

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

COLLABORATION—RATHER THAN COMPETITION—FOR QUALITY LEARNING

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Competition increases performance, but collaboration increases learning.

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. 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 dull for others. And, most significantly, competition is particularly counterproductive to learning when the learning is at the beginning stages.

Competition

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 unwittingly 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 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 competition, losing may build character. However, in schooling—especially when a student is first learning a skill—successes, rather than failures, build character and esteem. Competitive approaches kill the drive for learning if the student rarely finds himself in the winner’s circle. Competition leads to sorting which, to a very young person, often fosters feelings of disappointment, which diminish the innate desires to participate in the activity—in this case, learning.

A common example of such a competitive approach is the use of ratings, where students are ranked according to their grades, accomplishments, or some other criteria. There is no doubt that some students who strive to be at the top are stimulated by such incentives. *But ratings are an incentive only for these students interested in the reward*—in this case ranking high. And even though the incentive of ranking high may influence some students in a positive way, it does not necessarily enhance the quality of the learning. The reason is that the focus becomes whatever is necessary to achieve the ranking, which is not necessarily the same as quality learning. And, even more importantly, it discourages other members of the class who know they will never rank near the top. Competitive approaches influence students to work against each other, rather than for each other and with each other. “Serve yourself” is the theme. In addition, some people who get good ratings—especially those caught up with perfectionism—often register a paradox; they feel that they don’t deserve to be ranked above some of their classmates. On the other hand, those who received low ratings often feel they have been misjudged. To put it simply, class rankings destroy team spirit and community.

The education community should not be stuck in the outmoded model of promoting competition between students. It is not the path to quality work. Teachers can prove the point to themselves by simply taking a student poll. Ask students how many believe they do their best in school. The higher the grade levels of the inquiry, the lower the percentage of positive answers received.

Quality work is rarely the focus. Another way to prove the point is to reflect: As a student, in how many classes did you do your best quality work?

It is imperative to understand that grades serve as an incentive in much the same way that rankings do. Many students are interested in achieving high grades. However, today there are thousands of young people in classrooms across America who show little interest in grades. Grades do not serve as an incentive for them. Again, when grades are an incentive, the focus is on this external reward, often at the expense of the intrinsic satisfaction of quality work. In addition, there are many areas across the country where earning good grades is frowned upon by youth cultures. The braggadocio of some parents is also frowned upon, as illustrated by the bumper sticker, “My kid beat up your honor roll student.”

We cannot really blame the parent for this display which denigrates character education. The fault is in the system. The same is true for the school's attempts to encourage honesty when the system encourages cheating—a major unnecessary problem that permeates schools. Dr. Joseph Duran taught that, whenever there is a problem, 85% of the time it is with the system. Only 15% of the time will it be the fault of the people. W. Edwards Deming went further and suggested that the ratio is closer to 95-5. This is certainly the situation with cheating in schools. The system drives behaviors. If the emphasis is on grades—rather than on the joy of learning or intrinsic, self-motivation—then students will do whatever it takes to get grades. The answer is not to crack down harder on cheaters and somehow enforce honesty; the answer is to change the system, or at least in a classroom to change the emphasis. Schools foster cheating by encouraging and relying on competition—an approach that not only is counterproductive to fostering character but is also counterproductive to quality learning.

Grades change motivation. Teachers know this from the questions students ask. “Will it be on the test?” or “Will it be counted in the grade?” The focus is not on quality or learning but, rather, on the extrinsic reward of the grade. This is not the case in areas like performing arts and vocational classes. Students in these classes know that grades can even interfere with quality work. A performing student is not concerned with the grade. It's the excitement, personalization, and pride of what students accomplish that generates quality work. Similarly, the student working on electricity is not interested in only half the electrical charges being conducted, or a welding be only 50% satisfactory, or the car starting only 75% of the time. Can you imagine a dentist or an airline pilot pleased with anything other than their best efforts? Their motivation is on the quality of work. That is where the satisfaction is—not from external evaluations such as grades. This same drive for quality work can be fostered in academic classes. But an emphasis on grades, either by the teacher or student, is counterproductive to this end.

