TERRABIA CONSULTING
Complex training made easy

Part 3: Subscriptions
The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

So you've created a curriculum (or, technically, "a learning activity structure containing two or more learning activities") and figured out how it will be structured. Congratulations--you're almost there! You'll notice, of course, that we said almost there, as in "you've still got one more thing left to do." You need to decide on whether your structure will be created using a subscription (a curriculum with direct, subscribed child activities) or a fulfillment model (a curriculum with placeholders that point to activities that fulfill it). For more on subscription versus fulfillment, see the article "Part 2: To Subscribe or To Fulfill, That is the Question" at www.terrabia.com/articles.html.

Once you begin to become familiar with subscription and fulfillment models, the choice may not seem to be a hard one. After all, curricula that use subscription links make things easier for everyone. Not only do they allow learners to register for everything at once, making the entire process simple, but they are also relatively easy for administrators to create. Of course, as with most things, if it looks too good to be true, it probably is, and that's unfortunately the case with subscription-based curricula.

But what, exactly, is the problem? The problem occurs if a learner takes a specific training, and then later registers for a curriculum that contains the completed training. If this sounds like the sort of thing that will never come up, then you're in luck: you can stop reading this article and go on with your day. For the rest of you poor saps, well, you should probably keep reading ….

The Issue: the Short Version

Basically, if a learner has completed an element of a curriculum (online course, seminar, in-person training, etc.) and then later registers for a curriculum that includes the same, already completed element, the already completed element doesn't count toward the completion of the curriculum.

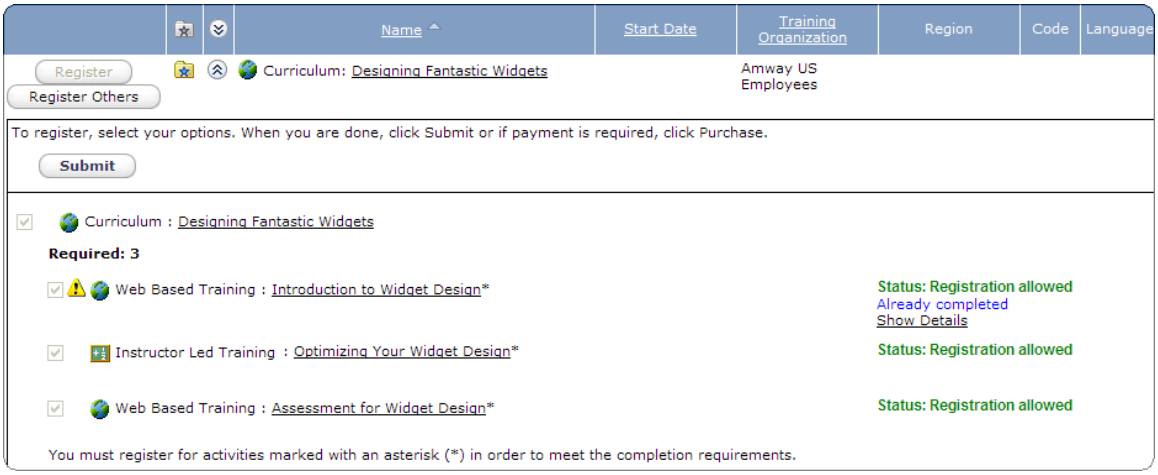
The Issue: the Long Version

A learner registers for a curriculum that includes a class or other learning activity that they have already completed. While the LMS recognizes that the activity has already been completed and warns the learner, if the activity is a *required* part of the curriculum--and it often is--the learner is still forced to register for the already-completed course because it's required. And, to add insult to injury, once the learner has re-registered for the training, the LMS expects the learner to complete the same activity again. The learner can finish the rest of the assigned curriculum, but until that previously-completed activity is finished for the second time, the curriculum remains incomplete. Sigh.

A Closer Look

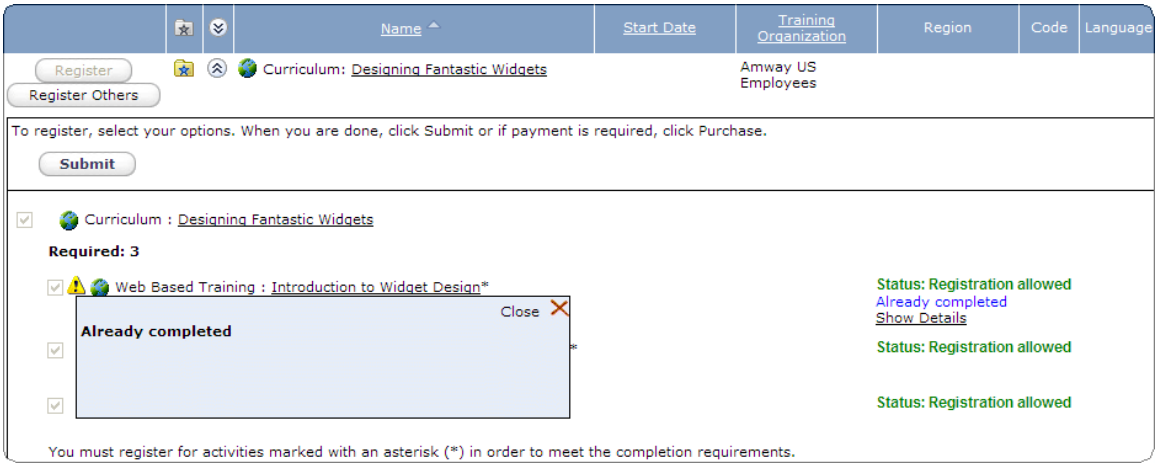
How about a specific example of what happens in this situation from the learner's perspective. The screenshots below show a curriculum called Designing Fantastic Widgets (it's always widgets, isn't it?), which we created using subscription links to three activities.

