

# The Case for Resubmissions: Building a Values-Driven Assessment System in your Classroom

Kirstin Milks

**In this audio story featured in the Fall 2021 issue of *Kaleidoscope*, Kirstin Milks shares the story of why and how she implemented a resubmission policy in her classroom.**

Hi there! I'm Kirstin Milks, a high school science teacher in Indiana, and I'm here to make the case for resubmissions!

In this video, I'll show you how to work towards a sustainable, values-driven assessment system in your classroom, and I'll show you how my students and I followed the same plan to build ours. First off, why do the work?

Well, this past year has made it clear to many more of us: tests and traditional grading are broken. Many of the assessments we've prioritized in schooling, even before the pandemic, can't show us what we know any given student can do.

And there's tremendous impact of systemic bias and racism on what passes for assessments—let alone who's allowed to pass them.

Meanwhile, the grading policy I inherited in my department? The one with high-stakes timed tests, harsh penalties for late work, and one-and-done tries? It was actively causing harm. \*I\* was causing harm.

Those first years, I watched students suffer, their anxiety rising, as they leaned \*away\* from their schooling instead of \*towards\* its power. And it wasn't just a couple of students.

Something had to change.

I realized I was still thinking about assessment as TESTS. Occasionally as measurement, which is a slightly different lens, but mostly one-and-done, did-you-do-it-or-not, now-we're-moving-on TESTS.

Before I became a teacher, though, I worked as a scientist, and I understood from that time of learning that progress isn't linear, that feedback matters, and that it's the ANALYSIS of data that propels learning forward.

So I wondered: what if I made my classroom fit that experience, those values?

What if I collaborated with my students to formally reframe assessment so it wasn't just about progress, goals, and measurement . . .

But first and foremost about seeking patterns, finding progress, and planning next steps?

And I had another motivation, too, as COVID-19 dramatically changed my teaching. The person I know who's said it best is Darin Somers-Glenn, my kid's wonderful first grade teacher, who's described the biggest challenge of remote learning as a feedback problem—as a daunting decrease in the \*depth\* of feedback available to students, as well as their teachers. And I couldn't agree more.

Feedback, along with positive relationships with the folks who give it, is what helps people grow their skills in healthy ways, whether you're a student or a teacher.

And teachers can't just listen in or peek at a work-

in-progress as easily in socially-distant and digital classrooms.

This past year I realized, though, that the most powerful lever for deepening feedback was one my students and I had been developing for some time, motivated by those agonizing early years: giving and getting more expert feedback—for students AND for me—through mechanisms of re-assessment.

Allowing my students to resubmit work, nearly always for full credit, allows our classroom community to set and reach audacious teaching and learning goals humanely.

This past school year, it also let us stay more connected to our shared work, regardless of where and how students were learning.

Now, when other teachers ask me about re-assessment, there's always one question front and center:

"What about all the extra teacher work?" It's definitely a daunting thing!

Teachers, you and I have to take care of ourselves out there. Our time is valuable, overwork is constant, and burnout is real, especially right now. But we also have to make revisions work.

It's a fundamental issue of justice in our society. You want to work to dismantle systems of oppression, to build opportunities alongside kids? Re-assessment is a crucial part of that.

And I've realized that prototyping successful assessment procedures starts with not just your **content**, but your **values** as a person and as a teacher.

Carla Shalaby, who works in criminal punishment reform and educational activism, reminds us that there are no throwaway people.

There are no throwaway people.

When you act like you believe that, in school, you offer revisions.

But where to start? Well, let me show you what worked for us—it might work for you, too.

To get started, I thought about what makes me feel proud of my own learning. I asked a lot of students, too! Next, I unpacked WHAT my students and I value. That helped me remember WHY I was committing to changing my grading policy—and potentially doing a LOT more grading until I figured out a system that worked sustainably for all of us.

Finally, I prototyped and iterated assessment plans in my science courses that aligned with and amplified the experiences and values I'd analyzed.

I'll show you our current plan at the end of the video because—as so many wise people have said—"You can't be it if you can't see it." It's not a perfect plan, but I hope it will inspire you to start your own journey towards re-assessment if it's not a huge part of your teaching practice yet.

I started this journey by asking myself and my students: What are things you are PROUD of learning or having learned how to do?

And then I asked the magical question: Why? What about that learning experience made you feel proud?

I got, from myself and my students, the sort of answers you'd probably expect: people are proud of their learning when they feel challenged but supported, when they have agency over at least some of the process, and when they are aware of the improvement they're making. Offering resubmission and revision to your students can hardwire all three of these aspects into your classes.

So I urge you to ask yourself and your students: What makes you feel connected to doing school? What makes you proud to be a learner? What fuels your engine, and gets you out of bed in the morning?

I will tell you one thing that DOESN'T do it for me: Online instruction. It's that depth of feedback thing.

I try hard to find ways to love school no matter what, and that meant learning to love online school, but there's no denying this past year was incredibly challenging for me and my students.

But resubmissions and corrections helped us navigate. They helped us get to know each other and the work we were all learning to do. And they let me get our depth of feedback much, much, deeper than if my classes' assessment policy had been one-and-done.

And that felt like HUGE success, success we could all be proud of.

But the tradeoff is that I couldn't assess everything the way I could if students had been doing the work in front of me in real time. It was just too much.

I had to figure out what to prioritize—in a profession where we are frequently told, to the detriment of our health and well-being, to prioritize EVERYTHING.

So that's where doing a values assessment helped.

At first, setting up resubmissions in my classroom was challenging.

I was always swamped, stuff was months late getting back to students, and I even found myself procrastinating easy grading tasks to the point where students were ribbing me.

How, then, did I figure it out—how to do this work sustainably?