Grades will not disappear from the education scene. However, grades need not drive teaching, since they do not drive quality learning. For a start, teachers can do better than grade on a curve—which automatically casts half of the students in a class to a below average rating. Instead, grades should be thought of as goals, which are mutually established by the class as well as the teacher. Start with the vision that the role of the teacher is to assist students not only to learn and grow but also to enjoy the process. Explain and discuss with students the nature of external assessments, such as grades. Discuss how an emphasis on grades focuses motivation on the external reward of the grade rather than on the joy in learning.

Joy in Learning

Joy is ever changing. What is thrilling at one age is infantile at another. The joy of sharing, so prevalent at a young age, gives way to the satisfaction of doing something well. With older students, joy that comes from learning is not necessarily accompanied by joyful sounds or even smiling faces. It is often manifest in a more serious expression like that of

the scholar, so engrossed in the activity as to be oblivious of surroundings. Most teachers have experienced this joy of learning, and they want to pass it on to their students. Focusing on quality is a natural approach to achieving this objective.

Quality is what makes learning a pleasure and a joy. A quality experience hooks a student on learning. Sometimes mastery is hard work. However, when there is joy in learning, it does not seem like hard work because it feels good. A student will spend hours on the basketball court, working up a sweat while he practices a particular shot. Yet it does not seem like hard work. When a person *wants* to do something, the labor seems incidental. Quality work involves exertion, but it may even seem like fun. The significant adage to remember is that *people produce quality when they enjoy what they are doing*. Excitement, personalization, and pride are involved.

When people are engaged in quality work, a few indicators can be observed. People choose to be engaged in the activity; it is meaningful to them. The work involves some creativity and skill and involves more than a simple task; it is usually complex. The activity results in some success. Personal control is present. Self-assessment is involved. The engagement in the task is not perceived as being coercive. Oftentimes, the activity is not perceived as stressful; it may even feel relaxing.

Starting on the Process

Quality in learning is influenced by the quality of the process. An investment of time wherein the student *discusses* quality actually raises quality. This fosters a sense of ownership, which is so critical to quality work. Students of every age can be so engaged, but it takes more than just announcing a desire for quality. A sense of purpose needs to be established. A discussion of the following questions assists in this regard:

- Why are we here?
- What are we trying to do?
- What does it mean to do something well?
- How will we know if we are doing it well together?

When students move from the child development emphasis in primary grades to one of greater accountability in upper grades, a need for students to evaluate their own work is critical. Therefore, the first few sessions of the class should be devoted to a discussion of each of the following topics:

- What does it mean to do work with quality?
- How will each student know a quality level has been attained?
- How will the teacher know a quality level has been attained?
- What does the student need to do in order to attain the level?
- What can the teacher do to help students attain the level?
- How will a third party be assured that the level had been attained?

These discussions cause students to examine their own objectives regarding what they can gain from the learning, rather than just engaging in activities for the usual external reward of a grade and the external evaluation by the teacher. The result of such discussions is that during the remainder of the semester student enthusiasm and drive increase so that the students learn much more. What one may think of as "lost" at the start of a semester becomes more than regained.

A class consensus regarding the importance of what is to be learned is helpful. This is especially important since there are mandated subjects and mandated tests. The objective of the teacher is to kindle the workings of peer pressure for the learning process. As mentioned, the investment in the

process is worth the time because students become so much more motivated. With increased motivation, students learn much more than if they had not been involved in discussing the curriculum and what is necessary to attain quality.

Once students are persuaded that the contents of the course are worth their time and effort, discussion focuses on how the learning is to take place. This discussion revolves around such subjects as follows:

Testing: How often? What kind? How to evaluate? What is the purpose?

Homework: Why? How often? When?

Evaluation: How will we know how we are doing? Against what shall we make comparisons (benchmarks)?

Class Management: How do we make ourselves most efficient?

Documentation: How shall we persuade others that we have really done a good job?

The purpose of these discussions is to have students become more involved in their own learning—to persuade themselves to become responsible for their own education. These discussions facilitate this process.

Once some students have tasted the joy of learning they may not want to return to something inferior. But other students need to be constantly engaged in order to be wedded to academic learning. Teachers must ever be alert to engage the students in discussions of what constitutes a quality experience. The negotiations and discussions are continual.

