

Subject: Should Students be Graded on Participation?
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Faculty Focus

Reconsidering Grading Students on Class Participation

By Christopher Willard

A common phrase uttered during the first day of class is: "You will be graded on class participation." As instructors we know what we expect. But what exactly do our students think we mean by that statement? The longer I've taught the more I've come to realize that students may not really know.

The most enthusiastic students might interpret this as a need to jump in on every issue, while across the room a student who labels herself as shy uses the overzealous students' seemingly effortless participation to reinforce her own self-beliefs. Another student might interpret participation to mean attendance and expects full marks for participation just for showing up. Without a shared consensus, it is unfair to penalize students for individual interpretations that may not fit our definition.

Of course, many of us do define participation, often letting students know our desire that they participate in class discussions – asking and answering questions, offering their perspectives, etc. And yet, how often do we question whether we may be unknowingly marginalizing students by our expectation? A student may never have learned skills of public speaking, may speak English as a second or third language, may not wish to publically display a speech disorder, or may come from a background where speaking up in a class or questioning a person in power is discouraged or perceived as rude. A student may require more time than others to process information. And, it is important to note, students are under no obligation to disclose any of these attributes to other students or the instructor.

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When I first began teaching, I expected students to speak aloud and I viewed it as transgressing cultural norms and backgrounds. I thought that a student's verbal participation was a matter of just trying and I would call on them in my attempt to help. I now consider participation to be a layered and learned skill.

The significant question that arises is this: If I am grading on participation, what am I doing to teach this skill? Or contrarily, how can I grade what I do not teach? Students agree. I value participation in classes, we discuss it and I support students in trying out forms of verbal interactions, but I do not grade it. I now save the grading for things that align more specifically with the content and intended outcomes.

What I've discovered, expectedly, is that students who no longer associate stress with speaking in class are more interested in verbally questioning, dialoguing, opining, and critically analyzing – in other words they participate more, which is exactly what I wanted all along.

Christopher Willard is an author, visual artist, and educator. He is Head of Painting at the Alberta College of Art + Design, Alberta, Canada.

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