Well, a big shift happened when I looked deeply into my own values, about what was most important to ME as a teacher, as a scientist, and as a person.

When I dug around inside my teaching practice—and, indeed, into the core of who I am—two themes emerged.

First and foremost, I deeply value love, the power of what it means to love our world and its people enough to work together to make it a more just place.

Secondly, it turns out I'm just a really big nerd. I really, really love learning new things.

In parallel, I also thought about what science-teaching values I hold dear, the ones that more directly drive what I want students to learn in my classes. I value authentic science practices, like designing experiments and analyzing data, I value communication in science, and I value scientific literacy as a skillset absolutely vital for a successful adulthood.

[What are] my students' most valued learning tasks from my classes? Ones that prioritize one or more of these aspects, it turns out.

These subject-specific values came in handy when I got down to the details of my plan. But to commit to doing the work to transform my grading policy to better reflect these values without totally overwhelming me, I had to go back to my personal WHY—for me, it was those core values of love-as-service, plus the high value I place in learning new things.

In other words: Revamping my grading system was going to help me learn things! About my teaching practice, about my students' experiences, [and] about what they knew. And learning, I think, is a really important way for a teacher to love the students they serve.

So: look through a list of personal values—there are lots out there.

See if you can find ONE or TWO values that resonate with the core of who you are. Maybe you find out they're honesty and courage, or freedom and discipline. Do a

little writing or talking with a friend about why those values speak so deeply to you. They'll help motivate and focus you through the process of updating your grading system.

And then think a little bit about the classes you teach. What do those subjects of study value—and what do YOU particularly value about them?

I want to pause here to note that, when we dive expansively and inquisitively into our deeply-held beliefs and values, we might find ourselves finding new ways to frame them in this situation.

For example, I know a teacher who highly values personal discipline a lot—and they're using that value to justify accepting only on-time work from students. But doesn't it take discipline to take feedback, and then redo an assignment you're told wasn't right yet?

Another commonly-held value, "respect," has cultural understandings and norms that are different depending on a person's identity, background, or environment.

For what it's worth, my students have taught me that the folks who show them the most respect also hold them to the highest standards. And that's what a well-designed resubmission plan lets teachers do humanely.

That being said, let's go back to the science-specific values I uncovered with input from my students. The way to make reassessment manageable and useful for everybody is to focus assessments, and feedback on those assessments, on these content-area values.

Sure, you are going to prioritize other skills or content sometimes—but think of these as the engines on which your course will run.

So I ask you to dream a little—how might you prioritize the content-area skills and ways of knowing that YOU value?

And how do you turn that dream into reality? Well, my students and I are trying!

But first, a quick story about an awesome thing I will never do again.

One year, back before there were children in my own little family, I tried a system of standards-based portfolio grade proposals. The idea was that students would reflect on my assessments of their work throughout the semester, then create a portfolio that displayed their progress and proposed a grade (within some guidelines I created).

It was the hardest and most time-consuming year of assessment I have ever done. And it wasn't sustainable, particularly as my family responsibilities increased.

But I learned an incredible amount about my students and their experience of my class.

And the part that worked the best, for all of us, was that students had to take their feedback seriously in order to propose their grade. The test scores at the end of the year made it clear—this process had led to lots more learning.

And that part about feedback became the core of my current assessment system.

But, at the same time, I had to set some boundaries that kept my grading time within reasonable levels.

Here's a quick description of how we currently, imperfectly negotiate all of that:

First off, my teaching team re-focused our curriculum on essential standards and skills. That meant letting go of some of my favorite things, like, oh, the very science I practiced before becoming a teacher. But you have to figure out a reasonable amount of STUFF to do and learn in any given semester, and there is no way around that.

Second, we're learning to prioritize projects over traditional tests—and to find ways to incorporate lots of checkpoints so students can improve their work.

Third, you realize pretty fast that you can't look at ALL the work. So use your values—your personal ones and also your content-area ones—to pick the thing or things you'll check in a given assignment. Sometimes it's all of it—but often it doesn't have to be.

Fourth, each assignment is credit/no credit. That's important in a school where the culture heavily prioritizes grades, because it helps students understand that mastery is the goal and is within their reach. In our school, we use zeros as placeholders in the gradebook to sort students into differing levels of remediation needs, so that's what I do when a student's work hasn't come in yet or needs to be revised.

Fifth, I try my best to provide clear feedback and/or requirements through our learning management system and its commenting feature. If I'm grading an assignment where I'm seeing many of the same error or misunderstanding, I might type out a response in a notes document, then copy-paste the same feedback for each student who needs it.

Sixth, we use our school's built-in office hours to do

one-on-one or small group remediation. When we've been doing remote and hybrid learning, I've added a few "flipped" class periods per month to serve as additional office hours.

Seventh, there are long—but not infinite—deadlines for full-credit work. There are some assignments, like our monthly ecology fieldwork, that need to be completed in a more timely fashion, and those will have a small deduction if an assignment is late. But mostly things are full-credit! We're on 12-week trimesters, and I've found that the six-week halfway grading period is a helpful deadline for us.

Finally, many placeholders convert after the grading deadline into an automatic partial credit.

So that's our current plan. It's adapted to some of the cultural norms at our school and in our department, and it's by no means perfect.

But I offer it to you as an example of how values-driven thinking can help to create something that works, deeply, for students and teachers in supporting our learning.

It's not just the feedback in this system that students tell me they value, by the way—it's that resubmissions take away some of the grade pressure that is so ubiquitous in high school right now.

Re-assessment gives students a safety net—a way to make sure they feel safe when things get hard. And we all could use a safety net in our lives, particularly if it helps us learn more deeply and flexibly and connects our learning.

I hope you'll think about how building more revision into assessment can help us provide safety for the young people in our care, through feedback and opportunities to grow.



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