Competition as a Teaching Strategy

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Abstract

In this article, both the negative and positive roles of competition as a teaching strategy are explored. By using the lenses of culture, gender, second language learners and different levels of education, the strategy of competition is considered in terms of its component pieces in order to find how best to use it. By adjusting the use of competition to include collaboration and being mindful of competition's effects, teachers can bring it back into the classroom for the benefit of our students.

Competition played a central role in my own education, shaping my expectations of teaching and learning. While competition was a motivating factor for me, this was not necessarily true for others. For a handful of high-achieving students, competition stands as an engagement tool, but for the rest of the students in the class, it can have the opposite effect. In other cultures, this is reflected in the poisonous over-competition that cripples students in Asia. Taken to extremes here in Canada, some teachers will engineer competition between genders to help students; however, the opposite effect is more often true. The use of competition with bilingual students and tutors shows how flawed the use of this teaching strategy is and how it is linked to decreased learning of the curriculum. There are solutions to these problems, the first of which involves purely eliminating competition as a teaching strategy from our repertoire. Another way to strip the ineffectiveness of competition in the classroom is to modify the strategy and create an element of collaboration in the games or competitions. We can also use the strategy of class-versus-teacher, class-versus-class, or even school-versus-school to incorporate the students who otherwise would have been left behind. There are ways to use competition in the classroom, provided we are careful in our use of these strategies and keep the needs of our students paramount when planning.

Negative Results of Competition in the Classroom

Competition motivates only high-achieving students in the class, but it is demotivating in other cultures or when used with gender, and it decreases bilingual students' learning potential. The ability to engage the high-achieving students through competition in the classroom is mitigated by the students in the classroom who see this strategy as a showcase of their lack of ability. Elliot, Jury, and Murayama (2018) described the lower achieving students in the class who avoid demonstrations of their ability because they think that they cannot compete at a higher level, nullifying any positive effect in the class. By dropping the competition from the classroom, Cohan and Honigsfeld (2010) found that the alternative is far better. They had no issues with the students if they worked in a setting that was relaxed, without contrived competitive situations. When competition for grades is considered by students, many will look to see whether their grades will be on a curve or not and, if so, the students may decide to disengage from collaboratively learning because they are worried their standing will be reduced (Burleigh & Meegan, 2018). Finally, Raupp in 2018 pinpointed how competition can bring out behaviours that we want to avoid in the classroom, such as students becoming upset and unmotivated instead of creating a lesson or classroom that is engaging. The students who find the class easy or competition engaging thrive, but the class members without that intrinsic drive mitigate the success of their peers because it is the competition that gives a platform for their lack of ability.

When taken to extremes in other cultures, the competition that we have traditionally thought of as a motivating influence is even more detrimental to students' success. In China, the drive to

succeed, combined with parental pressure, leaves students in a position to succeed or academically die. This death-ground competition idea illustrates that students at the middle school level in these Asian cultures are under immense familial, peer, and parental pressure to be the best in the class because of how competitive it is to be accepted by a prestigious high school (Liu & Dervin, 2017). The numerous after-school programs and extra tutoring for these students demonstrate how extreme this culture takes its education. This mentality can cause issues with self-esteem and continuation of studies after high school. Those who do not win the race to be first in this extremely competitive cultural environment find that it is detrimental to their success.

The use of competition with bilingual students and tutors shows again how flawed the use of this teaching strategy is and how it is linked to decreased learning of the curriculum. Hispanic students were shown to be much more likely to be put in remedial classes than their non-Hispanic peers (Madrid, Canas, & Ortega-Medina, 2007). The language divide in these students was posited to be one of the reasons why they were not doing as well as their peers. When put into randomized groups that used cooperative peer tutoring in contrast to a competitive environment, the students who were in a cooperative group learned more authentically than those in the competitive group. Again, we see that competition as a teaching strategy is linked to decreased learning of the curriculum.

