Perspectives (1969-1979)

Volume 7
Number 2 *Fall*

Article 4

1975

Behaviorism in the Classroom: It Seems to Work

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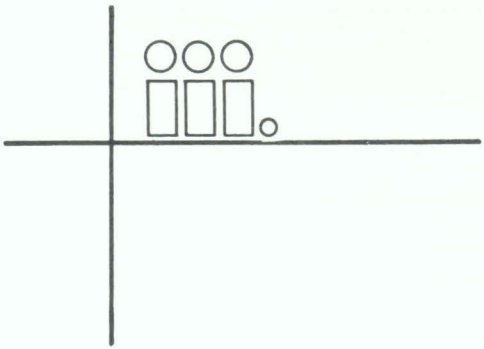

Behaviorism in the Classroom

By Milton Kornfeld

In trying to find a better way to motivate and evaluate my students, what I did last year was, essentially, to borrow an idea which appeared in *Change Magazine* (April, 1973) under the title "Behaviorism in the Classroom," by Elaine G. Breslaw. Ms. Breslaw teaches history at Morgan State College in Baltimore, and her description of student behavior at this predominantly black school indicated that her students were enough like my own to warrant consideration of this approach to motivating and evaluating students. In regard to her students Ms. Breslaw's concerns were not dissimilar from my own:

> "I wanted to motivate students to attend class regularly, prepare reading assignments in advance, complete written work on time, read more deeply in subjects that interested them and avoid the need for official excuses for missing examinations. I hoped to encourage good study habits that in turn would lead to the acquisition of knowledge and high grades as ends in themselves—and, finally, to a heightened interest in the study of (Humanities)." (p. 53)

I was also motivated by the desire to try out a system which might simplify the grading process by cutting back on the hair splitting distinctions of "C+" or "B-", and also find a way of harnessing student effort and rewarding those students who, while not necessarily "bright" enough for high grades, were solid and consistent workers who were too often the victims of outrageous fortune's slings and arrows, i.e., "other people don't study and get better grades than I do" types. Finally, I wanted a rational system for coping with attendance, lateness, and the general gamut of student excuses which didn't force me into a policeman posture.

On the first day of class I handed out a sheet, much like this (see below),

which explained the system of evaluation we'd use during the year. The students were interested as well as confused, but after lengthy explanation they seemed satisfied and looked forward to a new way of coping with the obstacles school presents.

Team II — Professor Kornfeld

Old Wine in New Bottles

Grading System for Humanities:

	Maximum Units	
3 Papers	4½	
3 Quizzes	3	A = 11
1 Precis	1	B = 9
Final Exam	3	C = 7
Attendance	1	D = 5
Class Participation	1	
Credit for doing 6 of 7 assignments	1	
	14½	

Papers will be assigned at least two weeks in advance of due date. They will be graded on the basis on ½, 1, 1½ units.

Quizzes will all be announced in advance and will incorporate work from the *week before* the quiz, as well as material we will be studying that week.

Attendance credit for attending 12 out of 14 classes. Coming to class later than 10 minutes after the start of class will count for ½ an absence, as will splitting at the class break.

With the exception of valid medical excuses all papers are due on the day assigned. If you can't get it in that day there is a 24-hour grace period . . . after that, tough.

Since I feel intensive writing about literature is an important way of learning to read and appreciate it, my course was heavily oriented toward writing. The papers were assigned two weeks in advance and there was an assignment due each month. The grading was on the following scale: A "U" was an unsatisfactory paper and received no credit; a "½ S" was worth ½ a credit and denoted a marginally acceptable piece of work; this ½ credit was introduced in the second semester since I found myself hamstrung by the "U" or "S" distinction during the first semester; an "S" was awarded for satisfactory or acceptable work and worth 1 credit; an "E" was awarded for excellent work and worth 1½ credits. At this point you might say, well, what has been accomplished here—the subtle 11 point scale of A through F has been replaced by a crude 4 point scale. To an extent that's what has happened, but the need for this will become apparent shortly.

I also wanted students to be prepared for class and to be responsible for

the material we were covering. To accomplish this I decided that frequent quizzes which could be quickly graded and returned made more sense than longish exams which tied up my time and delayed feedback unnecessarily. These were graded on an "S" or "U" scale with a student having to get 6 of 9 questions right for an S.

The precis was an exercise in close reading and concise writing. I distributed essays (three the first semester, one the second) on literature or film and asked the students to write a resume in their own words, or no more than 500 words. The essays were usually tough and the precises were graded on an "S" or "U" basis. Since I was grading for content and information these could be read very quickly and didn't consume much of my time.

With the exception of the final exam, all work was optional. I explained to the students that this was so not because I didn't care whether they did the work, but because I felt they should exercise some choice about when and how they did their work, and if they had a Social Science exam the same week a Humanities paper was due, there was no sense killing themselves and doing mediocre work for both courses. If they wished, they could easily make up the work in Humanities by opting for the next assignment. I also felt the coercive nature of many assignments leads to students resentfully and sullenly doing work they have no real feeling for. I also explained that the broad range of options provided gave each person an opportunity to do well in areas in which he/she was strongest, and to experiment and learn in other areas. Finally, by putting all work on the same quantitative scale it was possible to know exactly how well one was doing at any point in the semester, and how much work one had to do to receive a grade he/she desired.

My own evaluation of this system is that it worked well; while I can't say whether all my behavioral objectives were achieved, most of my students worked consistently and with determination throughout the year. During the first semester when I had approximately 110 students, I received an average of 81 papers for each assignment, and 71 precises for each precis assignment. In response to a questionnaire at the end of the first semester, 95% of the students polled (N = 80) liked the broad range of assignments the plan offered; 85% were pleased that so much of the responsibility for what kind of work was done was left with them (significantly, while I gave 31 D's and 9 F's at the end of the first semester, not one student complained of these grades and they realized, I think, that they deserved what they got); 69% felt the grading system helped motivate them to come to class; 71% felt the system and the options provided had a positive effect on their grade; 59% felt the option on attendance helped get them to class; 84% felt the work load in the course realistic; and 88% basically liked the system. Over both semesters my class attendance was spectacular: 88% for the first semester and dipping to 85% for second semester (sections met for two hours once a week).

While many students felt I was a tough grader, most felt I was fair, and

this seemed like one of the keys to this system working effectively—most students felt the rules were clear and due process was being observed. The greatest complaint during the first semester was from students who were getting "U's" on their papers. They felt they were getting the same "reward" as those who didn't hand in any work. To remedy this I devised the 6/7 option for the second semester and gave credit, albeit not much, for sheer quantity of work done. Some people who consistently received "S" grades felt disconsolate because they felt they weren't progressing. This is a serious and substantive problem. As I saw it, the "S" range was a broad category running from a low C to a middle B grade, and it is probable that a great many students will fall into that range. One could point out that consistency at that level is something of a virtue (a mealymouthed defense at best) or encourage the poor bugger to work harder, or finally, have the student keep a folder with all his work and then comment on the progress he shows as his folder grows over the year. Ultimately one might have to admit that there *are* limits to growth, and tell the student to concentrate on some other discipline.

Regardless of one's philosophic feelings about social engineering and behaviorism, pedagogical necessity and an eclectic attitude toward our profession certainly warrants serious consideration of this approach.