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Will being involved in calculating their own participation points make middle school learners better class participants in my Spanish class?

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I analyzed the number of referrals, garbage duties, and parental conferences based upon misconduct and compared that to this years. Unfortunately the numbers stayed about the same. I had three parent emails, four garbage duties, two detentions, and one referral to the vice-principal (see chart 1 below). This means that my system of having them reflect upon their classroom participation did not make a difference in those students who are likely to put being social priorities ahead of the learning. Middle school is a time, particularly at seventh grade, when peers become extremely important.

I did however interview a female seventh grader who reported that she daydreamed less and realized more what active listening means. I interviewed another female seventh grader who is an A student who said that she loved Spanish because she gets her rewards (meaning points and thus teacher recognition) for being a model student.

The result is that those students who are on task feel rewarded for being so. Those who are not on task were not changed by this activity because they place too high a value on socialization during class time. However, this realization of the overall importance of socialization has led me to have more skits and role-plays in front of the class, their peers. If students realize they will be performing for their peers, they are more likely to place a bigger effort on creating an end-product worthy of presenting, and not spend the time otherwise wasted by fooling around.

Therefore, this project has given me ideas on how to use the importance of peer relationships to better motivate middle school learners. One idea for those who do not do their homework, is to have them do it in class, separately, while those who did their homework enjoy a more interactive lesson, such as a game. Those who are off task by constant chatting to neighbors are asked to sit apart from the group, in special seating

without a partner until they usually plead that they will be compliant after sitting apart for two or three days.

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In my initial research question and design abstract, Professor Miller raised the question if adding participation points to the students' grades is an acceptable grading policy at my school. This is a valid question as many schools are requiring grades to be based solely on proof of standard acquisition. It has been discussed at my school of having this be the case and having a separate grading column for participation and effort, but this change has not come about as of yet. It should also be noted that I never dock a student participation when that student is absent. The school policy is that the student has one week to make-up work, but I realize they cannot be graded for class participation if they were not present.

I have chosen to compare my last year's eighth grade classes (who were exceptionally challenging in terms of behavior due to extroverted personalities), who did not calculate their own participation points, compared to this year's 2 eighth grade Spanish 1B courses. I was interested to see if I could affect better participation by trying to internally motivate the students to be more aware of their classroom behaviors by reflecting on their behavior each quarter with the questions I have listed above. It was my hope that the students would be more self-aware of how their behavior is connected to their listening skills and grades, and thus learning!

It should be mentioned that I teach at Cupertino Middle school, which is a not a Title I school, but does receive Title I funds for a minority of the students. Most students are not Title I students, and can be ranged in the upper lower to lower middle class. In

Spanish, the academic elective, I see more of the advanced students who have parental support to get ahead in their education.

By taking Spanish two years successfully in our program, the students are ready to enter Spanish 2 in any public school program.(The private schools of course vary as some have very advanced programs.)

Therefore, I do have less frequency of students off-task than compared to my fellow core teachers. However, the classes are very crowded, with 35 students on average to each class in my 1A classes, but in the 1Bs I had 16(period 2) and 21(period 7). The 1Bs do tend to be a little smaller than 1As due to drop out for difficulty and some students failing and not being able to move on. It happens that last year was my first year at Cupertino Middle and the teacher before me was fired for being ineffective. Some students did not keep with the program as they were unhappy with her teaching.

This year I have similar numbers in my Spanish 1B classes I have been using for the project: (period 2: 22) and period 7(19), which works out perfectly for comparison of study. My colleague's classes were much bigger with 37 in one class and 35 in another. The principal explained that she changed the system this year and assigned us common prep times for departments, which has created an imbalance in numbers.

Methods:

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Data: Tools:

Here is a list of the questions the students were asked at the end of each quarter. They were to give themselves one point if their response was positive. The possibilities were: 1 point, .5, or 0. The total was 10 and was then evaluated by me and given a number. Most students did very well in self-analyzing and often my numbers matched their own.

List A:

1. Give yourself a point if: You are always on time for class.
2. You always have your materials needed out and ready.
3. You did not use my class to leave to use the restroom more than twice in any given week.
4. You did not disturb the class in such a way that it paused the lesson because I had to pay attention to your behavior.
5. You did not chat about anything in class other than the material while we were having a lesson.
6. You did not chew gum in class.
7. You did not spend the lessons looking out the window daydreaming, or drawing pictures.
8. You raised your hand to answer, went to the board to write an answer, or volunteered to read.
9. I was able to hear you use your Spanish in class.
10. You stay in your seat during class unless you have asked permission to get up.

I have considered in addition to the questions that I will still use for quarter one(as it clarifies how I assign participation points), asking the students the following questions:

List B:

Do you feel you have distracted the learning of any other students in this class?

*

Please list the names of five students who sit in your area:

Do you feel you have been respectful to all of these fellow learners?

***Please explain your answer by listing the behavior(s) which have shown your respectfulness:**

Is there anyone of your fellow learners you have distracted during our lessons?

Is there any of your fellow learners who has distracted you from learning?

***Please list their name(s) here:**

Thus what I would like to do is to use these questions in the second or third quarter and use the others still in the first quarter. In the first quarter I find that the behavior off-atsk is minimal as the students are still getting to know me and each other. It is as the year moves on, the students start to “come into themselves” and feel more comfortable in their surroundings, talking more and losing momentum for the learning.

Chart 1:

Last year (school year 2006-2007) [top line] behavioral consequences enforced compared to this year (2007-2008) [bottom line]:

| | | | |
|--------------|------------------|-----------|-----------|
| 3 | 2 | 4 | 1 |
| 4 | (no longer give) | 2 | 1 |
| Garbage duty | **Gum duty | Detention | Referral* |

*Referral: A Referral is taken more seriously at our school. It involves sending the student to the Vice-Principal who then determines the student’s consequence for his/her actions. The consequence ranges from a garbage duty to attending lunch detention. For more serious consequences, or for frequent offenses, the student may be required to attend Saturday school.