In this example, our user--let's call her Lisa Learner--has already completed the first element in the curriculum, Introduction to Widget Design, at some point in the past. (Lucky her …) Because of this, when Lisa goes to register for the curriculum, a warning icon ⚠ is shown next to that completed activity.



Learner Mode – Registering for the curriculum

If Lisa clicks on the warning icon, a pop-up box tells her that the course is "Already completed." This warning is shown because the LMS knows that Lisa has already completed that element of her curriculum.

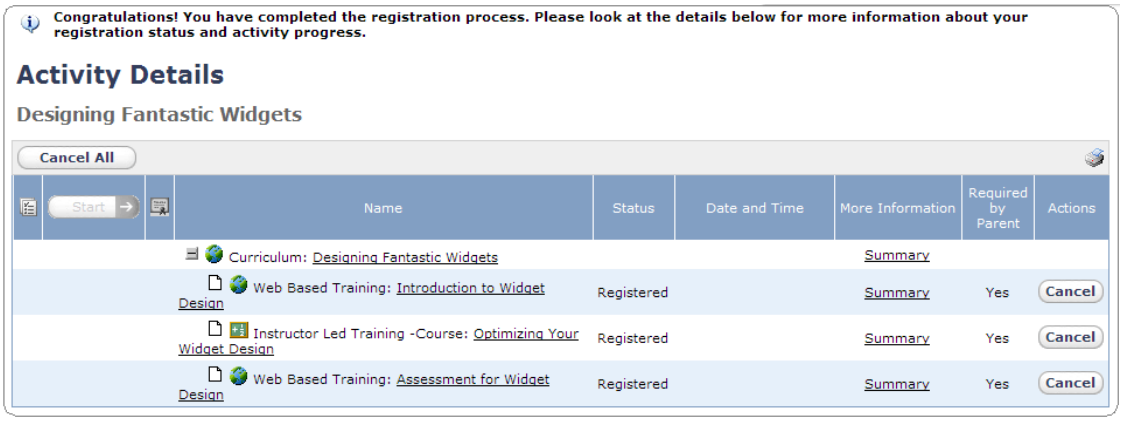


Learner Mode – Warning message during registration

However, since Introduction to Widget Design is a required element of the curriculum, Lisa must select it (or it is selected for her) before the Submit button is enabled. In other words, in order to register for the curriculum, Lisa is forced to *re-register* for Introduction to Widget Design.

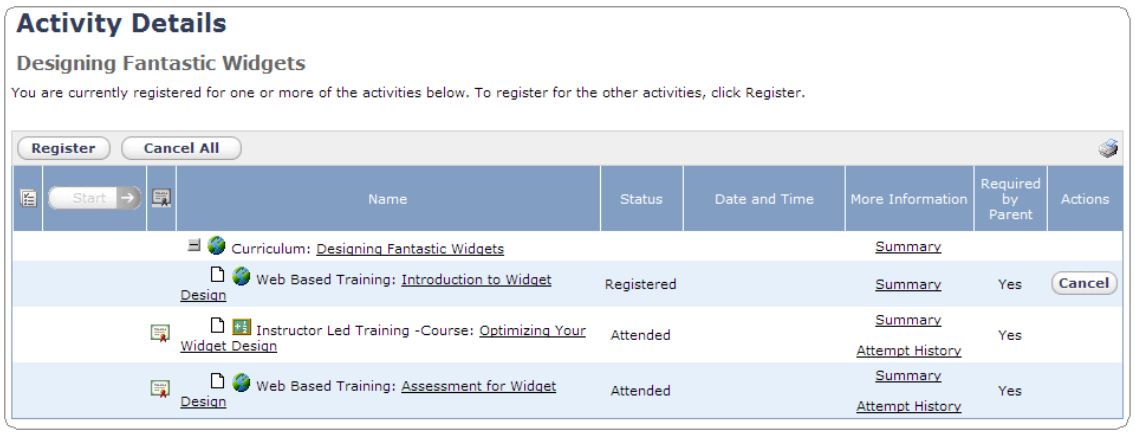
Once Lisa clicks Submit, she is navigated to the Activity Details page. Notice the status of the completed activity is now “Registered” since Lisa was forced to re-register for the activity during the curriculum registration process. So the LMS *knows* Lisa completed Introduction to Widget Design and has records of her completions, but the status of the *latest attempt record* is now “Registered” when it used to be “Attended”.

