

## Chapter 18: Examining the Use of Competition in the Classroom

### In this Chapter:

- Defining Competition
- Likely Consequences and Benefits of Competition
- Healthy versus Unhealthy Competition
- Classroom Applications
- Competition in the Transformative Classroom

Some of us had positive experiences with competition as students while others had encounters that were painful or at best not enjoyable. As adults we reproduce our own views of competition formed as students and apply it to teaching our students and children. Consequently, we may be operating from unexamined assumptions; as a result it is possible that our students are paying a price for our lack of awareness. It may be instructive to consider the effects of competition as objectively as possible as we try to find an appropriate place for it in our classroom.

In this chapter we examine the nature of competition and its role in teaching. We will distinguish “healthier” forms of competition from those that are less healthy and examine if and when competition could be incorporated in the transformative classroom.

**Chapter Reflection 18-a:** Recall your experiences of competition as a student. What is your association with it now? How does your perception vary from that of others? How has your perception affected the way you use (or plan to use) competition in your classroom?

### EXAMINING THE NATURE OF COMPETITION

#### Defining Competition:

The definition of human competition is *a contest in which two or more people are engaged where typically only one or a few participants will win and others will not* (Webster, 2007). Competition exists when there is scarcity of a desired outcome. Individuals and/or groups are then positioned to vie for the attainment of that outcome. For example, in team athletics, two teams engage in a sport for the goal of winning.

It is partly true that the world is competitive. It is difficult to entirely avoid competition in life; however, for the most part, competition is a self-imposed or at least self-selected condition. We can just as easily live an existence defined more by collaborative and self-referential goals than by competition with others. To say the “real world” is inherently competitive is a myth. Moreover, to say that we are preparing students for the real world by putting them in artificially constructed competitive situations is to impose on them a specifically biased world-view (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). In a broad sense, educators collectively create a more or less competitive future by the way we encourage our students to think and treat one another. If we create a more cooperative environment in our schools we create the likelihood of a more cooperative future; if we create more competitive environments, we create a more competitive future.

**Chapter Reflection 18-b:** What would be the role of competition in your ideal world? Keep this in mind as you reflect on the role you want competition to take in the micro-world of your classroom.

### **The Effect of Situational Competition**

When we introduce the competitive element into a situation it creates a sense of external urgency and drama. Competition brings a variable into the equation that shifts the participants' attention from the task itself to attention to the cost of their performance in the task (Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Reeve & Deci, 1996). For example, if the task were to assemble a model airplane, we could make it into a competition declaring the model making activity a race to see who could finish the task first. Consider how this competitive element changes the participants' thinking. The sense of urgency (for whoever cares about winning) is elevated. An external drama is introduced. The purpose of the activity moves from the learning goals (i.e., engagement in making sense of the elements of the process and the attempt to interpret and make a quality effort) to efficiency, speed, and the outcome relative to others. As a result the activity becomes less something in which to engage for its virtues and becomes more a means to an end (Reeve & Deci, 1996). The process and the reflection on the task become less important than the product. We can see this change in focus occurring no matter what the teacher may say either to encourage or discourage it. The structure by its nature encourages the shift in the participants' attitudes.

**Chapter Reflection 18-c:** Recall a situation in which there was a race to complete a task. Were more mistakes made? Was the quality of the performance better or worse? How do you explain your observations?

Introduce competition to the context of a group effort and a shift in attitude will occur. When competitive goals are present, groups tend to place increased value on the outcome of the effort and tend to decrease their focus on the process. They will increase attention on what it takes to win and decrease attention on learning for its own sake. In addition, the competitive element has an effect on group dynamics (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). Suppose that we ask groups to work in teams to assemble model airplanes and set up a reward for the group who finishes first or creates the best product. If we substitute a competitive condition in place of a collaborative condition, group members will change the way they regard one another. The competitive condition encourages them to view their fellows less as peers or members of a learning community and more as instruments to be used to reach the goal (Emmer & Gerwels, 2006). Behaviors such as dialogue and reflection are useful in the collaborative condition. In the competitive condition they often slow the process and diffuse group focus. In a collaborative condition divergent ideas can usually be explored without penalty; when we introduce the element of competition, a disincentive to dialogue is created. No reflection is incorporated than is necessary to accomplish the task.

