Volume 6
Issue 9
September
2014

Lander University's

White Board

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Using "Mulligans" to Enhance Student Participation and Reduce Test Anxiety

WHEN I SPEAK with other professors who work extensively in the classroom, we often find that we share many of the same challenges. Students' lack of classroom participation in discussion and test anxiety are two of the most common. Many professors try to mitigate these issues through two time-honored pedagogical tactics: a participation grade and extra credit questions on tests. While both tactics can be effective, by applying concepts from gamification research I found a way to both enhance classroom participation and reduce test anxiety with one simple technique.

While many have heard of gamification, it's important to note that gamification differs from game-based learning. According to a National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) report, gamification is "a much newer concept than game-based learning. It uses elements derived from video game design which are then deployed in a variety of contexts" (Perrota, et. al). Gamification focuses on what games do for brain processes and tries to bring that into the learning environment. While reviewing gamification concepts, I discovered two elements I thought would enhance my classroom: flow and fiero. Flow refers to a state of focused, enjoyable attention that has been known to enhance intrinsic motivation and memory. Fiero is a game design term referring to small victories that result in a feeling of accomplishment, which has been linked to greater engagement and attention to the material. (24, 33).

Lecture/discussion sessions rarely result in these learning states even with the instructor providing engagement opportunities. Most students have been trained to approach the lecture as a largely passive activity. I wanted to bring my students out of this orientation, and to improve test performance through reducing anxiety without reducing rigor. By using the concepts of flow and fiero. I found a way to achieve both with the same modality through the use of what I call mulligans.

Trivia nights in the Midwest are very popular. Before the game begins, players purchase small stickers, called mulligans, which are used to reduce the penalty when the team doesn't know an answer. This sparked an idea that has proven to be successful in the classroom. All it required was a trip to a teacher supply store for stickers and then a bit of explanation on the first day of class.

At the beginning of the semester, I tell my students that there are no extra credit or participation points. Instead, they can earn mulligan stickers to be used on tests or assignments. These are earned during class by showing mastery of content, presenting well-thought-out discussion points, or showing improvement in specific skill areas. Each mulligan sticker is worth one point, and students can use a maximum of five mulligans on a single assignment or test. I give out the mulligans intermittently during the term and never tell students when we're going to have a mulligan day.

Initially, I was worried that this element may be too juvenile for college students. However, by calling them mulligans and equating them with familiar classroom elements, students reacted very well to the idea. Student participation improved from the start of the course and continued even on days when I didn't distribute any stickers. They were more prepared and more eager to contribute to class discussions, and students actually focused during review since it was a prime earning opportunity. The mulligans also provided a tangible incentive for quiet students to step outside their comfort zone and gave me a quick assessment of which students were contributing.

Moreover, students with mulligans showed less outward signs of test anxiety. They could see their collection of stickers as proof that they knew the material, and when stickers were used on test questions that gave students trouble, it helped me assess places where students struggled most.

Lastly, this small change improved the intangible vibe of the classroom. There were moments of fiero and flow that students could easily see, especially when a student got their first sticker, or 'beat' another student to an answer. While it may seem like a gimmick or perhaps juvenile, this one element of

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Editor Wants to Know

The White Board has been coming to Lander's faculty for almost five years. Now is the time to ask if it is a valuable addition to your email box.

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Four Key Questions about Grading

THERE'S AN EXCELLENT article on grading in a recent issue of Cell Biology Education-Life Sciences Education. It offers a brief history of grading (it hasn't been around for all that long), and then looks to the literature for answers to four key questions.

1. Does grading provide feedback to help students understand and improve their deficiencies? The grade itself is feedback, but generally it is accompanied with faculty comments that justify the grade and offer suggestions for improvement. Most of us know the problem here, "The grade trumps the comment," as one researcher cited says. Students tend not to read the comments; they look at the grade and get on with life. Not all research supports that conclusion. In some studies, students report that they do read the comments but often struggle to understand the feedback, and they don't always know how to fix what we identified as a problem. As a result, the same mistakes occur in subsequent assignments. Grading feedback is not as effective as we might hope.