Teaching vs. Learning

The quality of the learning experience depends upon how teaching or how the learning process is managed. The following little story illustrates the difference between learning and teaching. The dog owner says, "Last Wednesday I taught my dog to whistle. I really did. I taught him to whistle. It was hard work. I really went at it very hard. But I taught him to whistle. Of course, he didn't learn, but I taught him."

Recognizing that it is not teaching but learning which determines the quality of education, it is evident that learning depends upon how enthusiastically the students tackle their assignments. For example, over the years teachers have learned how much homework students will tolerate and have adjusted assignments to this level of toleration. To get students to do more, teachers have employed "carrot and stick" approaches. By a combination of rewards and threats, we have tried to force students to do homework—often tying it to a grade. The students, in return, have done their best to outwit the teacher. To change the situation requires harnessing the internal motivation of students. The key to harnessing that internal motivation is participation. Research has shown that participation with others may stimulate the brain to release "feel good" chemicals such as endorphin and dopamine. Positive feedback from working with others may be the single most powerful influence on the brain's chemistry.

Collaboration and Quality

W. Edwards Deming, the teacher who brought quality to the workplace, clearly showed the advantages of collaboration over competition for improved quality work. Traditional approaches believed that if quality were increased then costs would surely rise. Deming showed—by using collaboration—how quality work would increase while costs simultaneously were reduced. Using collaboration to improve quality, Dr. Deming brought Japan, from a reputation of producing cheap and shoddy products, to become the world's leader in producing quality products. Collaboration—the antithesis of individual competition that is so prevalent in our schools—became

the overriding approach. Along with diminished competition, the use of exhortations, threats, prizes, and special rewards for doing what people are supposed to do were also reduced. In a nutshell, Deming showed the world that, for improved quality work, working together is better than working competitively.

The key to quality learning is to structure student interaction for maximum participation. For example, a common approach to starting a lesson is to *ask* students a question, which infers a right answer. Students compete for the teacher's attention by raising their hands. 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 of those who were not called on. Instead of this approach of asking a question and then calling on a single person, *pose* the question. Posing—in contrast to asking—infers open-endedness, invites students to engage in thought, and engenders dialog. Have students collaborate in pairs or small groups for responses. When collaboration is used, then *all* the students participate. Also, notice that students first grapple with the idea or concept. This approach of challenging students at the outset is the approach used so effectively in Japanese schools. When curiosity is fostered before presenting information, student interest and motivation are increased. In addition, by structuring learning activities to be primarily collaborative, learning becomes noncompetitive—an essential principle for increased quality.

Here is another example of how collaboration improves quality of learning. A high school student accustomed to above average test scores was disappointed in her last two test results. The student had grasped the prime concepts but did not do well on reporting details. The teacher told the students that, in order to place concepts in long-term memory, details need to be remembered. The student's father suggested that, as the daughter reads, she should illustrate what she is reading. The daughter, being in high school, thought that illustrating was too juvenile. The father explained that when the brain attempts to remember words, *semantic* pathways to memory are being used. Semantic pathways require much repetition in order to be retained. On the other hand, he explained, when the brain attempts to remember illustrations, it uses *episodic* pathways which require little, if any, repetition. Episodic pathways are contextual or spatial and always involve location. The father, to make his point, asked his daughter what she ate for dinner the previous Saturday and requested that, as she answers, to relate her thinking process out loud. The daughter responded by saying, "Where was I last Saturday?" "Exactly the point! You looked for a location because we are always somewhere, and we remember through images," said the father. "This is the reason it is easier to remember illustrations and pictures in contrast to remembering information from textbooks and lectures which usually involve only words." After the explanation, the daughter suggested to two of her friends that they also illustrate their next reading assignment and share their illustrations. All three met and discussed their illustrated notes. During the discussion, each became aware of a few additional details that the others had included. Test scores dramatically increased. Although the strategy of illustrations assisted, it was the contributions shared through collaboration that made the activity not only enjoyable but also so successful in attaining higher test scores.

Continuous Improvement

Deming's overriding theme was continuous improvement through continuous evaluation. This model calls for a framework that allows those closest to the task to have ownership of the task. Ownership is critical to quality because the driving force is self-evaluation—rather than outside inspection. Deming understood that motivation, productivity, and quality work cannot be legislated. They come from intrinsic motivation.