In a collaborative setting there is no disincentive to involve the efforts of the less dominant or less skilled members of the group. In the competitive condition, however, some combination of personality dominance and individual level of competence will define the values of the process, inevitably marginalizing weaker and less skilled team

members. Even with good will and/or good intentions present at the beginning of the process, these trends will take over as the structural incentive in a competitive condition inherently promotes a shift in the focus of the task and the nature of the team dynamics (Emmer & Gerwels, 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 2006).

**Chapter Reflection 18-d:** Recall your own experience in group against group competition. What was the attitude of the others? Did everyone in the group enjoy the experience (even on a winning team)? If not, why not?

### **A Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Use of Competition**

If we compare the potential benefits of competition to the potential costs, we find there are a number of reasons to be cautious. While competition can instantly infuse fun and drama into the equation, there is a cost. Aside from the shift from process to product focus described above, there are additional consequences such as promoting a fear of failure and undermining students' intrinsic motivation. Figure 18.1 outlines this cost-benefit analysis.

### **Figure 18.1 Consequences and Potential Benefits of Competition**

#### **Consequences of Competition:**

- Promotes a shift from means/process to ends/products
- Brings an external dimension into the equation and weakens the students' intrinsic motivation
- Heightens the level of anxiety/threat
- Promotes a tendency to take on a mentality defined by "fear of failure" (winning would consequently relieve the anxious condition) and a "helpless pattern"
- In groups:
  - Shifts the emphasis from quality relationships to effective relationships
  - Decreases incentive to think reflectively or divergently
  - Accentuates the effects of existing social hierarchy and ability levels
  - Decreases the sense of bond generally among groups and temporarily increases the bond within the winning group

#### **Potential Benefits of Competition:**

- Increases the level of anxiety/threat for a performance (pressure may potentially refine skill given a more demanding performance context)
- Can provide a dimension that potentially reinforces group interdependence and/or team skills
- Potentially increases the level of "fun" and/or drama in an activity

**Chapter Reflection 18-e:** Reflect on the costs and benefits of competition listed above. In your opinion, does one list outweigh the other?

While the list of potential costs related to competition is more substantial than the list of potential benefits, the power of its effect makes its use very tempting. Little else gets a group of young people more energized than competition. However, like the use of any other extrinsically motivating practice, the short-term benefits mask the long-term

detrimental effect. As is necessary when we consider the use of extrinsic rewards or other “loaded” strategies, we need to be intentional and careful in our use of competition.

### **USE OF COMPETITION IN THE CLASSROOM**

There is some subscription to the position that there is no such thing as healthy classroom competition. While it can be debated whether competition should be incorporated in schools at all, it is a prevalent practice and will likely continue. With that in mind, let’s distinguish “healthier” forms of competition from those that are less healthy. There are a few principles to consider when judging whether a competitive classroom situation is more beneficial or less.

First: competition for valuable outcomes will have more detrimental effects on a class than competition for trivial and/or symbolic outcomes. There are essentially three types of “valuable or real” outcomes. They are: a) material things of value -- this includes privileges that have a substantive impact; b) the teacher’s conspicuous and/or lasting affection; and c) recorded grades. When we give students a meaningful reward for winning, the winning becomes important, and we make a statement that students should care at least as much about getting the reward as they do about the quality of their effort. Recall the discussion of motivation: when we do this we have extracted the intrinsic motivation from the situation by introducing an extrinsic reward.

