

Late assignments? *Never again...*

Do you sometimes get a little frustrated with learners:

- who hand their written assignments in late, or
- ask for extensions to the deadlines?

Late assignments are not the end of the world, of course, but they can be the iceberg tip masking learners' poor time management, and perhaps even poor commitment to their courses. Late assignments may also, however, be an indicator of much more. And learners may well have a case when they claim it's not entirely their fault that their work will be/is late.

A typical scenario

- Learners are given a number of concurrent written assignments to be completed in a set six-week block, such as a half-term.
- A week away from the assignment deadlines, some learners begin to panic; they know their work won't be finished on time.
- In the back of some learners' minds is an excuse that they hope will win a deadline extension until after the half-term holiday.

Added to this typical scenario is often a self-protection claim from the learners: 'How are we supposed to meet all of the assignment deadlines when they all come at the same time?'

Typical solutions

Solution 1: It is not uncommon for a group of subject teachers responsible for setting concurrent assignments to stagger the deadlines to appease the learners. But this solution assumes that the reason learners are struggling to meet deadlines is that they all come at once.

Consequences

- In some subjects learners may not have the full six weeks to sufficiently develop their skills and ideas to produce outstanding work.
- Some teachers may have to reschedule their scheme of work which may not be in the best interest of the learners' development.

Solution 2: Some tutors take pity on the learners and extend the deadlines.

Consequences

- Learners learn to disrespect deadlines and, ultimately, the authority of the teacher.
- Tensions begin to emerge between learners who work hard to meet deadlines and those who win extensions.
- Learners with deadline extensions carry the psychological baggage of outstanding work into their holiday and recuperation period.
- Learners with deadline extensions are at risk of getting further behind as their focus will inevitably be on their outstanding, rather than current, work.

The real issue

The real issue is likely to be that learners did not use the whole of the assignment period to complete their work, leaving too much to be done in the final week or two. But the *underlying* issue may well be that the teacher either:

- did not set clear weekly expectations, or
- did not monitor the provenance, the development, of the thinking and writing each week.

On this second point, some possible reasons for missing a learner's early inactivity might be:

- that there isn't enough time in the lesson to look at everyone's progress as well as teach the next aspect
- that some learners can become expert at avoiding the showing of any developing work.

Consequences

- Learners become increasingly at risk of underachieving, and, in the worst cases, leaving the course early.
- Learners do not fulfil the potential for significant learning *every* week; their focus becomes the assignment itself, rather than the learning it promotes.
- Learners' key support needs may not be detected, or may be diagnosed too late.

A real solution - never again will assignments be late

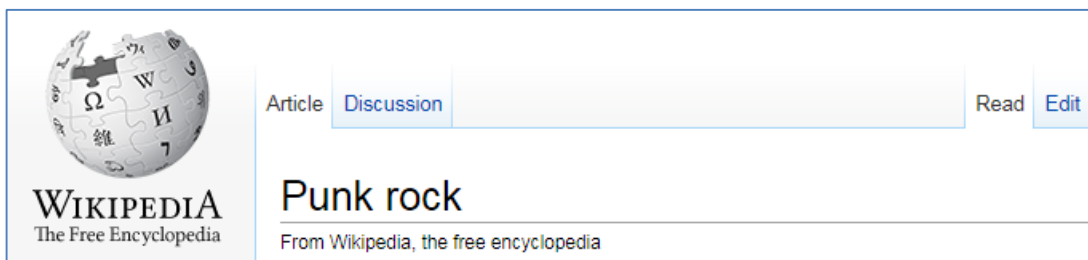
The real solution comes from understanding the real issues and ensuring that on-going learning remains the key focus.

Imagine an assignment regime where:

- learners know at the outset that there is *no potential* for an extension
- learners fully understand that their emerging written work and reflections will be seen by their teacher at any point in the six weeks (and at any time of day or night)
- the checking on learners' progress takes minutes and doesn't require the energy and time needed to collect in work
- there are no issues with the emailing of work or with version control.

All of this is possible if learners develop and complete their work on a *wiki*.

A wiki is a very straightforward, yet powerful webpage. It has two important buttons: *read* and *edit*.



The person who creates the wiki pages determines who can *read* and who can *edit* them. In all other respects, it is simply a text file, such as a Microsoft Word document.

If you are not familiar with wikis, then the idea of setting up a wiki for every one of your, say 30, learners might seem a little daunting, but it actually takes only a little longer than creating and saving 30 blank Word documents:

- create a new wiki page
- assign *read* and *edit* permissions to yourself and John Smith
- save the file, e.g. Assignment 1 – John Smith.

You can create wiki pages in most virtual learning environments (VLEs) such as Moodle, and this can create an extra (and often welcome) initiative for increasing traffic to your learning environment.

Wiki hosting sites are also freely available; just search the internet for 'free wiki'.

So how does this approach *guarantee* that learners will not hand their work in late? It's simple: there is no longer a 'hand-in' date, just a date on which you will remove the learners' *editing permissions*. Their work, because it has been completed on the wiki (on-line and stored on secure servers), will be 'handed in'; in whatever state it happens to be in on your deadline date.

Using the wiki approach

There are two crucial questions at the end of week 1 of a new assignment:

- have the learners got off to a flying start?
- are they progressing in a fruitful direction?

You may feel that your assignment-launch lesson was inspiring and motivational, but what objective evidence would you need to help you make that judgement? Could it be that all learners begin their work straight away? If so, then at the end of week 1, you can quickly open each of your learners' assignment wiki pages (which takes a matter of minutes) and see what they've done. If the wikis are all blank, then this is useful feedback that could influence how you approach your next session.

Alternatively, if you find, say, a handful of learners who have started work, but seem to have missed the point, then, again, you are armed with information that can help shape your next intervention. This could be to alter your approach in your next lesson, or you may simply want to leave a 'post-it' type note on their wiki page, offering them encouragement, a new reference, or simply a nudge in the right direction.

A final word

None of this approach is about replacing the teacher – but every bit of this approach is about improving the quality and impact of the time teachers spend with their learners. It:

- removes many of learners' tried and tested excuses
- helps teachers identify support issues early
- helps learners focus on learning
- stops learners going into 'wait mode' when their work is collected in for monitoring
- stops teachers having to carry around scores of assignments

- improves the efficiency of progress monitoring, and
- some virtual learning environments have built-in plagiarism detectors, so these issues can be nipped in the bud rather than spoiling a finished assignment.

And of course, learners should:

- learn more
- achieve higher standards, and
- not leave their course early because of the demotivation of being behind with their work.