

Binary Problems in a Graduated World

Sometimes There's No Partial Credit

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I recently had a serious revelation about how most people view the world, when one of my clients expressed his indignation over a local government procedure. Because an application had been submitted incompletely, it had been rejected and returned upon review. And since it had taken two weeks in the queue to reach the review stage, my client was now faced with a processing time of five weeks instead of the planned three. After much discussion, I realized that the builder refused to accept the reality that some things in life (quite a few, actually) are what are known in mathematics as binary (2) sets or binary solutions. Certain situations dictate two, and only two, outcomes. The tossing of a coin, for example, will either be heads or tails, and absent the almost impossible "it landed on the edge" scenario, one would be a fool to expect anything else. Yet, for many who have grown up in a world where black and white are judged to be extremes (*but there must be a shade of grey in there somewhere*) and it is considered disparaging to tell someone that they have failed (*but Jimmy tried so hard, he should at least get partial credit*) it is almost impossible to accept the reality of a sometimes binary world. There is no difference between the man that tries to swim across the lake and drowns half way, and the one who drowns 20 yards from his goal. Binary set - you make it across the lake , or you don't. Yet people will talk about how close the second swimmer came, and how sad it is that he came up a little bit short. We live in a world which abounds with two outcome situations, yet many of us refuse to accept these circumstances and demand a fairness and a range of outcomes which just may not exist. So when the application comes back because it is incomplete, don't rail at the unfairness of life - either complete and resubmit it, or don't. Those are the only real choices you have.