The Three D’s

The most effective teachers vary their styles depending on subject matter, course timing, and other factors. In doing so, they encourage and inspire students to do their best at all times.

How to vary your teaching style and why

This paper discusses three primary teaching styles that should be in the tool chest of every college instructor, along with practical suggestions about when and how to use them.

The basic concepts are derived from the “Situational Leadership Theory Model,” developed by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey, with whom I studied at Ohio University. Since then, as a college instructor, coach, consultant, corporate trainer, and facilitator, I have successfully applied the concepts described below with thousands of students in a variety of settings.

Think of these teaching styles as the three Ds: Directing, Discussing, and Delegating.

The directing style promotes learning through listening and following directions. With this style, the teacher tells the students what to do, how to do it, and when it needs to be done.

The discussing style promotes learning through interaction. In this style, practiced by Socrates, the teacher encourages critical thinking and lively discussion by asking challenging questions of students. The teacher is a facilitator guiding the discussion to a logical conclusion.

The delegating style promotes learning through empowerment. With this style, the teacher assigns tasks that students work on independently, either individually or in groups.
Using an appropriate mix of each teaching style

I typically structure my classes to include some amount of each teaching style. However, during the first part of a semester I primarily use the directing style, followed by more discussing style in the middle. Toward the end, I lean more heavily on the delegating style. Using an appropriate mix helps students learn, grow, and become more independent. Too much reliance on one style causes students to lose interest and become dependent on the teacher. But no matter which style is used, teachers should be alert for “teachable moments.”

Below is a brief description of each teaching style, with suggestions on using them for best results. For each I have organized this material according to four key components: communication, coaching, decision making, and recognition.

The Directing Style

COMMUNICATION in the directing style is predominantly one-way: teacher to student. The teacher imparts information to the students via lectures, assigned readings, audio/visual presentations, demonstrations, role-playing, and other means. Students learn primarily by listening, taking notes, doing role-plays, etc. The teacher may ask, “Do you understand the instructions?” but generally does not solicit other feedback.

COACHING occurs as the teacher advises

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > PLAYERS AND COACHES

When I was a high school freshman, I made the varsity hockey team. Unfortunately, compared to other teams in the league, we floundered. At the time, in all of my teenage wisdom, I concluded that the difference between us and the league’s most excellent teams came down to coaching, and I began studying what the top coaches did to bring out the best in their teams and players. Later, at Ohio University, I took a terrific course taught by a terrific teacher: Managing Organizational Behavior by Paul Hersey. His knowledge and passion for the subject further ignited my interest in management and teaching styles. After graduating no NHL teams clamored for my services. I worked a few years in sales but that wasn’t my passion. At age 27, I accepted a teaching and coaching position (varsity hockey) at American International College. This experience gave me the opportunity to apply some of the concepts and theories I had learned in college—and on the ice so many years earlier. Over the past thirty years, I have observed, studied, and interviewed hundreds of the top business managers and leaders to try to identify how they bring out the best in their people. The principles I have learned about management and leadership styles are also applicable to the needs and approaches of teachers in the classroom.

Meet Paul B. Thornton

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students on what they need to change. In addition, the teacher may demonstrate desired behaviors to the students, such as rewriting a passage to improve clarity.

**DECISION MAKING** occurs when the teacher defines the problem, evaluates options, and makes a decision. By understanding the teacher’s process, students learn how to frame problems, evaluate alternatives, and make effective decisions.

**RECOGNITION** happens spontaneously when the teacher praises students in class. It also can be accomplished on a more formal basis through test grades or teacher-student conference feedback.

**Suggestions for using the directing style**

- **Start with the big picture.** Provide the context before launching into specifics.

- **Be clear and concise.** Students need to know exactly what they must do to succeed and how their work will be evaluated. Understandable goals, specific deadlines, and concise directions increase student motivation and eliminate confusion. Slightly written, poorly organized instructional materials, on the other hand, will confuse and discourage students.

- **Provide sufficient detail.** Breakdowns occur when important details are omitted or instructions are ambiguous.

- **Don’t sugar coat the message.** There are times when teachers need to be very direct to get through to students.

**The Discussing Style**

Communication in the discussing style is two-way (between teacher and student) or multi-way (among students, or students and teacher). The teacher asks challenging questions and listens carefully to responses. Follow-up questions help uncover underlying assumptions, reasoning, and feelings. Students learn to have opinions and be able to back them up with facts and data.

Coaching occurs when the teacher asks questions that require students to evaluate themselves. Good questions to ask are “How do you think you did? What could you have done better? What steps can you take to improve?” The goal is to encourage students to examine what they did, why they did it, and what they can do to improve.

Decision making occurs as the teacher and students work together to define problems, identify and evaluate alternative solutions, and make decisions. Students learn as they respond to the teacher’s questions, offer their own ideas, and consider the pros and cons of each option.

Students should be praised for thoughtful observations, creative ideas, building on the ideas of others, and helping the group reach a logical conclusion.

**Suggestions for using the discussing style**

- **Prepare questions in advance.** Great discussions don’t just happen. Ask one question at a time. Be open and interested in learning what each student thinks.

- **Don’t allow one or two students to dominate.** Solicit everyone’s ideas. Gently draw out students who seem reticent. I sometimes start my classes by saying, “I want to give each of you one minute to discuss your views on this topic. Let’s go around the room.” Get closure by reviewing the key point or points you want to make.

- **Have Students Create Questions.** I like to have my students read a case and formulate three questions to ask their classmates. Then we discuss their answers in class.

- **Utilize “clickers.”** Some teachers ask them to use clickers to answer multiple-choice questions during class. After their responses are summarized onscreen, students discuss why they gave certain answers.

**The Delegating Style**

Communication occurs as the teacher assigns tasks for students to tackle independently or in small groups. Students listen and ask questions until they fully understand the task.

Coaching is accomplished primarily through self-coaching. Students gain the most when they are able to critique their own performance. For example, to my stu-
students I might say: “I want you to think about your performance on this assignment. Identify three things you did well and one area needing improvement. I’d like to meet tomorrow to hear what you come up with.”

Decision making happens as students establish goals, implement plans, and work through issues on their own. The teacher gives them the power and responsibility to solve their own problems, which may include dealing with team members who are slacking off.

Recognition most often includes praise, good grades, and other rewards given to students who work well independently, meet deadlines, and produce good work.

Suggestions for using the delegating style

• **Assign research projects.** In my management course I require students to interview a manager of a local business to get answers to questions like the following:
  
  – What are the main performance measures your company uses to evaluate each employee’s performance?

• **Assign team projects.** Have each team select a team leader, define roles and responsibilities, and hold each other accountable for completing the project on time. In my management class, I have teams of students analyze the management and leadership behaviors on movies like *Remember the Titans.*

• **Assign a capstone project.** The final project in my course involves student teams doing a PowerPoint presentation that summarizes the seven principles they will follow to be an effective leader.

There is no one best teaching style. Effective teachers use a variety of styles, and they know how and when to choose the most appropriate one for the specific situation.

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**REFERENCES AND RESOURCES**


