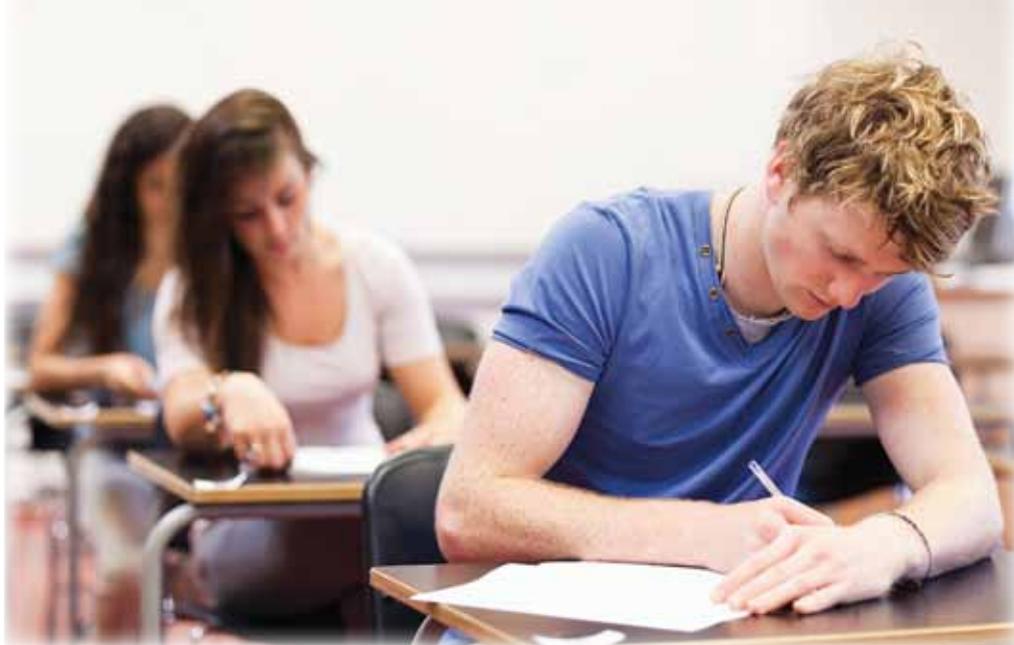


STUDENTS CAN FINISH COURSES WITH A BANG



by Mark Klemp

My focus in the teaching profession has been primarily grade 11 and 12 math, physics and chemistry with most of the emphasis being on the diploma courses. Over the years, I gained some great ideas from experienced educators and then tweaked them to suit my own needs.

I found that there was always a certain percentage of exams in which students would not get the marks they were capable of achieving. The question was always asked, “Do you do re-tests?” My answer was always, “No. Try harder next time.”

And then, a dangerous thing happened! I started to think about the concept: What you see is what you get.

Quite often, students have told me that it is next to impossible to raise their final grades as there are so many tasks—exams, quizzes, assignments, labs, etc.—completed over the course of the semester that any improvements that happen in the last month of class will not influence their grades significantly. In essence, why bother trying?

Now, after my teaching practices have evolved, I realize that if students can show, at the end of the semester, that they truly do understand the material, then an opportunity should be given to replace an exam they have performed poorly on. However, there are strings attached—the replacement of the exam must be earned.

This is how it works. I broke the courses I teach down into four main units with each unit consisting of an assignment, a lab, a quiz and a cumulative unit exam. The evaluation below shows the weight of each element.

Evaluation

Cumulative Unit Exams	50%
Assignments	5%
Labs	5%
Quizzes	10%
Critical Moments	10%
Final Exam	20%
Total	100%

In every course I teach there are about 24 distinct pieces of assigned work that are important in helping the student maintain a solid understanding of the material presented in class. The following is an excerpt that I use on all of my course outlines regarding “Critical Moments.”

In order to maintain a solid understanding of the material, I also encourage students to complete journals which are brief reviews of information discussed in class. At the beginning of class, on a regular basis, homework and journals will be checked for completion and recorded on a bulletin board. I define this portion of the course as “Critical Moments” since students cannot be successful if they are unable to complete their work or review on a regular basis. At the end of the term, if the student earned 80%+ of all “critical moments” then, as an added bonus, s/he will be able to write the final exam and replace their lowest exam mark with their final exam grade.

It should be noted that even though the student loses the grade for incomplete work, if s/he makes an attempt to receive extra help and complete the homework at a later time, the effort will still be recorded, via the “black mark” and help in earning the 80%+ required to replace the lowest exam mark with a potentially higher final exam grade. Ultimately, I want the same thing as what the students and parents want—Performance and Results!!!!

The system I created is far from perfect. However, it does encourage the students to focus on the final exam and complete the assigned work. Diploma courses demand that the teacher-awarded and the diploma-awarded marks are close, and performance is paramount in the final weeks of any course to achieve success.

When the students and parents understand that there is a small safety net, they begin to appreciate how the course is set up and recognize that a small inconsistency can have a significant impact on the final grade. With the competitive nature of post-secondary education and emphasis placed on exams, everyone has to realize the importance of fair assessment and finishing courses on a strong note. Educators, like myself, who do not necessarily believe in retesting, can make small changes in how we do things to improve grades and provide students with the necessary tools to succeed.

Mark has been teaching in rural Alberta for over 25 years. Almost 15 of those years were spent working half time—in 1998, Mark and his wife took over the family farm where they raise cattle and grain with their three teenage kids.

