, which is how we talk about mistakes anyway, they feel more motivated and more hopeful that they can be successful, even if it takes them longer, even if they came in with less prior knowledge. When the students who have been historically underserved or who have felt more systematically prohibited really from accessing some elements of our educational system, when they know that the faculty member is saying to them, "Even if you make mistakes early, those won't be held against you." Or, "Even if you do badly on this assessment, there'll be an opportunity for a retake." It invests them so much more in the course and changes their self-concept around their capacity and possibility, and engages them and invests them in the class in a much more positive, productive way. What we've seen is that when students know that there is the opportunity for a retake, they don't feel as stressed in the initial assessment event. And because they have less stress and less anxiety, they're able to optimize more of their cognitive capacity and actually perform higher so that they don't need the retake, which is awesome. When teachers use retakes, how do I think about the earlier assessment? Sometimes faculty will average those two performances. And the problem with averaging the performances is that you're including outdated data in their grade. Because if they actually learn the material or learn the content, we don't want to include information that is going to pull that grade down and therefore warp the accuracy. A much more effective way to do it is to replace the earlier grade, not have a ceiling where if a student, you know, can only get up to a 90 percent on the retake, because when you do that, you are essentially warping the accuracy. Because even if a student knows all the information, we wouldn't want their grade to misrepresent their level of understanding simply because it took them longer. Some of the strategies that faculty use when doing retakes is that they will think about whether there's a value in reorganizing assessments. By designing assessments, not by the type of question that's offered—short answer, paragraph, etc.—but by the specific content area. So I could say, I'm teaching three different objectives. The first third is around this content or objective area and a student is going to get some grade on that content. And then, the next third is on the next content area and they're getting a grade on that, and another grade on that. And I might even enter all three grades into my grade book because they're about three different content areas. And then if a student needs to retake it, they don't have to retake the entire assessment. We can look and say, "What are the content areas in which you already showed proficiency? And then you don't need to redo those. You only can redo and you only need to focus on the areas that you haven't quite met the expectation yet." So that's one way that faculty do it. Another is that they actually think about how they can embed retakes and redos in subsequent assessments. So in other words, if a student didn't do well on this particular assessment, rather than offer a retake, how can I embed the content from that prior unit into the subsequent unit's assessment? So that if a student then better understands that first unit's content by the time they get to the second unit's assessment, I can overwrite the earlier unit's assessment. What that actually also does is that it allows for students to see the value and have deeper understanding of the first area of content when they learn the second. In other words, they may not actually understand some aspects of Unit 1 until they learn Unit 2 and are applying aspects of Unit 1 in Unit 2. A really important decision that faculty face when they decide to offer retakes is whether retakes are optional or mandatory. Many faculty start with wanting it to be optional, that a student has to decide that they're going to do the retake and do whatever are the prerequisites and then do the retake. Later in their thinking, they understand more deeply why mandatory retakes are actually more equitable. What they find is when retakes are optional, the students who want to do the retake are those who actually performed pretty well the first time. The student who got a B or B-plus or A-minus, who is not very far away from



ACUE

Student Success
Through Exceptional
Teaching

that final level of success and feel it's within their arm's reach and have experienced enough success and enough sort of confidence that they know that they can take that retake and do well. And we don't want whether a student does a retake to be dependent on whether they have enough confidence to believe they can be successful, right? It's up to us to say to students, "We are so deeply convinced that you can be successful, that we are not going to allow you to opt out of your own success, that you are going to do this retake and we are going to help prepare you and we're going to partner with you to make sure you realize your own success."