Last year’s referral was given when a student wrote “Rafael is a fag.” on her white board and displayed it in class for all to see. This student had already received a garbage duty

in class and two detentions. It was an Asian female whose parents did not apparently take her actions and acting out seriously as she would say her parents never punished her.

This year's referral occurred when a student who also has previously received garbage duties, and a brunch detention, wrote with a marker on a fellow student's sweatshirt.

For both of these students, I of course emailed the parents, as I do for any of these consequences, asking for their support as I am trying to keep their son/daughter on task.

**I have decided to no longer assign gum duty as I have been hearing it is controversial in some schools. Even though we give gloves and a scraper, I am concerned with the factor that it is just plain gross. I know I wouldn't like to think of my own son scraping someone else's gum off a desk or the pavement.

As aforementioned, the self-calculation did not affect the desired result. There was not the buy-in I was hoping for. However, those students who should be recognized for their good listening skills did feel rewarded. This is evidenced by the smiles on their faces, and the responses I have overheard while they are handing the papers into the inbox.

" I love Spanish. " -Sonia (an A student who works to keep others on task)

"I got a 10. " (Alicia says with a big smile.)

The biggest result I have had in reflecting upon the data and outcomes is that the students are extremely motivated in middle school by their peer relationships. So in developing methods to better keep students on-task (especially during the difficult spring months), I am trying to account for this priority to work to my advantage, instead of against me as their teacher. The challenge is to incorporate this social priority into the fabric of a lesson so that anyone not accomplishing his or her task is kept from it.

In the background research I conducted before starting this project, I could not find a paper directly on target for self-motivation in middle schoolers. Most papers involved elementary schools and experimented with classroom rules and chores. However, the bottom line to all of these experiments conducted is that there has to be "buy-in" to the classroom procedures. The students at this age, for example, who help to develop their classroom rules were found to be more likely to follow them. The students whose teacher had assigned chores, were more likely to not rebel in the class as they felt more participatory.

It is this way in Spanish as well. I find that the more interactive games, the more the students feel in control as participators in the learning, the more they don't resent the learning of a difficult subject such as foreign language. Therefore, I struggle throughout the year balancing the fun interactive games with the more traditional pen to paper learning and rote drills for practice. As a Spanish one teacher, I want the students to move on in their studies and not feel put off by the subject. As a middle school teacher

the success of my program relies upon buy in, as the students always have the option of taking it in high school, when it is more obligatory for college.

Therefore, the research from these primary schools does coincide with what I find as a middle school teacher in that the students need “buy-in”; however, in the middle school the students are beyond helping to make up the rules as my project has clearly shown, and they need more at this age for “buy-in” and ownership of their learning. They are at an age when family support of course is crucial and this I cannot control.

But I do believe that I have gained valuable information from this project which has spurred other ideas (previously mentioned) for motivating students externally when they are not yet ready to be internally motivated by the learning.

More Tools:

Surveys/ Interviews

In the beginning of the year, I handed out surveys asking the following questions:

1. What are two things you can do to be successful in Spanish?
2. Explain what it means: “I am responsible for my day.”
3. If the work becomes difficult, and you don’t understand, what will you do?
4. What is the difference between “hearing” someone and “listening” to that person?
5. How can you tell if someone is listening to you?

I handed out the surveys to all of my classes this year, and did not have this survey last year. I wanted to see if I could stimulate an awareness of what is expected as an active listener in the first day of class. In looking over the responses, they are all very similar. Here is a summary of their responses:

1. study/pay attention/ practice at home
2. I am responsible for my own actions and decisions.

3. Ask the teacher for help/ ask parents for help
4. Listening means you can repeat back what the person has said/ you have processed what the person has said
5. Their eyes are focused on you

I compared those students' answers who I consider "A" students and are on-task to those who are not "A" students and are happy to skate by with a B or C, and are frequently off task (and thus need external motivators to stay on task).

The answers were the same. There was no real variation in their responses apart from one B/C student who answered number 3 as "guess". There was some variation in that those who are off-task tended to be those who did not answer in complete sentences and whose handwriting was sloppy looking, possibly identifying from the beginning a habit of lack of effort or a fine-motor lacking.

However, I do not feel due to my end results in the project that this survey helped the students to realize themselves all as active listeners. The answers do not match up with some of the students' behaviors during the year, much like I found in the participation questions that they tallied. The conclusion is that for those students who are off-task, more is needed. This more is going to come from activities which utilize their need for peer relation interaction during class time, such as physical separation from peers, not being able to participate in the interactive activity and being asked to makeup other work missed from being off-task, and the questions listed above in List B for second and third quarter.

In wanting to verify the effectiveness of the List A questions (the participation point questions) I chose what I consider a very good student (Gabriela) who actively listens in class to ask for feedback:

Interview:

Q: Do you feel calculating your own points helps you to stay on task?

A: I like it, because I can see what you expect.

Q: Do you think it will help keep students on-task?

A: It will help only certain students. Some of the students are going to be off-task no matter what you do.

And this second response is the conundrum for a new teacher like me. This research project does not end here. Each year I teach I will learn to tweak my methods to keep my high –energy, highly sociable middle schoolers on task. This research project has helped me get started toward a more perfect system to keep a very large group of students and personalities all working towards their goal of acquiring Spanish 1 for high school, the ultimate goal of course being to acquire good learning and listening skills for mastery of all subjects.