

THE TEACHING PROFESSOR

Do Students Really Know Their Academic Strengths?

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Students focus on grades far more so than faculty would like. This is particularly true when students do not receive the grades they believe they deserve. They think that some assignments disadvantage them. I wondered how students would respond if they were given the opportunity to select the weight distribution for graded course components. The assignments would be preset, clearly described in the course syllabus and students would complete each one, but they could select the percentage of their grade accounted for by each assignment.

I took this approach in two sections of the Capstone: Strategic Management course. Students were given a grading agreement on the first day of class that asked them to select one of the designated percentage weights for each assignment that I would use in calculating their final course grade. I would now recommend letting the students have until the second week of class to finalize their decisions. They need time to get acquainted with the course and find out about their assignments in other courses. The four graded components in the course included: (1) case preparation and class participation (10 percent, 15 percent, or 20 percent); (2) individual written case analyses (30 percent, 35 percent, 40 percent, 45 percent, 50 percent, 55 percent, or 60 percent); (3) group case presentation (10 percent, 15 percent, or 20 percent); and (4) business strategy game (15 percent, 20 percent, 25 percent, 30 percent, or 35 percent). Once submitted, students were not permitted to make any changes to their designated distribution.

Students submitted a written rationale explaining how they decided on their particular distribution. Most said they chose the assignments they thought maximized their strengths as learners (53.8 percent) or they decreased the value of assignments that required skills they considered weaknesses (30.8 percent). I solicited feedback about this approach at the end of the course and most students were satisfied with the process. They perceived that they had more control over their final grade which motivated them to engage in the learning process.

If students really knew their academic strengths, their final grades would be higher than when I set the assignment percentages. However, the actual manipulation of the percentages did not determine how well students performed in the class. There was no significant difference in average final grades when students selected the assignment weights and when I set the weightings as I had done in the previous year.

In general, higher-achieving students rated the experience more positively than did the lower-achieving students. It may be that higher-achieving students have a better sense of their academic strengths. It is also possible that their locus of control is more internal, which contributes positively to learning. This research was conducted with graduating seniors, which probably influenced the outcome. Seniors have had more time in college to assess their academic performance in terms of knowing which assignments work well for them. First- and second-year students, even high achieving ones, may not be able to handle this approach as well.

Other research documents that students often expect grades much higher than they ultimately earn. This is particularly true of low-achieving students who may be less motivated when the teacher sets the grade weights. Giving students more control over grading at the outset by allowing them to select the percentage value of each assignment may increase their motivation. Doing so does not jeopardize how well they do in the course, or at least it didn't in my course.

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