Second: the shorter the life of the competition the more likely it is to have a beneficial effect. The length of the contest increases its sense of prominence and decreases its sense of intensity and fun -- both undesirable effects. For example, if we keep track of the number of books each student has read over the course of the semester and post the tally on the classroom wall, the initial effect may be an increased motivation to read. We initially may assume the strategy is effective. However, as the contest goes on we notice that students are reading books just for the sake of winning the contest and will have an incentive to falsify the number of books they have read. Over time we will notice the competition is becoming less fun and increasingly burdensome. At the end of the year the competition will have produced one somewhat happy and very relieved student, many students who feel unhappy about losing, a good number who will feel a little unhappy but highly relieved that the chart is no longer being held over their heads to shame them.

Third: the leader of the competition must place a conspicuous emphasis on process over product. If winning is the point, students will take on a “just do what it takes” attitude. If students are encouraged to value the process, they will feel justified in staying focused on the learning outcome and feel assured that it is okay to put their attention into quality as the primary goal. However, facilitating this mindset is only possible when the context itself does not place so much value on winning that the leader’s emphasis falls on deaf ears. The two first principles are prerequisite.

The most healthy and beneficial competitions are:

- exclusively undertaken for symbolic value (e.g., “good job, you won,” “polite applause for the winners,” “congratulations to group four they came up with some great ideas and won the contest”)
- short and sweet
- characterized by all participants feeling that they have a chance to win

- have the process and quality of work given conspicuous value and the product of the winning given a conspicuously low level of importance

Figure 18.2 lists the principles that create more healthy or less healthy competitive contexts.

**Figure 18.2 Distinguishing Healthier from Unhealthy Competition**

▪ **In Healthy Competition**

- The primary goal is fun.
- The competitive goal is not “valuable/real” nor is it characterized that way.
- The learning and/or growth goal is conspicuously characterized as valuable.
- The competition has a short duration and is characterized by high energy.
- There is no long-term effect from the episode.
- All individuals or groups see a reasonable chance of winning.
- The students all firmly understand these points.
- Examples include: trivia contests, short-term competitions for a solely symbolic reward, lighthearted challenges between groups where there is no reward

▪ **In Unhealthy Competition**

- It feels real. The winners and losers will be affected.
- The competitive goal/reward is “valuable/real,” and is characterized that way.
- The learning task is characterized as a means to an end (winning the competition).
- Winners are able to use their victory as social or educational capital at a later time.
- Competition implicitly or explicitly rewards the advantaged students.
- Over time students develop an increasingly “competitive mindset.”
- Examples include: long-term point systems, competition for grades, grading on a curve, playing favorites, awards for skill-related performance.

**Chapter Reflection 18-f:** Recall the last classroom competition that you observed. Given the list above, would you classify it as a healthy or unhealthy competition?

**What about a Little Competition for Meaningful Outcomes? Is It Sometimes Okay?**

Readers may be thinking, “I use competition for meaningful outcomes and I don’t see any problems. The winners are happy and it seems to make the losers want to try harder so that they can be winners in the future.”

The full effect of an “unhealthy” competitive experience may not be apparent on the surface or arise immediately. In fact, it may appear to have a desirable influence on students. Vockell (2004) points out that competition helps some students (e.g., the

winner) feel an enhanced sense of self-esteem by experiencing a favorable comparison. That is, they feel better about themselves because they came out ahead in relation to someone else. One of the problems with this source of satisfaction is that it leads quickly to the fear that in the future one may not come out on top – it engenders a fear of failure. In fact, self-esteem based on comparison is not true self-esteem (as discussed in Chapter 7). It is a fragile ego construction. The best it can lead to is a temporary experience of relief from feeling like a failure. It leads to an ultimate loss of intrinsic motivation as a result of competition for external reinforcement (i.e., the prize, the validation, the favorable comparison) and defining oneself by a personal “win-loss record.”

