

Faculty Attitudes toward Student Risk-Taking in a Testing Situation

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Tract: Best Integrative Teaching Practices

Description of Activity: This activity will replicate an actual teaching dilemma involving the grading decisions to be made following an unusual classroom exam experience. The context for this dilemma was a senior-level Entrepreneurship class where risk-taking was taught and discussed as a critical component of entrepreneurial success. As noted by Temple (2004), teachers often desire students to take intellectual risks but seldom realize that such intellectual risk-taking also involves ethical dilemmas and development. In this case, the specific situation involved test taking strategies used by students that fit the “letter of the law” (i.e., broadly defined test directions) but violated the intent or “spirit of the law” as intended by the instructor.

In round one of this session, participants will be presented with the facts of the predicament and then engaged in an exercise designed to allow them to experience the challenges associated with assigning fair and reasonable grades. Participant responses will be analyzed in real time and will be contrasted with previously polled faculty responses. In round two, the presenters will facilitate a discussion with the participants with the goal of attempting to reach consensus on an equitable solution to this academic puzzle. Finally, the actual solution enacted by the involved faculty member to solve this grading quandary will be presented and discussed.

Learning Activity

Round One:

Case Scenario

An evening class offered one fall semester provided an interesting backdrop to an ethical dilemma that focused on risk-taking, thinking out of the box and the art of interpretation. The case centers on a mid-term exam and how the answers were to be identified. Prior to taking the exam much discussion had occurred that covered the entrepreneurial spirit and how individual’s who start their own business seek opportunities to do things differently.

The professor teaching the class presented an interesting test taking scenario that was previously used at Texas Christian University (TCU). The approach involved a different method to encourage and reward risk-taking. Specifically, the TCU professor encouraged risk-taking by changing the format of the test in his entrepreneurship class by changing how the students were allowed to answer each question. The TCU professor gave each student the opportunity to select the incorrect answer for each question and if successful, would receive a “100” on the test. The risk involved the possibility of selecting a correct answer and therefore their grade would be calculated based on the number of responses answered correctly. This would cause one to make a very low grade.

This novel approach to test taking and the associated risks associated was discussed earlier in the semester in the current class. Then on the evening of the mid-term exam as the professor was distributing the exam, he was asked by his students if they could have the same option of completing the exam questions in the same manner as the entrepreneurship class at TCU.

The professor agreed and thus the case was born.

Additional Case Details

Additional details of the actual case are listed below:

- Senior Management course in Entrepreneurship
- 47 students enrolled in the class
- Night class (meeting once a week)
- Two major exams (mid-term & final) in the class – each exam was worth 20% of their grade
- Risk-taking was discussed from an entrepreneurial perspective
- Students were also encouraged to see opportunities and think creatively
- Before deciding to take the test with the option of selecting all incorrect answers students inquire as to the makeup of the exam (T/F, multiple choices, essay, etc.) (Note: after being informed of the exam makeup most students decided not to pursue this option.)
- Students who wanted to take advantage of the “select incorrect answer” option were required to note this on the front page of their exam.
- Three students opted to take the risk

Resolution Answer Sheet

Participants will be given the Resolution Answer Sheet (see Attachment 1) and asked to complete it. Participants will be asked to select one of three scenarios and then explain the rationale for their selection. Various demographics will also be collected for analyses purposes.

Comparison to Previous Data

Participant responses to the situation will be compared and contrasted with existing data previously compiled. Appendix 2 presents the data and associated comments from colleagues primarily in the same college as the current professor. Appendix 3 presents the results of another group of professors attending a teaching workshop that also were presented the scenario and asked to complete the Resolution Answer Sheet.

Round Two:

Group Discussion

The presenters will facilitate a group discussion of the three data sets. Emphasis will be given to examining group percentages and any specific discriminating demographic (such as tenured versus non-tenured).

Integrative Learning Outcomes

Encouraging students to be creative and take risks is a two-edged sword. On one side, we as professors want our classrooms to be engaging and interesting to our students. And generally, we are willing to be flexible and somewhat spontaneous in meeting that objective by supporting creativity and risk-taking. Certain subjects such as the one described in this activity lend themselves to fostering more creativity and risk-taking. In addition, as noted by Gazin (1999), individuals which desire to be effective educators should experiment with alternative teaching methods in order to better reach their students. Finally, the teaching literature offers a number of suggestions on how to foster risk-taking and creativity in the classroom. For example, De Souza Fleith (2000) suggests the following ideas: (Note: many of which directly relate to the current situation)

1. Allow time for creative thinking
2. Reward creative ideas and products
3. Encourage (sensible) risks
4. Allow mistakes
5. Imagine other viewpoints
6. Encourage explorations of the environment
7. Question assumptions
8. Refrain from evaluating/judging
9. Foster cooperation rather than competition
10. Offer free rather than restrictive choices
11. Encourage dissent and diversity
12. Set students up for success rather than failure
13. Require little if any rote learning

Furthermore, she suggests that it is important that teachers recognize students' strengths, abilities, and interests. Teachers should also encourage different responses, encourage humor, questions, **support risk-taking, and should provide students with various options or alternatives.** Although focused more on promoting creative thinking and problem-solving, Hamza and Farrow (2000) offer a different list of guidelines for classrooms:

1. Challenge learning through experimentation, novelty, and originality
2. Be open to change
3. Relate real-world experiences to students
4. Be positive; reflect a positive attitude
5. Create ways to build mutual successes between teacher and student
6. Encourage students to produce their thinking
7. Build teamwork in the classroom
8. Create a student-centered environment
9. Use learning-outcome objectives to guide and evaluate classroom instructions
10. Present open-ended, obscure questions for which there are no clearly right or wrong answers.

