
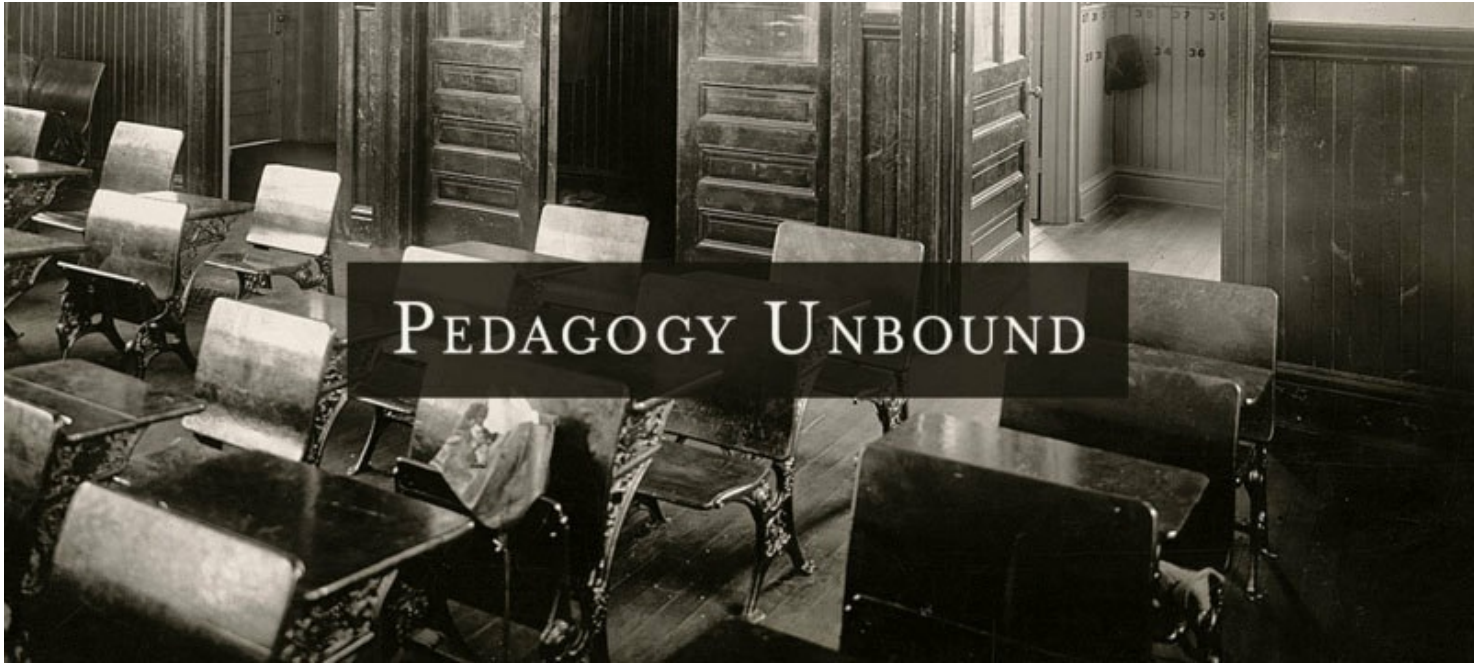


4 Simple Ways to Help Them Persist

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As a faculty member, you may be all in favor of organizing your course so that [students learn from their mistakes](#). You would like to offer students multiple opportunities to take an exam or complete an assignment because you know that makes pedagogical sense. Yet the logistics keep getting in the way.

Similarly, many instructors, myself included, understand the appeal of a grading system — like [specifications grading](#) — that emphasizes mastery of learning outcomes regardless of when that mastery is achieved. But departmental, institutional, or other constraints prevent us from switching.

So I set out to find some easier ways to encourage our students to be persistent after they fail to understand course material.

Don't leave exams behind so quickly. The first thing we can do is make sure that when students take a test, we go over the results with them in class. That seems obvious, but I know many professors still hand back exams and expect students to go over what they missed on their own. Instead, devote class time to reviewing the results. If the test was worth giving, if it tested important concepts and skills that you want your students to understand, then it's worth taking the time to make sure they got them right. Howard Aldrich, a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, [has written about his practice](#) of breaking students into small groups to review their test results. He asks the groups to go over each question, and help each other understand why they made their mistakes. Within the groups, students quickly shift roles between “teacher” and “learner,” depending on the question.

Aldrich also notes that he makes sure that his final exam is cumulative — that is, the tests given throughout the semester cover ground that will also make an appearance on the final exam. Aldrich tells his students that up front, and allows them to keep their tests. This gives them extra motivation to make sure they understand where they went wrong before moving on to the next subject.

Follow up. Another idea that Aldrich suggests is to give a follow-up quiz after each test. Give the quiz in class after you review the test results, or make it a take-home quiz. It should be short, and focused on the material that gave students the most trouble. The quiz offers students an opportunity — and an incentive — to figure out how to master the most difficult concepts.

Similarly, I like the idea of a wrong-answers test near the end of the semester. This is more easily accomplished with a small class, but not impossible with larger classes. Near the end of the term, give each student a personalized test made up of questions the student got wrong (or similar questions) on the earlier tests. Students know the test is coming, and can take time to study their previous mistakes to prepare for it. It does require some extra work on the instructor's part, but with a little foresight and preparation, it's easily manageable.

Give two-stage exams. Try changing the nature of the tests you give. [Two-stage exams](#) have a simple concept that offers a myriad of benefits: Students first take the test individually, and then immediately retake it in groups. The group test counts — so students are motivated to work together to figure out the correct answers — but for only 15 to 20 percent of the whole test grade. Most of the grade (80 to 85 percent) comes from the results of the individual tests. Because the individual portion of the test is worth so much, students still have to study hard on their own. But they also are rewarded for the work they put into understanding and correcting their mistakes.

With two-stage exams, students receive immediate feedback on their wrong answers while at the same time gaining exposure to alternative approaches to difficult problems. They can see what they did wrong and then almost instantly learn how they might be able to get it right.

Build drafts into your assignments. If, like me, you don't give many exams, essay drafts are a great way to build this same strategy into your assignments. [As I've suggested before](#), requiring students to submit multiple drafts gives them feedback they can actually use — and that they might actually pay attention to. I require my students to turn in drafts of all of their essays weeks before the final version is due. If they are late with a draft, or fail to turn it in, they are penalized just as they would be for any other late assignment.

With mandatory drafts, my aim is to help students improve on their writing mistakes as they go — which is what they'll have to do in whatever career they'll pursue after college.

As you look for ways to nurture that skill in your students, keep in mind: You don't need to reinvent the wheel to see results.

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