When a student sees his/her school performance as a contest, it leads increasingly to a helpless pattern. As discussed in Chapter 7, a student's helpless pattern develops through perception of himself/herself as having a fixed quantity of ability. This incites the need to prove adequacy relative to others. While on the surface it may appear that students are motivated to perform it is rather evidence of motivation to avoid the pain of feeling inadequate and inferior. The development of this helpless pattern promotes a decrease in internal motivation, a decreased value for growth as a goal, and decreased resilience to challenging situations. Initially students may be energized by a competitive challenge (out of fear of failure, or a desire to enhance their self image by a favorable comparison to others); however, students will eventually put in less and less effort, quit when things get difficult, and lose interest in learning unless it includes the drama that the competitive element brings (much the same way that a gambling addict needs to play for money to be able to take an interest in playing the game.)

**Chapter Reflection 18-g:** Reflect on the most desirable state of mind to perform successfully in highly competitive situations. In situations in which the contest requires physical strength, fear and anger can sometimes create a desired effect. Most often, though, competitive performance requires the execution of skills and strategy. Take professional golf as an example. When high-performing players were asked to explain what they were thinking in a pressure situation, they reported they were making an effort to keep attention in the moment and resist the temptation toward external stimuli. They are not always successful in doing so. When a player fails to stay in the moment and shifts their awareness from a shot to their performance relative to others on the course, the common result is poor play. This usually takes the form of a breakdown or what is referred to as “choking.” Top performers, such as Tiger Woods, have learned to discipline their minds to focus only on the moment and enjoy the process. They know thinking in terms of comparison (i.e., competitively) will lead to less effective performance as well as mental distress and less enjoyment of their job.

### **Classroom Applications of Competition**

At what age level is competition appropriate? It is more appropriate at higher maturity levels, but little or none is appropriate for very young children. There is no real justification for using more than a minimal amount of competition in the K-3 classroom. At this age it has no value or necessity. In the K-3 classroom our main task is to help students form a “success psychology.” Competition has little value in our efforts to do this and will work against this goal. For grades 3-6 a small amount of “healthy” competition can be justified. Students at this age are old enough to separate themselves

from outcomes within competitive tasks -- if we support them in doing so. A taste of healthy competition in schools can help the intermediate age student make sense of and navigate other competitive contexts. After seventh grade, students are mature enough to understand many of the natural tendencies, both healthy and unhealthy, that will surface from within during a competitive context. A reasonable amount of healthy competition, led by an adult who helps the students remain intentional and aware, can be justified from middle school onward.

We might think of competition in the classroom as we do a timed or public performance - it raises the level of threat in a situation. When is that a good thing? Typically, when the skill or knowledge is well-formed and internalized or it is becoming rusty. When is it a bad thing? When students are still learning the skill and need to put conscious attention to it. During the learning of a new skill, students need a high-support, low-threat situation. It is only after they have mastered a skill set or knowledge that it can be used in a competitive, timed, or public context.

Some common applications of competition in the classroom would best be characterized as entirely unhealthy, while others vary from more-to-less healthy depending upon how they are designed and led.

- **Grading on a Curve.** A decreasing number of teachers subscribe to the use of normative grading (i.e., grading on a curve). This is an encouraging trend since it is difficult to even find any support that it is motivational or necessary. Pitting students against one another for grades has consistently been shown to have serious ill effects (Cropper, 1998; Lam, Yim, Law & Cheung, 2004; Kohn, 1986). Moreover, the amount of motivation that it does produce is limited and less powerful than other social structures such as cooperation (Johnson & Johnson, 1974, 1988).

**Chapter Reflection 18-h:** Have you ever blanked out in a competitive condition? When the stakes have been high for a test or public performance, have you ever found yourself forgetting what to do or say? Test anxiety is a byproduct of the competitive factor. Our consciousness shifts from the task to the cost of the performance of the task and we blank out. The creative mind has been shut down. What is left is a mental defense responding to a threat condition. While this emotional response may be effective at producing fight or flight chemicals in the body in the case where we must engage a crisis of survival, it is not very useful when we are trying to think clearly and calmly. To test this principle, consider how you performed the same task in a non-threatening context at another time. Was your mind more at ease and thus more effective?

