

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

HOW TO ACHIEVE 100 PER CENT STUDENT PARTICIPATION

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Competition increases performance, but collaboration increases learning.

COMPETITION

One needs to look no further than the business or sports sections of any newspaper to see how pervasive competition is in our culture. There is no doubt that competition **increases performance**. Athletic teams, bands, and other performing groups practice for hours spurred on by the competitive spirit.

Obviously, fair competition is valuable and can be lots of fun. Competition in classrooms, however, is fun for the winner but is often unfair for the others because the same children usually win, making it uninvolved and even futile for others. If a student rarely finds himself in the winner's circle, then competitive approaches **kill the drive for learning**. Think of it this way. People compete because they want to win. They love the feelings of winning. Nobody enters a competition wanting to lose.

Competitive approaches influence students to work against each other, rather than for each other and with each other. "Serve yourself" is the motto. Competition often fosters feelings of disappointment, which diminish the innate desire to participate in an activity.

Teachers of early grades work with children who come to school eager to learn, but competition dulls their spirit. For example, when the kindergarten teacher says, "Boys and girls, let's see who can make the best drawing?" the competitive spirit is fostered. The assumption, of course, is that this charge will spur the youngsters to do their best. Unfortunately, however, the teacher has set up only one of the students to be the winner. Even if all the pictures were to be posted, the inference is that only one student would have the best picture. The teacher has unintentionally fostered "non-winning" with the other children simply because **competition, by its very nature, engenders winners and losers**.

In band and athletic competitions, losing builds character. However, when a student is **first learning a skill**, it is the **successful experiences** that build character and self-esteem. In the above example, the teacher could challenge the students without having them compete with each other by saying, "Boys and girls, let's see how good of a drawing you can make."

As I visit classrooms from Los Angeles to New York City, I see the traditional mode of teachers asking questions and students (who want to participate) raising their hands to be called upon. This approach sets students up to compete for the teacher's attention. Using this approach, the only winner becomes the person the teacher calls upon. In a primary class, one can audibly hear the sound of disappointment in those who were not called on.

The education community should not be stuck in the outmoded model of promoting competition between students. It is not the path to effective learning. A more effective strategy promotes total student involvement without competition.

COLLABORATION

The advantages of collaboration over competition for improved learning have been known and demonstrated for many years.

Here is a simple way to structure student interaction for maximum participation. First, two requisites: (1) Students have a learning buddy. (2) You have established a management attention procedure that allows you to almost instantaneously regain the attention of all students.

Instead of asking a question, which often implies a correct answer, and then calling on a single person, **pose** the question. Posing, in contrast to asking, is open-ended, invites students to engage in thought, and engenders dialog.

After students interact with each other, the teacher then discusses or gives the answer. Students quickly learn that the teacher is interested in everyone's involvement. In cases where one answer is correct, students who know it gain intrinsic satisfaction that comes from "being right."

Here is a simple example that I used in my elementary, middle, and high school classes -- and one you can this month.

The Friday before Presidents Day (February 18 this year), I show a picture of Mount Rushmore with the sculptured heads of presidents Washington, Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Lincoln. <www.travelsd.com/parks/rushmore>. I introduce the topic by saying that on Monday we will be celebrating the presidents of our country and, to promote appreciation and celebration, school will not be held. I then pose a question students are to discuss with their learning buddies. With elementary students, the question relates to identifying the first and/or third president. With middle and high school students the question relates to a century in which one of the presidents lived or served in office.

Notice that the strategy promotes 100 per cent participation because every student talks to a learning buddy. Even a shy student will participate with another student. Also, notice that students **first grapple** with the idea or concept. This approach of challenging students at the outset with discussion is the approach used so effectively in Japanese schools. This grappling fosters curiosity, interest, and motivation.

In short, when activities are structured to be primarily collaborative, learning becomes noncompetitive, all students participate, and learning is enhanced.

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