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By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

I started thinking about the topic of points distribution when I wondered in a previous blog whether the 5 or 10 percent that many of us give for participation was enough to motivate students, or whether being such a small part of the grade, it actually devalued what students contribute in class. Since then I've been thinking more about how we decide on the allocation of points or percentages for the various assignments students complete in a course. For many of us (that includes me), it isn't as thoughtful of a process as it should be. Rather, we do what we've done before, or we ask around, get a general sense of what everybody else is doing and follow suit.   
  
The assumption is that students will work the hardest and learn more from those course activities that count the most. In many courses, exams count for the lion's share of the points or percentages used to determine the final grade. This means that whatever is being assessed on those exams is what's most important in the course. Some exams (or, according to several studies, a lot of exams) assess facts—whether students know content details. They don't assess whether students remember those details unless the exams are cumulative and even then they only need to be remembered until the final. Is factual knowledge what matters most in the course? Exams also test the ability to recall knowledge or to demonstrate thinking within time constraints and without access to resources. Is that one of the most important skills students should take from the course and their college learning experiences?   
  
Assignments like quizzes, homework and participation are worth trivial amounts compared to exams. What's message does that send to students? Does it tell them that the skills and knowledge acquired from participating, taking a quiz or doing homework aren't as important as what they learn by taking exams? That these are parts of the course they don't need to take as seriously? That there's something less significant about the quality of the learning these activities promote?

If this sounds like I'm challenging point distribution systems that make exams significantly more important than anything else that happens in the course, you could call me on that. I do think we over emphasize exams. I don't think most exams promote the kind of deep learning or sophisticated learning skill development we're after.   
  
For any class activity or assignment, our thinking should be clear about what the student will learn by completing that work. Actually, as Wiggins and McTighe propose in their model of backwards design, we should start with what it is we want students to learn (that can be knowledge or skills) and then we design assignments and select content that will promote that learning. Unfortunately, for most of us the assignments and content come first, which is all the more reason why we should take stock of what we are having students do and the priorities we've established for those various activities.   
  
Beyond the actual point distribution and how we make those determinations, what we know about how that distribution influences student behavior in our classes. Have you ever talked with students about this? The discussion is not about how they would distribute the points in the course (although that might be interesting to hear), but how the current distribution affects their efforts to learn, how it affects when and what they study, and what they think they learn by spending more time on certain assignments.   
  
This is also a topic profitably discussed with colleagues. The goal of the conversation should not be determining the "right" way to distribute points or percentages. The right way is the way that accomplishes the learning goals and objectives of the course and those are different depending on the course.   
  
Like so many aspects of instruction, we tend to do things the way we're used to doing them. That may not be the wrong way, but right or wrong we should have probed the reasons why. So take a look at your points or percentage allocation, share what you do and more importantly what justifies the particular allocation you use.   
  
Reference: Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J. *Understanding by Design. 2nd ed.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, 2006.   
  
[https://r3.res.outlook.com/owa/14.16.117.1/themes/resources/clear1x1.gifShareThis](https://sn2prd0510.outlook.com/owa/redir.aspx?C=w4l34KwJOEGZTYUepiuvBDmkmQSLwM4IpFGpV7EwhNXjBfeOuXchl9RXaxTyajIDTAbqUfT4qZk.&URL=http%3a%2f%2febm.facultyfocusemail.com%2fc%2ftag%2fBPO7k2B8X3cvB8fvnVAABCFJhV%2fdoc.html%3ft_params%3dEMAIL%253Dlmaule%252540indstate.edu%2526PASSWORD%253DB8X3cvAABCFJBPO7k23p4VcxPMUHoU%26t_sharepop%3d1)

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