

Carrot Versus Stick Teaching

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We all know raising children is different from teaching undergraduates. Yet as a father of four children — now all grown — I have learned much from parenting that I have been able to apply to the college classroom.

In particular, raising four teenagers taught me a lot about how to reach, engage, and motivate teenage students. The trick to effective parenting, I'm convinced, is to allow children to exercise their agency — encouraging them to make good choices through a clear system of rewards and punishments, with the emphasis on the former. I believe that's true in teaching, as well.

This is the old carrot-and-stick approach — alluding to the different ways a farmer might persuade a mule to cooperate. Do you smack him on the backside with a stick, or do you hold a carrot out in front of him? Do you motivate him through punishment, or through a perceived reward? Any comparison between mules and teenagers in this paragraph is purely coincidental.

As a parent, I learned that for teenagers, the metaphorical stick doesn't always work, especially for kids like mine who tend to be a bit mulish, which is to say intelligent, independent-minded, and prone to question authority. If your entire system of discipline depends on punishments, you are unlikely to be a successful (not to mention happy) parent in the long run. Your kids might do what you say, but only grudgingly to escape punishment. Alternatively, they may simply dig in their heels and refuse to do anything at all. Either way, they're not really learning anything that will positively influence their decision-making as adults.

A carrot works much better. It gives teens something to strive for — a clear and obtainable reward, along with the knowledge that it can easily slip from their grasp if they fail to do certain things. Then the consequences are clearly tied to their own decisions.

For example, my wife and I had a policy: Once our teenagers got a driver's license, they would have a car to drive. Their part of the bargain: Keep their grades up, stay out of trouble, participate in at least one extracurricular activity, and pull their weight with the household chores. The car we provided might not be new or even particularly nice, but it would run. (My two younger sons drove the same 1995 Jeep Cherokee from 2010 to 2016. That had the added benefit of preparing them to one day be graduate students.) If any child found that arrangement unsatisfactory, they could get a job and buy their own car and insurance. None chose that option. They all kept their grades up, played sports, stayed out of trouble, and earned academic scholarships to college. For us as parents, the cost of an old car was cheap by comparison. The carrot worked beautifully. (Anyone interested in a thoroughly used Jeep?)

Of course, this concept has been around for decades, dating back at least to the famed behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner's theory of "positive reinforcement." And reams of research suggest that positive reinforcement is indeed an effective way to modify behavior, especially in (but not limited to) young children.

When it comes to college teaching, however, what I'm talking about here is not merely a system for rewarding desired behaviors, although it is that. My objective is to create a classroom culture of choice and accountability — one in which students who are willing to put forth the effort can clearly see a positive outcome on their grades, and, ideally, on their learning. Meanwhile, those less inclined toward hard work can just as clearly see the connection between their own choices and their performance in the course.

You might argue that virtually all college courses fit that description — the harder students work, the better they do. But in my experience, that connection isn't always clear to our students.

Often, to them, grades seem somewhat arbitrary. I especially hear that when I teach writing courses. Whatever explanation, rubrics, or matrices we devise to explain our grading system, some students still perceive that it all just comes down to the instructor's opinion.

The problem is, they're not entirely wrong. We might quibble with the word "opinion" — preferring a phrase like "professional judgment based on years of training and experience." We might argue, rightly, that there are some objective standards of good writing that we apply to their work. But in the end, their grade on a given assignment really does come down to what we think of it.

Students often have difficulty understanding the complex thought processes by which we have reached our conclusions about their work, nor can they always see the connection between our evaluation and the amount of effort they put into the project.

Further exacerbating the problem is the fact that ability is clearly a factor. One of my foundational beliefs as a writing teacher is that anyone who is willing to work at it can become a proficient and effective writer. Yet it is undeniable that some students are simply more naturally gifted writers than others — and that's a big advantage in a writing-oriented class. Other potential advantages include having had good high-school teachers and having been raised by educated parents.

