An Intriguing Participation Policy

I WAS LOOKING at participation policies in a collection of syllabi this week. I wouldn't give most of them high marks—lots of vague descriptions that don't functionally define participation and then prescribe instructor assessment at the end of course with little or no mention of criteria. But I've voiced my concerns about participation policies previously, so I won't do again here. Instead, what I would like to share with you is a policy that's impressive in its specificity and in the intriguing idea it contains.

Here's an excerpt from the syllabus:

Participation counts for 15% of your grade in this course. Here are the behaviors that count:

- asking questions
- answering questions
- making comments (extra points for comments that relate to material in the text, and for sharing relevant experiences)

Here are the value-added behaviors—the ones the put your contributions over the top:

- responding to something another student says (including answering a question asked by a student)
- constructively disagreeing with something in the text or said in class by me or another student

And there are behaviors to avoid:

- not listening
- pretending to be listening while texting or cruising online
- speaking without being recognized
- making fun or otherwise berating something said by another person.

May I call on you? Send me a note if I may. Send me a note if you prefer to volunteer. My preference is to go with volunteers.

Here's how your participation is graded:

I regularly write notes about who's doing what. Every day after class (or during) you should write down what you contributed—the question you asked, the answer you gave, the comment you made, etc. At mid term I'll ask you to send me an email that lists the dates and the contributions you made. I'll compare your record with mine and send you an email indicating your grade if your current level of participation continues. I'll also make some suggestions for improvement. At the end of the course, I'll ask you to send me a second note which summarizes your contributions across the course. Be welcome to say what grade you think these contributions merit. I'll respond to your note with the grade and my feedback.

Giving students some control

I found intriguing the idea of letting students decide whether they want to be called on or prefer to volunteer. Do you think that's a good idea? I rather like it. It gives students some control and if we believe the research that being in control increases motivation, maybe that and freedom from the fear of being called on might encourage some students to speak up.

I can imagine getting a note back from someone saying they'd rather not contribute period or, more likely, getting no notes from those who don't participate. Is that a big deal? Those folks earn participation grades of zero. No participation policy gets every student contributing—at least not in my experience or based on regularly reported research findings.

The approach does invite a conversation about making contributions in a group. In most professional contexts, you can expect to be called on. For example, you might be asked to speak about an area of expertise or provide a status update on an important project. And in most work contexts, you need to be able to contribute voluntarily—adding value to the conversation, sharing views of those you represent, offering relevant information, and asking pertinent questions. College classrooms are great places for students to develop those skills and this approach better reflects that the responsibility for this skill development ultimately belongs to the students.

I read an article in the paper yesterday highlighting a study that found that when you tell overweight people that they need to lose weight, it has the opposite effect. They eat more. People must decide for themselves that weight is a problem they have to address. Could participation be like this as well? Maybe we ought to be spending less time forcing the contributions, and devote more time to showing why they're important, and what they can do to make classroom interaction something that stimulates thinking and learning. Maybe giving students a choice about being called on or volunteering is a step that moves us in this direction.

Maryellen Weimer; Faculty Focus; October 2, 2013; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/an-intriguing-participation-policy/]; October 2, 2013

Mid-Term Week - Oct 14-18
Fall Break - Oct 14-15
Mini-Term begins - Oct 28
Faculty Informational Meeting - Oct 23

Three Teaching Styles

THE MOST EFFECTIVE teachers vary their styles depending on the nature of the subject matter, the phase of the course, and other factors. By so doing, they encourage and inspire students to do their best at all times throughout the semester.
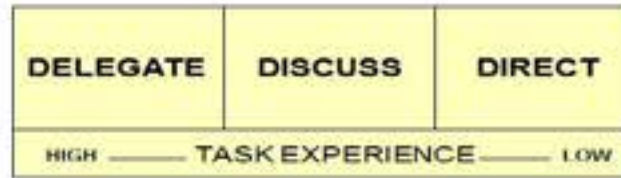
It is helpful to think of teaching styles according to the three Ds: Directing, Discussing, and Delegating.

The directing style promotes learning through listening and following directions. With this style, the teacher tells the students what to do, how to do it, and when it needs to be done. The teacher imparts information to the students via lectures, assigned readings, audio/visual presentations, demonstrations, role playing, and other means. Students gain information primarily by listening, taking notes, doing role plays, and practicing what they are told to do. The only feedback the teacher looks for is "Do you understand the instructions?"

Suggestions for using the directing style:
- **Start with the big picture.** Provide the context before launching into specifics.
- **Be clear and concise.** Students need to know exactly what they must do to succeed and by what criteria their work will be evaluated. Clear goals, specific deadlines, and concise directions increase student motivation and eliminate confusion. Wordy, sloppily written, and poorly organized instructional materials confuse, overwhelm, and discourage students.
- **Provide sufficient detail** Communication breakdowns occur when important details are omitted or instructions are ambiguous. For example, when I once neglected to specify the font size students should use, the papers they turned in had font sizes ranging from 8 to 14!
- **Don't sugar-coat the message.** There are times when teachers need to be very direct and candid to get through to students.

The discussing style promotes learning through interaction. In this style, practiced by Socrates, the teacher encourages critical thinking and lively discussion by asking students to respond to challenging questions. The teacher is a facilitator guiding the discussion to a logical conclusion. Students learn to have opinions and to back them up with facts and data.

Suggestions for using the discussing style:
- **Prepare questions in advance**. Great discussions don't just happen. Ask one question at a time. Be open, curious, and interested in learning what each student thinks.
- **Don't allow one or two students to dominate the discussion**. Solicit everyone's ideas and opinions. Gently draw out students who seem insecure and reticent to participate. I sometimes start my classes by saying, "I want to give each of you one minute to discuss your views on this topic. Let's go around the room and hear from everyone." Get closure by reviewing the key points you want to make.
- **Have students create questions.** I like to have my students read a case study and formulate three questions to ask their classmates. We then discuss their answers in class.
- **Utilize clickers.** Clickers are an easy way to get students involved during class. Pose a multiple-choice question and their responses are tabulated on the screen. You can then open it up for discussion as students share why they selected a certain answer.

The delegating style promotes learning through empowerment. With this style, the teacher assigns tasks that students work on independently, either individually or in groups.

Suggestions for using the delegating style:
- **Assign research projects**. In my management course I require students to interview a manager of a local business to get answers to questions like the following:
  - What are the main performance measures your company uses to evaluate each employee's performance?
  - What are the key lessons you, as a manager, have learned about conducting effective performance appraisals?
- **Assign team projects**. Have each team select a team leader, define roles and responsibilities, and hold each other accountable for completing the project on time. In my management class, I have teams of students analyze the management and leadership behaviors on movies like Remember the Titans and Crimson Tide.
- **Assign a capstone project**. Let students show you what they can do when working independently on a topic that's important to them.

Use an appropriate mix of each teaching style. I typically structure each of my classes to include some amount of each teaching style. However, during the first part of a semester I use more of the directing style. In the middle part of a semester I typically rely more on the discussing style. And in the latter part of a semester I generally lean more heavily on the delegating style.

Using an appropriate mix of teaching styles helps students learn, grow, and become more independent. Too much reliance on one style causes students to lose interest and become overly dependent on the teacher.

Summary

There is no one best teaching style. Effective teachers use a variety of styles, and they know how and when to choose the most appropriate one for the specific situation. In essence, the three teaching styles boil down to this:
- Direct – Tell students what to do
- Discuss – Ask questions and listen
- Delegate – Empower students

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