- **Playing favorites, Praise and Disappointment.** It may not appear on the surface to create a competitive condition, but when we give a differential level of liking, personal praise, or its opposite, personal disappointment, we are creating a subtle form of classroom competition (Pianta, 2006). In a sense, when we do this we say that there is some criteria that we use to decide to whom we show more affection and admiration. Showing differential levels of liking has the effect of an emotional token economy. All students lose in the long run in this kind of environment. While those shown favoritism may

initially feel fortunate, they are still being encouraged toward an external locus of control and a *failure psychology*. This is happening as well to the students who do not feel preferred. This type of competitive emotional climate can be even more harmful than a competitive performance environment (Reeve & Deci, 1996).

**Chapter Reflection 18.i:** Reflect on your experience as a student. Can you think of teacher behaviors other than games and normative grading that caused you to think of yourself as in competition or compared to the other students in the class? What were they?

- **Table Points and Group-Group Competition for Points.** In some cases, using games that result in group points can be a useful tool to help bring a heightened level of attention and importance to certain group skills and can help clarify behavioral expectations. For example, during the first week of school we might give points to groups for being ready, listening, demonstrating intra-group cooperation, exhibiting or going beyond the class expectations, etc. As a result, this practice can fall in the healthy column, if done thoughtfully and deliberately. However, beware of pitfalls. Above all be clear which behavior leads to what outcome. It is important to make a clear distinction between the following: a) that which is graded academically; b) that which is rewarded/graded for investment in the process/participation; and c) that which is given points. Even if these distinctions exist, they can be difficult for some students to interpret. First, make sure that we keep these areas separate and distinct; second, be very clear and conspicuous about what system is leading to what outcome. As we will discuss in Chapter 20, assessing participation and process can be a very sound strategy. However, the assessment information should never be used as part of a competition or a game. For example, if we give group points for quality process investment and/or cooperation and then include these assessments as part of a group grade for a project, we need to keep those points separate from any points that we give for a group competitive game. We can do both -- the game and the participation assessment; just keep them entirely separate. If not, the sense of reliability and trust in our formal participation assessment system is destroyed and our game will seem a lot less fun as students will be confused about the purpose and impact. In Figure 18.3 a purposeful and effective use of table points is contrasted to an accidental and ineffective system.

**[[Insert Figure 18.3: Comparison of a Healthy vs. Unhealthy Classroom Points Competition System]]**

- **Knowledge Bowl, Trivia, Jeopardy and/or Mock Quiz Show Games.** If we design a game for our students that includes academic content, it has the potential to be fun and help reinforce certain skills and content; however, we need to keep in mind the principles for healthy competition. For example, the use of a jeopardy-like game or a team knowledge bowl to review for tests can raise the level of interest and excitement while accomplishing essentially the same degree of content processing. But if the outcome of the game becomes part of formal grading, the competition



moves from the healthy column to the unhealthy. Let's compare two scenarios: one in which the outcome translates into formal grades and a more healthy application in which it does not.

In the healthy competition scenario, assume the class is divided into four groups. We have the students work together to answer questions related to the content of an upcoming exam. The content is familiar and the competition acts as a means of testing the degree to which the students could retrieve the information under pressure. The purpose is clearly stated as preparation for the exam. At the end of the competition the teacher recognizes the efforts of each team and asks them to offer the winning team their congratulations and polite applause. After this recognition of effort, it would be effective to make a statement related to what the knowledge level during the competition indicated about the readiness of the group. In this scenario the competition is simply the means; the desired end is the learning and the fun.

