

Late Work:A Constructive Response
By Rick Wormeli
(from Because You Teach)

It's Friday. Your arms are fully extended, carting heavy crates full of projects to grade over the weekend that in all likelihood will be carted back to school on Monday untouched—a teacher can dream. It's been a long week of multiple distractions from the intended lesson plans, but you've finally come out the other end of it ready to be with your family and catch up on sleep and the larger world.

Just as you're about to step into the fading afternoon sun outside the front doors of your school, your principal appears from behind the main office doorway and calls, "Hey, how about that paperwork that was due today? Any chance that I could get you to do it before you leave? It should only take 20 minutes or so."

You grind to a halt, heart sinking, and turn to face your administrator. "Oh, wow," you begin. "I'm really sorry I didn't finish that. We had the field trip this week, and testing meetings the last couple of afternoons. I completely forgot, but I really need to get home to my family. Is there any way I can work on it over the weekend and get it to you first thing Monday morning?"

If the principal is worth her salt she'll respond with, "I understand. There's plenty for me to work with over the weekend, and if I get your information on Monday, I will still be able to use it. Thanks for working on it. Have a good weekend."

The principal's compassionate response is easy for her because you have been diligent in the past about completing paperwork on time. Your request for a deadline extension is occasional, not chronic.

Matters would be different if you were chronically late, however. The principal would be within her rights to remind you of your professional duties, express disappointment and frustration, and even put a letter of reprimand in your file. She might also take time to investigate and help you reprioritize your time.

Many middle school teachers fear that a compassionate response to late student work will teach students that it's okay for them not to be punctual or heed deadlines. The ensuing anarchy would engulf us all, they fear, and in the real world, they tell their students, you would never get away with such behaviors.

These are wrong on all accounts. In the real world, airplanes take off minutes and hours late every day. Dentists run late, people request permission for filing tax forms late, new building construction often takes longer than we think, and car repairs are frequently not finished by the designated time. This is not to disparage any of these industries; it recognizes that humans are organic and messy, subject to more than the dictates of the clock.

We teach self-discipline and the importance of punctuality in more effective ways than blindly punishing students. For instance, we share stories of individuals who were and were not on time with their tasks and the consequences in each case. We show students the high achievement that can be reached by on-time completions. We provide students with individual feedback regarding their punctuality, we emphasize formative assessment and feedback over summative versions so students stay on course, and we structure our lessons so students want to keep up with work in order to fully participate in compelling experiences and to not be overwhelmed by playing catch-up with too many tasks at one time.

We also must realize that we are not teaching full-grown adults with adult level competencies. We are teaching young adolescents who are learning those competencies for the first time. To demand consistent, adult-level competence of middle schoolers is inappropriate. We have to walk students through mature decision making and action-taking regarding their time.

We can occasionally put content curriculum to one side and bring unspoken curriculum to the forefront: We ask students to identify what's important versus what's urgent in their lives, and we show them how to refocus on the important. We ask students to list activities they have after school each day, the time it takes to do each one, and to take a step back and look at their schedule for the whole week to see if any of it can be rearranged or reprioritized.

We help students set up Calendars of Completion with which we break down large tasks into daily smaller tasks. We help them record what they need to do on Thursday before a big project is due on Friday, then what they need to do on Wednesday so they can do those tasks on Thursday, then what they should do on Tuesday so they can do the tasks on Wednesday so they can do the tasks on Thursday so they can turn in the project on Friday. We work backwards with students until the present day. The time spent doing this is invaluable to middle school students—where and when else might they learn this? There are even some of us adults who could benefit from someone guiding our time management.

When a student submits a project late, we don't take off a whole letter grade for each day it's late. After two or three days, even if the project would earn an "A" normally, the student reasons, why bother? Some of us tell the student to do it anyway because the subject is worth learning, but this requirement doesn't result in the learning we think it does. Doing the project after it's already earned a "D" or an "F" breeds resentment, not maturity, and the grade recorded for the project is false—any decision or feedback predicated on it is also false.

If you have to, take a few points off the overall grade, but not whole letter grades. A whole grade lower is punitive, a few points off is instructive. The student will still learn, and we keep the experience from becoming a vicious black hole to both parties. Even better, the student learns and the grade stays close to being an accurate rendering of mastery.

Consider: If the student is late with the work only occasionally (i.e., once or twice a grading period), then it's easy to be merciful. Let him turn it in late for full credit. Just as in the opening example, teachers and others turn things in late all the time. The student has earned our goodwill and flexibility with weeks or months of on time performance, so we can extend him civility.

Is this fair to those students who turned their work in on time? Sure. We'd extend the same civility to them if they needed it, emphasizing the positive impact of punctuality on a person's reputation and what he can achieve. We'd also point out that on time students will be able to move on with their lives and work while the extended-deadline students have to do that in addition to finishing up the earlier work. It's a burden the on-time students don't have to bear.

If the student is chronically late turning in work, it's time to investigate and teach the student about the power of being on time. We don't simply admonish the student and record the "F." There is something wrong. It could be the level of instruction, the student's home schedule, an emotional issue, lack of resources, cultural insensitivity, miscommunication, auditory processing issues, or something else. We help students advocate for themselves, not just hold them accountable. Student accountability without purpose is one reason why students drop out and schools fail.

Because your colleagues may lower grades by a full letter grade and you want to keep the peace, you may have to do it as well. The problem, of course, is that this new grade is tainted and is no longer useful. In these situations, record two grades for the student: one that represents his level of mastery or performance regarding the material, and one that reflects the late penalties. For example, a student could earn an "A/D." When it comes time to document progress and make informed instructional decisions, use the accurate rendering of mastery, not the grade decreased by tardy response.

Let's deal with late work in ways that lead to students' personal investment in learning. Driving an assignment into the ground doesn't serve anyone. While there should be consequences for not meeting deadlines, we can still spend time investigating the situation before arbitrarily lowering the grade. In addition, keeping up hope that hard work even after the deadline will deliver a positive response in the grade, works. Very few students learn from experiences in which there is no hope for positive academic recognition for mastery obtained. The factor that causes such consternation is the time constraint, which is arbitrary and very fixable.

Successful middle-level teachers don't see teaching as a "Gotcha" enterprise, thinking their job is done when they catch young adolescents doing wrong and point it out to them. They know that students don't learn purely by being punished. It takes concentrated investigation and constructive action to get them to the point where punctuality matters. It's tougher to do, and automatically lowering grades when papers and projects are late is a cop-out. In most interactions on this planet, we're here to look out for one another, not document each other's fall. Young adolescents are watching us, hoping the world really is compassionate, fearing that it's not and they are

alone. We can assure them that the world is demanding yet compassionate, and more importantly, that they have the tools to deal with it.

*Portions of this article are paraphrased from Rick's new book
Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessment and Grading in the Differentiated Classroom
(2006) available at the NMSA online bookstore (www.nmsa.org)
and Stenhouse Publications (www.stenhouse.com)*

Reflect on the following questions:

- With what did you agree?
- With what did you disagree?
- What are your school's late-work policies?
- Are your responses to late work meant to punish students, teach students, or both?
- Identify the elements of your late-work policies that demonstrate your expertise in what is developmentally appropriate for the students you teach.
- What evidence do you have that your late-work policies are effective in teaching students how to grow in maturity so as not to be late with work?
- Besides placing marks in a grade book, how do we best teach students in your grade level to be self-disciplined and to take responsibility for themselves/