The gender divide provides an additional method for competition to damage students' success when it is used in mixed classrooms and creates gendered methods and norms. In our culture, the girls in our classes are more apt than our male students to avoid competition while learning (John, 2017). Because most of our classes are mixed in terms of gender, this finding that females are left behind when teachers use competition as a teaching strategy means that fully half of our student body is not helped by this process at all. However, it is more than half, because not all boys are motivated by this strategy, either. Classic girls-versus-boys scenarios in physical education classes and other subjects preclude girls from trying their best and should be dropped from teaching methods immediately. The damage that inter-gender and mixed classroom competition causes to students' success creates more gendered methods and social norms. We can see through these data that competition motivates only the stronger students in the class, but it demotivates when used across gender divides, in different cultures, and with bilingual students.

Modifying Competition With Collaboration

There are numerous solutions to these problems, such as eliminating competition, using competition in high-level learning groups, or using it in concert with collaboration. The first method of modification involves purely eliminating competition from our repertoire of teaching strategies. Researchers in Taiwan discovered that when students are given the opportunity to learn in a context without competition, they absorb far more information as compared to their peers in a separate group doing the same learning but competing against each other (Chen, Liu, & Shou, 2018). Chen et al. (2018) used the same assessment of the knowledge gained during the activity in a digital STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) learning environment. The group that did the most authentic learning and performed better on the assessment was the group that did not compete or rank against each other. This strategy is doubly effective if the content the students are learning is engaging or presented in an engaging way that activates their curiosity. It has been my experience that students learning for learning's sake is a far longer lasting method to imbue them with knowledge, and one way it can happen is if we eliminate competition from our repertoire of teaching strategies.

The only time that student competition seems to have a positive effect in a learning environment is either in medical school where students are already academically inclined and have been successful, or in a debate context for the same reasons. Competition for acceptance to a medical program is implicitly part of the process. By adding another element of competition

as a teaching strategy in medical school, a teacher can engage the students better and motivate them to keep their morale up (Corell, Regueras, Verdú, Verdú, & de Castro, 2018). In another study, Mosley-Jensen (2011) illustrated the necessary aspects of using competition in the classroom as a teaching strategy by looking at debate as a subject. The preparation and procedural aspects of the debate structure raised the level of knowledge and education in the high-achieving students who flourish in this situation (Mosley-Jensen, 2011). Medical students and students of debate, who are naturally inclined toward academics, thrive in a competitive environment; these students become more successful when competition is explicitly used in the classroom.

Another way to strip ineffectiveness from competition is to modify the strategy by adding collaboration to class games. Instead of taking competition out of the classroom, a high school mathematics teacher joined the competition aspects of games with collaboration (DiNapoli, 2018). The students competed against each other in mixed groups and had the same chance to excel and win because the students were motivated to work as a team. In my own teaching practice, this collaboration by students occurs when I challenge the students to a class-versus-teacher game, or a class-versus-class game or competition. When they can work as a team, the students who feel that they cannot rise to the level of the superstars are willing to demonstrate their skills. In a much larger context, school to school, it works even better when the students of a school compete, as detailed in a study out of the Netherlands (Cabus & Cornelisz, 2017). The collaborative competition then makes it much easier to assess students who otherwise might never have been able to participate. By adding an element of collaboration to the competition, teachers can bring back the students who would have fallen through the cracks and thereby ensure significantly more learning for our students. Eliminating competition, using competition in high-level learning groups, or using it in concert with collaboration are ways that we can use competition as an effective teaching strategy.

Conclusion

Despite competition being used in classrooms during my early and middle years' education, it leaves a lot to be desired as a learning and teaching strategy. There are teaching methods that can use competition effectively if care is taken, but not in the traditional sense. High levels of student-versus-student competition are detrimental to student success, especially in cultures wherein egregious pressure is put on the students. The students who thrive when competition is used in class are the high-achievers who would have done well anyway. The use of competition with bilingual students and tutors shows again how flawed the use of this teaching strategy is. When used to reinforce gender lines, competition can also damage the learning of boys and girls in different contexts. However, students learning for learning's sake obtain a more permanent grasp of the material, and doubly so if the content is adapted to be engaging. By adding an element of collaboration to competition, teachers can ensure that every student has a chance to participate and achieve the same level of learning as the high-achieving students. However, collaboration will not work if the students are graded on a curve and are looking out for their self-interests. Modifying competition and keeping the needs of our students in mind are recommended methods to use competition as a teaching strategy.

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About the Author

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