In an unhealthy scenario, the one might start the same way, dividing the class into four groups. But as soon as we tell students that the competition has a meaningful cost (the grade for the day perhaps) things will change. One of the first changes will be students conspicuously obsessed with fairness, the rules, and the appearance of cheating and/or any sign of favoritism from the teacher. A great deal of energy will need to be spent putting down angry demonstrations when any event is perceived as unfair. As discussed earlier, the members of each team will be encouraged by the competitive structure to put aside a democratic and egalitarian mentality and make judgments about how best to win. One's team members are seen less as participants in a learning activity and more as potential obstacles to achieving a valued outcome (winning). When the game is over, it is likely that the primary lessons are related to the fairness of the game, the teacher's responsibility for making the game and the teams fair, and the degrees of happiness or unhappiness related to the outcome of win or lose. What was learned about the content or group cooperation has a much less meaningful significance. If we continue to use the same format, these trends will become strengthened. Over time the students will begin to associate the teacher less with fun and more as the cause of their dissatisfaction. The bickering and complaining will start as soon as teams are created. Moreover, students will become increasingly impatient with low-ability members of their teams. The hostility from students who are embarrassed during the activity will come out as retribution in contexts other than these games. Those who are resentful of a loss due to their perception of the performance of their team members will grow in their dislike of them. They will see those students as the cause of preventing a desirable daily grade. In this scenario it is tempting to blame the level of character in the students, but the real culprit is the structural design of the competitive activity itself.

**Chapter Reflection 18-j:** How would you feel at the end of a review activity if the teacher gave daily grades depending on how well your team did? What would change in your attitude the next time you played?

### **THE PLACE OF COMPETITION IN THE TRANSFORMATIVE CLASSROOM**

A thoughtful and intentional use of competition has its place in the transformative classroom. Competitive contexts offer unique learning and growth opportunities. The

primary goal in the transformative classroom is to help students become familiar with the feelings and tendencies that can emerge and take a thoughtful and intentional approach to their participation within the competitive context. Teaching students how to deal with competition could be compared to sex education. We are not endorsing any particular behavior; we are assuming that students may find themselves in situations where knowledge and a proactive mindset could be valuable. They should have a healthy and informed approach to it.

In most cases, the competitive context brings out feelings in students that seem natural. In a sense, these feelings are natural; however, they are not going to lead to a feeling of natural happiness and peace (i.e., the natural condition). Students should receive guidance to see that feelings that competition brings out are normal and predictable but not necessary. Feelings such as worrying about losing, needing to win to feel good about oneself, needing the drama of the competition to feel interested, or being so worried about the outcome that one loses focus on the process are all normal but ultimately dysfunctional habits of mind. We must help students recognize these normal tendencies and replace them with more functional thinking to guide their choices and define their state of mind during a competitive experience.

To accomplish “competition education,” we incorporate three factors. First, make certain all competitive contexts are healthy as defined in Figure 18.b. If we create unhealthy contexts (e.g., we get excited about or give meaningful rewards to the winners or we place a great deal of emphasis on the outcome as important) we create confusing messages and undermine results. Second, help students be aware of their competitive feelings in low stakes contexts. Third, help students test their ability to stay conscious and intentional in higher stakes competitive situations.

Low stakes competition includes situations such as “looking for a ready group,” having students engaged in group presentations, or have them take part in small-scale competitive games. During these low-threat competitive contexts we must be clear about the purpose of the competition (i.e., fun and learning, not winning) and help students pay attention to what is going on internally. When it comes to facilitating games, be very direct, making the statement: “If we can play these games for fun, we will keep playing them. If we start worrying about who wins or loses or we start doing sloppy work to be done first, we will stop doing them.” If, as suggested in Chapter 5, we give minor privileges (e.g., getting to go line up first) to groups or individuals for being “ready” early, we need to make it clear that we all need to be “ready,” that it helps the whole class, and we are just using the game to emphasize an important collective skill. Our message to students may be, “This is good practice for games in life. We are all capable of being the first ones ready; if your group is ready first, great. If not, you made a good effort that helps us all. So we all win when we try our best.”

