Careless Mistakes

Mr. Mangham's Opinion

I don't know about you, but I don't think I have ever gone through a day without making numerous mistakes. Even on things I am good at. I usually don't get a 100 on my own reviews and tests the first time I make the answer keys!

When students turn in their review I expect to see 2, 4, 6, or 8 problems they missed and then corrected. Actually what concerns me is when a student turns in a review and the student tells me he or she got every question right the first time.

It is impossible to look at a student's work and determine if the mistake is careless or something else. I think a lot of times we mistakenly use the word careless when it is really just a simple mistake. Or small mistake. Or easily-correctable mistake. If a 4th grader tells you 7x8=54 was that a careless mistake or does the student not know their multiplication facts? We would not know what some additional research.

People (students and adults) use the term careless mistake as an easy way out. If I say the mistake was careless then I am telling you I knew exactly how to solve the problem. That makes me feel smarter than ever admitting that I might not have a firm grasp of the concept. If I could explain to someone exactly what I was thinking, that person might be able to help me correct the mistake next time. When I chalk it up to being careless I am basically saying I don't need any assistance.

From a teacher standpoint I feel it is much easier to assist a student who makes a true mathematical mistake as opposed to a careless mistake. I can show the student multiple methods and have him or her practice problems until it makes sense. Careless? I might be able to offer a few general strategies that limit carelessness, but we are all careless sometimes. Most years my student with the highest math average is not the same as the student who knows the most math. The highest average combines good knowledge with strategies that allow that student to be less careless.

I think some of the most mathematical students I ever had were also some of the most careless!

How can we determine a way to help our students do their best? Here is one strategy to try. Pick out three questions your son or daughter has completed entirely on their own: two that have correct answers and one that has a wrong answer. Don't tell your student that only one is wrong. Ask your student to verbally explain their thought process for all three problems - from the very first step all the way to the answer. Simply nod your head to show you are listening as he or she goes through all three problems. If the problem that was missed the first time was a careless mistake, 95% of the time the student will realize this as he or she goes through the explanation. If you go through all three explanations and your student does not catch the mistake it was probably something other than careless.

The more mistakes we can put into the non-careless category the better. Don't accept your student telling you he or she got a 70 on a test and it was all careless mistakes. Saying they were careless is taking the easy way out. Let's assume they were all non-careless so that we can offer new ways for students to attack the problems in the future. The math is getting more difficult so having a few more mistakes along the way should be expected.

Make your student do the complete review on their own the first time around with no help at all. That is the best way to prepare for a test. **Then grab some milk and cookies and make it a fun time as you go back look through which problems need a little tune-up before the test. Or send them to me so I can go over those problems with them.** Your student will remember those problems much more than if you sit and correct every mistake within a few seconds of their try of the problem.

In this class mistakes are expected, inspected, respected.