The Activity Details page shows no indication Lisa ever completed Introduction to Widget Design. The attempt history is not displayed on this page.



No attempt history link for previously completed activities

After Lisa has completed the second and third activities in her curriculum, the first activity is still waiting to be completed. Again. On the Activity Details page for the curriculum, Lisa's two completed activities now have a status of “Attended”, while the Introduction to Widgets course still has a status of "Registered," that is, not complete. As a consequence, Introduction to Widgets will appear on Lisa's Training Schedule (in the current registration view) and possibly on her home page. The first activity will remain open (with a status of “Registered”) until Lisa re-completes it. You probably don't need us to tell you how happy Lisa is with this situation ….

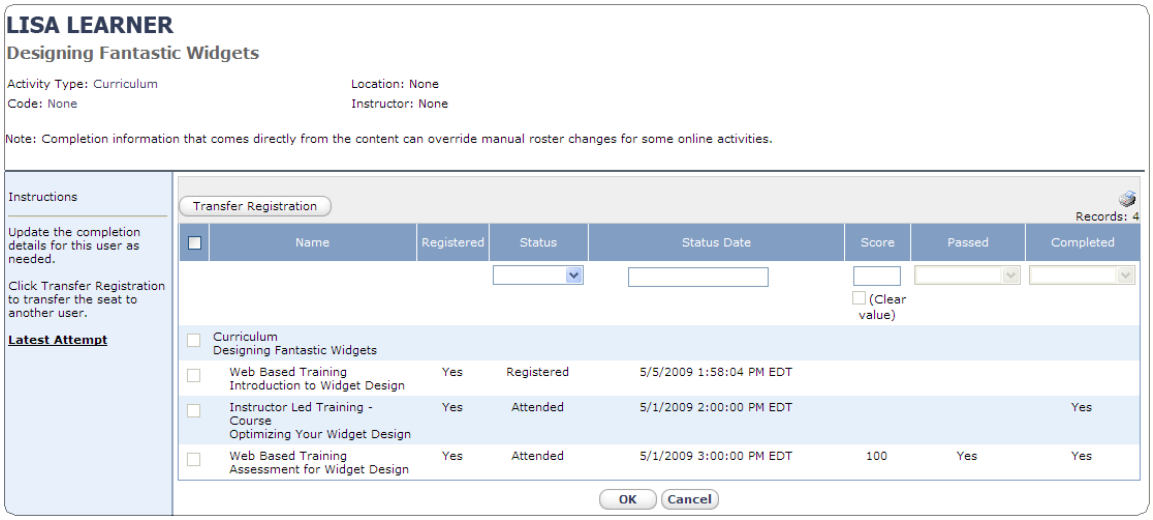


All elements of the curriculum are complete, but registration remains open

The Administrator's View of Things

So we know what Lisa sees in this situation, but how about the administrator? If the administrator looks at Lisa's curriculum, the two activities Lisa completed *after* registering for the curriculum are marked as "Attended." However, the first activity--which Lisa completed before registering for the curriculum--shows the latest attempt record is "Registered." Naturally, since that activity remains incomplete, the curriculum itself remains incomplete.

Now, you might think that you could simply mark the Introduction to Widget Design activity as complete to send Lisa on her merry way. Unfortunately, doing that would mean you were falsifying data, which not only makes it difficult later on to figure out what data is "real" and what data was entered just to solve this problem, but it can cause even bigger problems if your organization is ever audited. Not surprisingly, for both of those reasons, we don't recommend fixing the issue in this way …



Administrator Mode – curriculum roster

What It All Means

Basically, if you think that your learners have completed some activities in a curriculum *before* registering for the curriculum, you might not be able to take advantage of subscription links to create the curriculum itself. Of course, the only other option is to use fulfillment links, which fixes the problem described in this article, but only for versions 7.0 through 7.5. However, using fulfillment is significantly more cumbersome for your learners during the registration process. To figure out what's best for you, you'll have to find the right balance between how often such out-of-curriculum completions might happen, how many learners you have, how feasible it would be to train those learners on the registration process, and how difficult a fulfilled curriculum would be for them to use, etc. While there is no hard-and-fast right answer, there is a right answer for you---you just have to find it.

Irene Campbell has been using fulfilled and subscribed curricula for as long as they have existed. Since she began working with SumTotal products more than 20 years, she's helped with everything from small, phased-approach rollouts to huge projects involving international LMS rollouts to millions of learners. One of her favorite tasks is helping folks define their unique learning activity structures. In fact, figuring it out is one of her favorite LMS brainteasers! (As you can imagine, this makes her the life of pretty much any party she goes to … Okay, maybe not.)

If you have any comments, questions, or suggestions on this article, please mark them as required (subscription or fulfillment--it's up to you) and send them to articles@terrabia.com.

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