**Chapter Reflection 18 – k:** Recall our discussion of the 1-Style classroom in Chapter 12. If we are trying to help students become self directed, we want to wean them off behavioral expectation competitions such as being the “ready group” when we see behavior become internalized and consistently demonstrated. We can substitute positive recognitions, then ultimately group appreciation and recognition as the class develops into a community.

As we raise the level of competitive energy we should help students keep in mind that the reason that we use skills that we have developed in a competitive context is not to see who is better, but to practice how each of us does with a competitive learning environment. We are primarily testing our character, and only secondarily testing our skills. We are helping students learn how to perform under pressure, and to learn that one can actually perform in high stakes contexts without feeling pressured, anxious, or that their self-esteem is attached to the outcome.

As students grow in their understanding of how to take part in competition without losing awareness of the most intentional, functional and productive outcome, we must be specific and proactive in the messages we send and the consequences we deliver. In each competitive situation, keep in mind the following: a) potential problems, b) messages to resolve and bring awareness to those problems, and c) the actions that we will take if students cannot do it on their own.

Below are three example problems that could arise as students learn to be effective within competitive contexts. For each problem there is a counter message and then possible actions to take to help reinforce the messages.

**Potential Student Problem 1:** We notice students being tentative and anxious — showing that they are working in part out of a *fear of failure*.

**Intentional Teacher Counter-Message:** When students take on a fear of failure mindset, we need to first bring their awareness to their thinking. We would ask if they are working from a desire to grow and learn (i.e., a mastery orientation) or spending a lot of mental energy and attention on protecting their self-image (i.e., a helpless orientation). We want to remind them that we are playing for fun, and their learning is the important thing. We would remind them to stay in the moment, focus on the process, and let the outcome take care of itself.

**Possible Teacher Action:** First, we need to be sure that we can back up what we are saying. The competition should not be for meaningful stakes, the students should be prepared for what they are to do, and we should not have created an emotional climate that glorifies winning. Second, we need to send a message that we care about each student and want them all to do well. We need to act as teacher, not as judge. Students should see us putting our attention into instruction and supporting their efforts with that instruction.

**Potential Student Problem 2:** Students begin to put too much focus on the outcome/winning and lose sight of quality, cooperation, process, sportsmanship, and ethics, or become too concerned with fairness and cheating.

**Intentional Teacher Counter-Message:** When students get too focused on the competitive element of the task, remind them that their learning and treatment of one another is what is important. Remind them that this competition does not affect their grade or anything else that is important. If they are obsessed with fairness, this can be used as a means to become bigger than their situation. Explain to them that winners overcome adversity and don't get sidetracked by bad calls, corrupt systems, bad breaks, and so on. Help them see that this is good practice for life. Real victory is the ability to look back and be happy with how one acted during competition.

**Possible Teacher Action:** An assessment system should support the message that the process is what is being rewarded. Chapter 20 may be helpful in this area. If a team or individual does not show the ability to work in a competitive context without becoming emotional, blaming, cheating, or complaining excessively, a consequence is required. The best consequence will be losing the opportunity to take part. Having a group or student sit out to reflect on previous actions and priorities that motivated them is valuable. It may help to do some reflection with them if they are having trouble seeing where they veered off. As always the message is, “I know that you will be able to do this eventually; relax, take a few deep breaths, think about it a while. During this past situation you were not able to show the level of self-discipline that is needed to take part. You are smart, capable, and reflective and you have a lot to contribute. Let’s work on this so you can join the group as soon as possible.”

**Potential Student Problem 3:** Things get too heated and students become competitive and place too much value on winning. When this happens we can recognize that students are trying to enhance their egos and defend their self-images by winning. In this case the students have lost perspective and are following unhealthy instincts.

