The Spectrum of Teaching Styles: From Command to Discovery

A Review by Susan Schwager

The Spectrum of Teaching Styles is a way of describing teaching that focuses on decision making. Specifically, the "Spectrum" examines the decisions made by both teacher and learners in the context of a variety of different formats or styles. Mosston & Ashworth describe how a variety of learning outcomes can be achieved by purposefully shifting the decision making responsibilities between teacher and learner. The Spectrum consists of a series of "landmark" styles in which decision making responsibilities are shifted gradually from the teacher to the learners. The styles are arranged along a continuum that systematically provides the learner with increased power over, and responsibility for his/her own learning. The Spectrum provides for student decision making by engaging learners in activities that require them to make judgements about what it is they are learning. Although the styles seem to represent a logical progression in which students are gradually given more and more decision making power, the authors intend for the styles to be used selectively, in response to such factors as the demands of the subject matter, the needs of the learners, and the desired outcomes of the lesson.

"When teachers teach, students learn. Teachers talk, students listen. Teachers ask questions, students answer them. Teachers tell students what to do, students do what they are told." The spectrum of teaching styles should be required reading for anyone whose views of education are represented by these statements. The concept of teaching and learning is presented by Mosston and Ashworth as a dynamic interplay of decision making between teacher and students. The Spectrum provides the teacher with strategies for behaving in different ways, depending on the desired outcomes and the requirements of the situation. While operating from a sophisticated theoretical framework, the authors have geared their presentation of the spectrum towards grade school teachers, and show a healthy respect for the practical, real life situations teachers face.

However, teachers who are accustomed to a much less interactive view of teaching can encounter some difficulties in initial attempts to implement the styles presented in the Spectrum. The difficulties seem related to the requirements for teachers and students to behave differently in the context of each style. Although detailed descriptions of each style are presented, the subtleties and nuances of each style can appear overwhelming. In addition, although guidelines for selecting appropriate styles are offered based on the desired outcomes of a lesson (or portion of a lesson), choosing the appropriate style for a particular setting can be perceived as a daunting task. Teachers should be prepared for the possibility that initial attempts at implementing the different styles may not be as successful as they would like. However, the potential for improving students' abilities to make decisions about their own learning should be a sufficient incentive for teachers to persist in the application of the Spectrum.

The Spectrum of Styles is arranged along a continuum that is intended to reflect the kinds of thinking skills required by students in the context of the different styles. The lower end of the continuum is described as representing lower order thinking skill requirements on the part of students (reproduction or replication of known or previously learned material). The authors then present a "discovery threshold" and a "decision threshold" as points at which the learner begins to use certain types of higher order thinking strategies (production of new knowledge). The placement of these thresholds could be open to debate. For example, The Reciprocal Style is placed at the "lower" end of the continuum and is described as one of the styles that requires students to engage in "reproduction" of previously learned knowledge, rather than "production" of new knowledge. The Reciprocal Style requires pairs of students to interact regarding a learning task. While one student executes the task, a partner observes. Comparing the performer's actions with items on a criteria sheet, the observer provides feedback to the performer. The teacher interacts primarily with the observer about what the performer is doing, and what kinds of feedback would be appropriate for the observer to give. Analyzing another's performance of a task is a complex activity and requires the observer to be able to utilize some fairly sophisticated cognitive operations. The observer is asked to compare the performer's actions to a predetermined model, and based on the results of the comparison, make decisions about what feedback would be appropriate. These kinds of activities seem to go beyond simple recall and replication of previously learned knowledge and the Reciprocal Style in particular should be credited with providing opportunities for students to utilize thinking skills of a higher order than the authors indicate.

One of the most appealing features of the Spectrum is that it has so much to offer teachers who want to encourage critical thinking in their students. The Spectrum of Styles presents a variety of teaching strategies that will encourage students to take responsibility for decisions regarding their own learning. It is this emphasis on decision making that provides teachers with tools to get students to think critically. Mosston and Ashworth have chosen to identify the styles in the Spectrum clustered at the higher end as those that encourage students to utilize higher order thinking skills. However, in my experience working with teachers and student teachers in the public schools, it seems that most teachers utilize teaching strategies representative of styles at the beginning of the spectrum (Command and Practice styles in particular). An implication (continues on page 22)