

# The Spectrum Introduced: A First-Year Teacher's Project

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## *The Spectrum as Philosophy*

**E**very new teacher needs a philosophy of education to give meaning and direction to all the creative forces that come forth through hard work and inspiration. The Spectrum of Teaching Styles became my philosophy before I ever set foot in my elementary classroom. Although its importance cannot be denied, *what* to teach is emphasized by too many college classes. The Spectrum taught me *how* to teach.

## *Style H: A First Day Icebreaker*

As a first-year teacher, I approached my teaching assignment with great trepidation and excitement. I received a mid-year assignment to teach third grade because of enrollment increases in the suburban south Florida community in which I had done my internship. A new class of 28 children—four from each of seven existing third grade classes—created interesting problems for our first day of school after winter vacation. I inherited a veritable Tower of Babel of students uprooted from seven other teachers with different classroom procedures.

Believing in the Spectrum as I do,

my desire was to start immediately shifting decisions to the learners that first day. None of my new charges came from anything closely resembling a Spectrum classroom, so I knew that we were both forging new ground from the start. On that day I used Style H (Divergent Production) to get my new class to think of a unique class project that we could call our own.

Style H experiences encourage the discovery of multiple solutions. By using the Style H reduction process, we reduced all offered suggestions from possible to feasible to desirable. The episode concluded with a consensus that our new class would learn all of the capitals of the 50 states as a grand and unique social studies project for the remainder of the school year.

I knew that I needed to proceed with the project slowly and methodically. The project required an inclusive design that would be sensitive to students of all ability levels within the class. My objectives for the project also included creating an esprit de corps in an attempt to develop a unique class character for my 28 third graders.

## *Style A and Class Cohesiveness*

Style A (Command style) leaves all preimpact, impact, and postimpact decisions to the teacher. Being a new class, my students were willing to let me make all the decisions for our social studies project. The class adapted well to taking my directions for learning a small sampling of states and capitals. Hand and vocal signals, pointing, and individual and class repetition not only aided memorization and retention, but also created a class climate of cooperation and teamwork. I noticed a transformation from individuals to a cohesive unit accomplishing an objective as a group. Slow learners also responded exceptionally well to these Style A episodes.

## *Style E: Revelations about Students*

A teacher can learn much about a new class using many of the styles. For example, Style E (Inclusion style) offered many revealing glimpses at how students react to the choice of finding their own level of difficulty. Some of the best students felt uncomfortable making these conscious decisions because Style E forces learners to break the emo-

tional dependency on the teacher. In contrast, providing different entry levels was very popular with less successful students because their success was all but insured.

#### **Designing a Spectrum Game Plan**

The project ultimately required a total of five cumulative administrations of Style E episodes, each with three levels of difficulty. These Style E episodes offered students a choice of ways to test the success of the Style A sessions. When most students had successfully learned a certain number of states, new states were added to the Style A sessions. A new series of Style E levels then reflected the additional states.

Level one for each of the cumulative Style E administrations consisted of a cluster of matching exercises. Students only needed to recognize the correct capital within a small matching cluster. As more states were learned, the size of the level one matching clusters grew to reflect the increased numbers.

Level two simply listed all the states learned through the Style A episodes. At the end of the list was a listing of capitals in random order. A student filled in the states that he or she knew. These were marked off, and the rest were placed by process of elimination.

Level three was identical to level two except that it did not include a capital list from which to choose and mark off. Level three required total recall and memorization of the state capitals with no extra help. States simply were listed with blanks for the capitals to be provided by a student.

#### **Style E: Options for Risk Taking**

Style E inspires confidence by allowing several success levels. In this project, the students knew they needed only to master level one to be successful. They were, however, encouraged to progress through each of the three levels in each design. A less successful attempt at level two or three was not counted against a student if he or she successfully completed the previous level. If a student chose a higher level and was not suc-

cessful, he or she was not allowed to go lower in the same session. Although most students started on level one in each of the first Style E episodes, they ultimately began to feel comfortable with this task and chose the appropriate level for their ability. By the end of the project most students were skipping level one (matching) altogether, with about half of each going to levels two and three immediately.

#### **Styles B, C, and D for Independent Practice**

Throughout the course of the school year, Styles B (Practice), C (Reciprocal), and D (Self-check) were introduced into a variety of subjects and school activities. These styles became so familiar to the students that repeating style specific instructions soon became unnecessary. The time saved was spent on art

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and game activities that reinforced the states and capitals project.

The students themselves suggested using Styles C and D to practice their states and capitals. Style E level sheets were easily adapted for observer and doer, with pairs of students readily improvising their own Style C episodes. By filling in any Style E level sheet as the criterion sheet, students also practiced their capitals as a Style D self-check.

#### **The Big Payoff**

States and Capitals Olympics, a set of

time-trial activities, were held during the last two weeks of the school year. All 50 states learned through formal and informal episodes were listed on the chalk board in random order. Each student had multiple opportunities to recite each listed state and its capital as fast as possible. Each successful attempt was timed with a stop watch. If a student was stumped by a state, he or she had ten seconds to name the capital and continue, or the trial was disqualified.

More than a third of the class made it through the time trials without tripping over a single capital. Many of my third graders could recite all 50 states and their capitals in less than one minute. Interestingly, two of the finalists were late enrollees to the school who had to catch-up to the rest of the class. One finalist was a slow learner and underachiever. First place was shared by two students who timed an amazing 43 seconds for the task. (I clocked in at a respectable 62 seconds.)

My first year as a teacher was very successful because of the Spectrum. The emotional satisfaction that I received was compounded because I knew I affected these children in ways beyond their simple cognitive development.

The states project in particular had a positive effect on the confidence and self-esteem of low achievers in my class. Their social interactions with the rest of the class markedly improved in class activities, and their added confidence translated into improved performance in physical activities. Teaching and learning efficiency was so improved with the Spectrum that we finished several textbooks early enough to engage in many enriching and creative activities. All in all, it was a very good year.

#### **References**

Mosston, M., & Ashworth, S. (1990). *The spectrum of teaching styles: From command to discovery*. New York: Longman.

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