**Intentional Teacher Counter-Message:** When things get heated that is a clear sign that students are letting their egos get too involved. We might begin by asking them a question such as, “Hey gang, it is just a game remember? Ask yourself what is making you so competitive right now; is it the need to feel good about yourself by beating others or proving your worth? Look around, these are your friends, they will still love you and you will still love yourself when the game is over.” Help them stay in the moment and enjoy the process and recognize that peak performance comes from being completely in the moment and from letting go of the outcome. Help students shift their goal toward staying present and doing a good job with the quality of the relationships and performing the task and away from the illusion that wanting to win will help you win and/or be happy and satisfied.

**Possible Teacher Action:** If students cannot hear your redirection message because they are too immersed in the drama of trying to enhance their self-images by winning, you need to withdraw the privilege of competition. Our message to them at this point must be: “In this class, we compete to learn how to compete. When we cannot demonstrate that we are ready for it, we need to stop for a time. We can try again when we are ready.” When the emotions are still fresh an episode such as this may provide a powerful opportunity for the class to reflect on why it is so difficult to avoid getting tied up in the desire to win. If we have allowed the game to come to completion, however, this processing will not be as powerful. There should be an opportunity to recognize the clear cause-and-effect significance of our action: “In this class we use competition to the degree that we are ready for it.”

In the transformative classroom, the feedback and positive recognitions are reserved entirely for process-related performance and the quality of the participation. In the transformative class students learn that winning is not the point, and losing is not a big deal. Neither winning nor losing is meaningful. What is meaningful is what we learn about ourselves in the process, how we treat each other, and what we learn about our skill level.

**Chapter Reflection 18-I:** Reflect on your role as the teacher/leader in the transformative class. While we may need to provide strong guidance and leadership as the group is learning to function, our goal should be to let them learn to do it themselves. Avoid being in the role of referee or judge. Can you think of a teacher who liked to be in the role of referee? What did the students learn as a result? Where did the anger and complaints go when things went wrong?

Finally, we need to remember that, in the transformative class, games are for fun. Games and competition provide a combination of learning opportunities and a chance to play. What makes a game fun? The greatest indicator is that the participants do not fear the potential consequences. Teaching students how to play without fear of failure or letting their egos become too involved is prerequisite. Second, students can access the joy of the moment and have fun with the process. Involvement, challenge, adventure, and suspense all can feel fun if the students feel free and the situation supports fun over comparison. The influence of comparison will be a fun-killer. Fun during a competitive context occurs when the participant sees the competition as the game, and the fleeting reality, and the learning, relationships, and self-respect as the lasting reality.

### **CONCLUSION**

Approach the use of competition as you would toxic paint or an electric power tool. It can produce beautiful results, but unless we take great precautions we will regret putting it in the hands of young people. If it seems harmless, it is because we do not perceive the threat clearly. While consequences for promoting a fear of failure are not the same as they would be if a student were to injure themselves with a power tool, we need to be just as safety-conscious. Use the tool of competition sparingly and with care.

In the next chapter, we will examine the sibling of unhealthy competition -- the use of systematic public shaming in the form of a deficit model behavioral system. In much the same way that competition motivates through fear of failure, deficit models motivate through fear of guilt and shame. In Chapter 20, we examine healthier alternatives that achieve more effective results and support efforts to promote a success psychology in the classroom.

### **Chapter Reflections**

1. Reflect on your experience as a student. What about your experience in competitive events? Do you hold the same perception today? Does it affect the way you approach competition in your classroom?
2. What types of teacher behaviors encourage students to think competitively? Can you think of teachers who promoted a mentality of comparison and competition among their students in ways other than games and competitive contexts?

### **Chapter Activities**

1. In your group, discuss the question: Is the real world competitive? Can one live a competition-free life?
2. For each of the following activities conceive of teacher behavior and/or a lesson design structure that would promote a healthy competition and one that would promote an unhealthy competition.

- a. Reporting the results of a test.
- b. Walking through the room examining student projects.
- c. Encouraging groups to clean up and get ready.
- d. Holding a spelling contest.
- e. Holding a food drive.

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