The other edge of the sword is that a risk-taking inducing environment may pose an ethical dilemma to both students and professors and may impact their perceptions of what is “fair”. In this case, they were three separate groups of constituencies and each had their perception of what is fair. The first group was the three students that took advantage of the situation. The second group was the other 44 students in the class who followed the norm and took the test as originally intended. And the third group consisted of the professor that sought the input of his colleagues in determining what was fair and equitable.

This idea of fairness is directly related to the concepts of distributive and procedural justice. According to Greenberg (1990), distributive justice refers to the extent to which the outcomes that result are perceived as fair and equitable; procedural justice is concerned with the fairness of the procedures used to reach those decisions. Distributive justice was the primary concern of the 44 students. The 3 students were primarily concerned with procedural justice. And the professor was equally concerned with both.

When considering the attitudes of the various professors and colleagues interviewed regarding how to resolve this dilemma, it is interesting that there is significant divergence in what the respective members perceive to be the appropriate action. In some cases, a number of faculty members were adamant regarding their position. As shown in the selections and comments (see Attachments 2 and 3), about half of the group believe the fair resolution is to require the students to retake the test (distributive justice) where the other half believes the fair thing to do is to assign a grade of 100 (procedural justice).

It is also interesting to consider the faculty perspective regarding the three students in question. The portion of the faculty that believes the students should receive a 100 generally perceived the students as perceptive, aggressive and opportunistic. These attributes can often be found in successful entrepreneurs. On the other hand, those faculty that believe the students should retake the test under normal circumstances or receive a “0”, tended to view the students negatively as attempting to “work the system” or trying to make a “gray” issue out of something that to them is black and white.

REFERENCES

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- Greenberg, J. (1990). Looking fair vs. being fair: Managing impressions of organizational justice. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 12, 111-157.
- Hamza, M.K., & Farrow, V. (2000). Fostering creativity and problem solving in the classroom. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 37, (1), 33-35.
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ATTACHMENT 1

Resolution Answer Sheet

What would you do in this situation? (check only one answer)

- Assign a test grade of “100”
- Assign a test grade of “0”
- Require the students to retake the test under a normal testing scenario
- Other _____

Explain your answer: _____

Participant Information:

Gender: Female Male

Tenure Status: Tenured Non-Tenured

Faculty Rank:

- Full Professor Associate Professor Assistant Professor
- Adjunct Professor Instructor Other: _____

Years Teaching Experience:

- 1-2 3-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 > 20

ATTACHMENT 2

Resolutions: (ACU faculty, staff & community)

Take Test Over

Full Professor
Full Professor
Full Professor
Non-Tenure Track college teacher
Assistant Professor (TT)
Associate Professor (T)
Tech Support (Staff)
Retired college teacher
Assistant Professor (TT)
Tenured Professor
Tenured Assoc. Prof.

Give 100 on their grade

Chair, Assistant Prof. (TT)
Chair, Associate Prof. (T)
Associate Professor (T)
Assistant Professor (TT)
Associate Professor (TT)
Local Entrepreneur
Full Professor
Assistant Professor (TT)
Assistant Professor (TT)
Full Professor - English
Administrative Asst. (Staff)
College Teacher – other university

Comments:

Full Professor (T) - Black & White dog – no red dog available

Associate Professor (TT) - my initial gut tells me they should make 100

Full Professor (T) – if he hadn't answer "Fs" I would give him 100

Full Professor (T) - good try but you need to take the test over

Associate Professor (T) – I feel they should take the test over

Assistant Professor (TT) - They absolutely should take the test over – no discussion

(Staff) – They didn't answer the questions with the available answers and should take the test over.

Retired college teacher - At first I thought they should get 100 until I understood that on the exam you listed the available answers (T/F) – A for True & B for False, then I changed my mind and think they should take the test over.

Assistant Professor (TT) – They should take the test over because they worked the system and didn't show they knew the material. If you don't make them take the test over then you should require them to spend one hour with you covering the material on the test to make sure they understand it.

Chair, Assistant Professor (TT) – They should get 100 on the exam. They did what you asked. If you ran the scantron the way they answered it would they get all the answers incorrect?...if so, then they did what you asked and should receive the grade.

ATTACHMENT 3

Resolutions: (Drake University conference)

Take Test Over

Assistant Prof (NT)
Associate Prof (T)
Instructor (NT)
Assistant Prof. (NT)
Instructor (T)
Assistant Prof. (NT)

Give “100” on their grade

Instructor (NT)
Full Professor (T)
Full Professor (T)
Instructor (NT)
Tenured

Give “0” for a Grade

Assistant Prof. (NT)
Assistant Prof. (NT)
Associate Prof. (NT)
Assistant Prof. (NT)

Comments:

Assistant Professor (NT) - Retake under penalty of 20%. The students obviously circumvented the intent of the exam and thereby “cheated”. However, the problem may rest in explanation of permissible answers.

Instructor (NT) - Students did as per your instructions

Assistant Professor (NT) - Assign a test grade of “0” with the option to retake the test under a normal testing scenario. They didn’t choose an “incorrect answer.”

Full Professor (T) – Because you have to follow through on what you promised even though you did not realize all the implications.

Associate Prof. (NT) – Selecting a non-answer is not selecting a wrong answer. Allow, but not require, a retake. I think you made a mountain out of a mole hill.

Assistant Prof. (NT) – You said “incorrect”. C was a non-answer for T/F.

Full Professor (T) – Use as a teaching moment. Discuss in the context of entrepreneurship.

Instructor (NT) – Because of instructions given stay with original promise.

Assistant Professor (NT) – C is not a valid answer on white sheet. F is not a valid answer on white sheet. The white sheet is the exam not the scantron.