2. Does grading motivate students to learn? Not really. More often, grading motivates students to focus on grades. If learning is part of the equation, it happens more by accident than design. Pass back an exam and everywhere you hear the question, "Whatcha get?" Nobody is asking, "Whatcha learn?" This analysis of grading and motivation offers an even bleaker conclusion. "Grades can dampen existing intrinsic motivation, give rise to extrinsic motivation, enhance the fear of failure, reduce interest, decrease enjoyment in the class work, increase anxiety, hamper performance on follow-up tasks, stimulate avoidance of challenging tasks, and heighten competitiveness." (p. 161)

3. Is grading on a curve the fairest way to grade? The practice of doing so started in the early 20th century when it was discovered that IQ scores were distributed across the population in a normal curve. "Conforming grades to a curve held the promise of addressing some of the problems surrounding grading by making the process more scientific and consistent across classrooms." (p. 162) However, grading on the curve creates other inequities. If you have a bunch of really bright students in one section, some will end up getting C's while the same raw scores will be B's in the section where ability is more widely distributed. But most faculty don't apply the curve all that rigidly. They adjust it, as needed, for a section or a set of exams which erodes the objectivity and consistency. The other problem with the curve system is that it creates competition in the classroom. When students are competing for points, it's not in their best interest to collaborate or contribute, which pretty much rules out students learning from and with each other. That works out okay for some students, but it's not fair for those who do learn well with others.

4. Do grades provide reliable information about student learning? This is the perennial question about what it is grades really measure and if they measure the same things consistently. The research cited in the paper documents inconsistency in grading by individual faculty members (two different grades for the same piece of work when it's graded at different times) and across individual graders. Rubrics help, but research still identifies unrelated factors that influence grading (like gender, ethnicity, and knowing who the student is, for example). That kind of inconsistency isn't a problem with objective exams, such as those with multiple-choice questions, but those exams have students selecting answers, which is significantly different than generating answers. That rounds us back to the question of what kind of learning grades really measure.

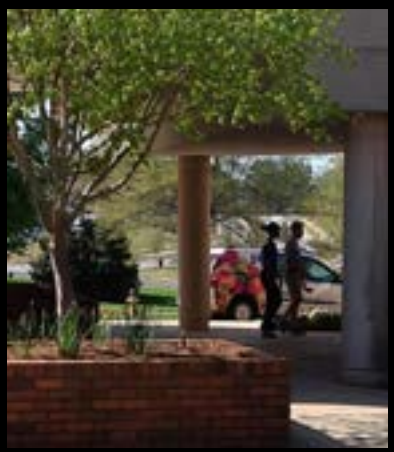
We grade students to give them feedback, to motivate their learning, to see how they compare with other students, and to measure their learning—all reasonable purposes. "However, much of the research literature [reviewed in this article] suggests that these goals are often not being achieved with our current grading practices." (p. 163) Yes, that's a pretty scathing critique, but it's well documented and our answers to questions this central need to be accurate.

Reference:

Schinske, J. and Tanner, K., (2014). Teaching more by grading less (or differently). Cell Biology Education—Life Sciences Education, 13 (Summer), 159-166.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Teaching Professor Blog; "Four Key Questions about Grading;" Faculty Focus; August 8, 2014; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/four-key-questions-grading/]; September 1, 2014

CAMPUS VIEW



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gamification has convinced me to look into the research further for other modalities that can improve learning.

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McGonigal, J. (2011). Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World. New York: Penguin Books.

Perrotta, C., Featherstone, G., Aston, H. and Houghton, E. (2013). Game-based Learning: Latest Evidence and Future Directions (NFER Research Programme: Innovation in Education). Slough: NFER.

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Lisa Pavia-Higel; Teaching and Learning; Using "Mulligans" to Enhance Student Participation and Reduce Test Anxiety;" Faculty Focus; August 18, 2014; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/using-mulligans-enhance-student-participation-reduce-text-anxiety/] September 1, 2014