So how do we offset those advantages to prevent students from concluding that the only way to make an A or a B in the class is to already be a good writer when they walk in the door? How can we help them see a clear connection between their own effort and their final grade, thereby encouraging them to engage in the very activities that will help them improve their writing, regardless of their background?

My answer: "carrot teaching." My students' grades are based mostly on performance, on my assessment of their written work. That's the "stick" — the points that I "take off" because of errors and other problems when I assign a grade, thereby "punishing" them. Here's the carrot: I try to reward effort in a way that affects their final grade, on the theory that, if students engage regularly in certain activities, their writing will improve.

I've experimented with this theory for years, searching for just the right balance between carrot and stick. In sharing what I've come up, I'm not suggesting that you should use exactly these same activities. Some of them might not work for your discipline. Also, please understand that this is a work in progress. That said, here's how I use carrot teaching in my first-year writing courses.

Students complete five graded writing assignments over the course of the semester, which together make up about 70 percent of their grade. That leaves 30 percent for what I call effort-based work — activities for which they can earn high grades based on their effort (attendance and completion) rather than on native ability or prior experience. I offer three types of effort-based activities — daily quizzes, reading reflections, and rough drafts — with each category worth approximately 10 percent of their final grade. Let's look at each one in turn.

- Carrot No. 1: The daily quizzes over assigned readings consist of short, simple questions meant to gauge surface comprehension, not deep understanding. If students have read the assignment, they will almost certainly be able to answer the questions. My purpose is to get them to read, because I believe doing so will help them as writers, and I'm willing to offer some serious points in return. (By the way, quizzes also encourage attendance and punctuality. If we're having a quiz, it's usually at the beginning of class, and I state in my syllabus that they can't make it up.)
- Carrot No. 2: Reading reflections are written responses to the readings based on open-ended questions that I provide. I grade the responses, but not in the same way, or with the same rigor, that I grade essays. Basically, if students give a reasonably substantive, thoughtful answer — in 75 to 100 words — for each question, they'll get full credit. My goals here are to induce students (again) to read, and to get them thinking about what they're reading, while gaining a little more practice putting their thoughts on paper.

- Carrot No. 3: I give points for rough drafts — to be precise, for first and second drafts of each of the five assigned essays. Cumulatively, those 10 drafts are worth the same as an essay, and all they have to do is bring them to class. I check over their drafts, and we workshop them in class. But students earn points merely for showing up with a rough draft. My goal here is to help them develop the habit of working through multiple drafts, which I believe is the secret (if there is one) to good writing. This, too, encourages attendance because they don't get credit for drafts turned in late.

I've seen a lot of advantages to this approach. For students, carrots represent the hope of finishing the semester with a higher grade than they might have received based on writing ability alone. A student with a C average on the essays, but who earns 100 percent of the effort points, can wind up with a B in the course.

And I have no qualms about that. Finishing all of the readings, writing all of the reflections, and producing all those drafts — that's a lot of work. If they do all of that, as far as I'm concerned, they've earned their B. (It's a little more difficult, statistically, for a student with a B to move up to an A, but that happens, too.)

More important, for me, is that by putting forth that effort, students are developing the skills I want them to develop. I've seen many a C writer, who started the semester making low C's or even D's, finish the term writing high-C or even low-B papers. If that same student has done all of the effort-based work, I'm happy to hand out a B.

Conversely, when students complain about their grades, this system means I'm almost always able to point to what they *didn't* do that adversely affected their grade. That's why my students rarely complain about their grades. They know good and well they didn't do certain things, and they would probably have made a better grade if they had.

In the end, I believe this model benefits students in three ways. First, it gives even "weak" students hope, which usually leads them to put more effort into the course. Second, it reinforces specific academic skills that will serve them well not only in my course but beyond. And third, they learn that there's a clear connection between the choices they make and the ultimate outcome.

I will continue to fine-tune my approach. But if I make any changes in the future, I expect they will be in the direction of the carrot, and away from the stick.