Schools generally use the old factory approach to evaluation. Before Deming showed the superiority of self-evaluation for improved quality work, American managers hired inspectors to inspect the

work of their employees. Quality did not really improve; rather, the poor quality work just did not get out. Costs went up because items that did not pass inspection were discarded.

Dr. Deming told me that when he went to Western Electric in the 1920's there were 30,000 people making telephone sets and 10,000 people inspecting their work. The job of the workers was to get their product past the inspectors, and the job of the inspectors was to catch them if they did something wrong. This is no way to reduce cost. It is no way to achieve improved telephones. It is no way to work.
(Personal communication with Myron Tribus.)

Rather than use this outdated factory model of the teacher as inspector at the end of the learning process, improved quality work results if *continuous* improvement and *continuous* feedback are built into the learning process. It is learner-generated feedback which increases motivation and which is so critical to improved quality of work. When we are pleased with our efforts, especially when we see improvement, we invest more effort. Improvement comes through self-evaluation, practice, and more evaluation. The better the quality of our work, the more we are pleased and the more we engage in the activity.

Collaborative Evaluation

Stephen Covey, in his provocative book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, refers to the concept of collaboration as “synergy.”

Simply defined, it means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It means that the relationship that the parts have to each other is a part in and of itself. It is not only a part, but the most catalytic, the most empowering, the most unifying, and the most exciting part.”
(pp.262-263)

Collaborative evaluation is an integral component of synergy. Collaborative evaluation enhances success, perpetuates a positive learning atmosphere, and raises quality.

Teachers who employ collaborative evaluation methods promote quality because students become more involved in assessing their own work, which results in greater retention of subject matter and improved attitudes toward learning. Interpersonal relations and understandings are also enhanced. Students learn that others' ideas and feedback can contribute to one's success and that having a different perspective and even a different background is of benefit. Due to the interchange of ideas, collaborative evaluation also improves both listening and expression skills—oral as well as written.

The brain is innately social and collaborative. Although the processing takes place in our individual brains, learning is enhanced when the environment provides opportunities to discuss thinking out loud and to bounce ideas off peers. The act of shared thinking, of having to put one's own views clearly to others, of finding defensible compromises and conclusions, is evaluative and, therefore, educative.

Teachers' workloads can be reduced, while simultaneously increasing the quality of student work, by applying approaches of collaborative evaluation through feedback. For example, assume the assignment has to do with writing an essay. After an assignment is given, but before it is started, students pair with each other and then share their understanding of the assignment. Then the procedure of “three before me” is explained, which is that before the teacher corrects any paper, it will have been seen by one other student three times. (A variation is to have the work seen by three different people, which may include someone other than a classmate. A parent qualifies.) After the

original oral sharing of ideas, each student writes a first draft that is exchanged with another student. Each student gives feedback to the other. A second draft is then written, again with each giving the other feedback. The final copy is then completed and submitted to the teacher.

As a general principle for quality work, a first draft should never be considered a final draft. The story is told about Henry Kissinger who submitted a report when he first started working for the government. His supervisor inquired if the report was his best work. Kissinger worked on the report for an additional two days fine-tuning it and giving the report greater clarity before resubmitting it. Again, a similar inquiry was forthcoming, "Is this the best you can do?" The report was worked on for an additional day. After further revisions, Kissinger submitted his work with some anger and confidence asserting that the report was the best he could do. His supervisor said, "Good! Then I will read it."

Summary

Although competition can serve as an incentive to improve *performance*, it can have a negative effect on *learning*. This is especially the case where success, not defeat, is so necessary when first learning a skill. Competition can also have a deleterious effect because some students find themselves rarely winning, thereby decreasing their motivation. In addition, the focus becomes one of winning or getting the prize, often at the expense of the joy of learning and quality work.

Learning is greatest when people work *with* each other—not against each other. Collaboration and focus on continual improvement result in improved quality work because they use continual self-assessment and feedback. Collaboration results in joy of learning. Finally, because the focus is on learning, in contrast to a focus on teaching, this participatory learning strategy can also reduce teachers' workloads.

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