

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

Should We Stop Grading Class Participation?

Why a professor no longer grades students on how much they speak up in class.

By *James M. Lang*

APRIL 9, 2021





GETTY IMAGES

When I began teaching, I adopted the common practice of grading student participation. I set aside 10 percent of my students' grades for that purpose, and did my best to keep track of how much they spoke up in class. That was challenging, especially early in my career, when in a typical semester I was teaching three or four courses of 20 to 30 students each. I had no formal system for tracking who spoke and how often — I simply relied on my observations and recollections.

Practically speaking, I tended to use the class-participation score to reward students who I felt deserved a grade boost at the end of the semester. When I was sitting down to assign final grades, I would first look at how they did on papers, tests, and projects, and then at their class participation. If they'd participated a lot, I would give them an A in that category, and it might raise their final grade from, say, a B to a B-plus. If they didn't participate much, I didn't punish them for it — I would just match their participation score to whatever grade they had earned for the other 90 percent of the course, so their overall grade would remain the same.

Even as I write these words, I am cringing at the thought that I engaged in this pedagogical practice for a good dozen years or more.

I no longer grade class participation. I seem to be in the minority on that, based on my conversations with other faculty members. But I have come to believe that grading student participation is a poor pedagogical choice, and that a better alternative exists. Here I'll explain why — and how I cultivate participation in my courses, even without hanging a grade-based incentive over my students' heads.

What drove me away from grading student participation was an uneasy feeling — and it grew each year — that grades were not something that should be fudged based on my hunches and instincts, or influenced in any way by my informal observations and memories. In retrospect,

it seems ridiculous to believe that I could accurately measure how much every student participated in all my courses during a 15-week semester.

Such a “system” is subject to every kind of bias imaginable. In addition to whatever unconscious biases I might be carrying toward students based on their identities, I might find myself looking more favorably on a student whose comments or demeanor remind me a little of myself — or unfavorably on a student who reminds me of someone I dislike.

You also don’t have to teach for very long to discover that some students love to participate in class, and will do so at every chance they get, sometimes in very superficial ways. How do I measure the difference between an introvert who makes one comment that changes the way we all think of the material, and an extrovert who makes 10 comments that are all the equivalent of “I agree with that.”

I do know fair-minded graders of class participation who do things like keep a roster on their desk and put check marks next to the names of students who speak.

But when we drill down to the particulars, this grading practice raises some hard questions that usually are left unanswered: Are all comments equal? What counts as a comment worthy of a good grade? How am I tracking the quality of the comments, as opposed to the sheer quantity?

And don’t even get me started on the biases of our very imperfect human memory. Perhaps most relevant here, psychologists will tell you that we’re all subject to the [recency effect](#) — a tendency to recollect, most easily and prominently, things from the very recent past. As the instructor, what I remember happening in the final weeks of the semester might shape my evaluation of a student’s participation more than what happened in the first few weeks. That might not be fair to a student who participated a lot early on but then got overwhelmed and quieted down later in the semester.

Even if I could track everyone's participation accurately, I am not sure we really *should* grade students on how willing they are to raise their hands and speak in front of a group. We all know — or have been — students who are made anxious at the thought of class participation, or who have learning challenges or disabilities that prevent them from engaging in a whole-class discussion as actively as do their peers. Should they be punished for their character traits or anxieties?

A few years ago those concerns reached enough of a fever pitch to persuade me to stop this practice altogether. It was difficult to abandon, because grading participation does stem from a positive intention: I want students to take part in class. Those who participate are more likely to succeed in the course because they have articulated their thoughts, have received feedback, and can revise them for graded papers, quizzes, and assessments. Those are excellent reasons to encourage participation.

If you grade participation, you might also do so because you believe it helps students develop thinking and speaking skills that will benefit them in the future. In some disciplines the ability to think on your feet might be an essential skill. As with any skill, it will improve with practice, so regular classroom participation can hone it.

But while those are excellent reasons to encourage participation, the motivation does not have to come in the form of a grade.

I no longer grade participation because — as I explain to students on the syllabus and on the first day of the semester — everyone participates in my courses. That's the expectation and the reality. Participation is not some optional extra. It's as essential to the course as writing the assigned papers and taking the final exam. You can't be a full member of our community without participating in class.

That participation does not always consist of comments lobbed into classwide discussions, but can take many forms. Most frequently, students in my courses will be speaking with one

another in pairs or small groups as they complete some assigned task. In a literature course I might ask them to annotate a certain poem in groups; in a writing class I might ask pairs of students to identify the three most effective qualities of a piece of writing. Over the course of the semester, all students will have participated in enough of these groups that they will have spoken multiple times in the classroom.

But they will participate in classwide discussion, too. This happens via what some people call “cold-calling,” but what I prefer to call “invitational participation.” When I ask students to join the discussion, I’m not challenging them to a duel. I’m inviting them to share their views because I value what they think. My invitations are premised on the fact that their comments matter. We can all learn from what they have to offer to the discussion.

Of course, invitational participation (or cold-calling, or whatever you prefer to call it) can provoke fear in students, so I prepare them in three ways:

- Every whole-class discussion begins either with a small-group activity or with each student writing a one-paragraph response to a discussion question. Students can always respond to my invitation to speak in class by telling me what they wrote on their own, or discussed in their groups. Even the most introverted or anxious students can usually muster the energy to report a group’s conclusion or summarize a writing exercise. (For more tips on this front, read Jay Howard’s advice guide on “[class discussion](#).”)
- I work very hard to make class a safe and inclusive environment, using many of the strategies recommended in the work of [Viji Sathy and Kelly A. Hogan](#). I also try to express my gratitude for participation on a regular basis, both in class and outside of it. Sometimes, when I return their written exercises to them, I will write short notes commending or thanking students for in-class comments. I might also thank students for their participation when they visit me in office hours.
- Most important, my invitation can always be declined. Students know they can always say “pass,” and they won’t be docked for it. I make this clear in the way I frame the

invitations: “Kiara, you’ve been quiet for a while, but you look thoughtful. Do you have something you want to add, or do you want to just keep thinking?” or “David, I remember you wrote something about this in your essay — do you want to throw that into the mix now?” I always try to frame invitations to imply: I bet you have something important to add here; any chance you want to join the conversation?

I should note here that, in recent years, I have received accommodation letters that specify individual students should not be required to participate in class involuntarily. Of course, I respect that accommodation — but I also usually meet with those students separately, after I have explained the participation policy, and ask them whether they would be willing to receive an occasional invitation, which they can of course turn down. Every one of those students has been willing to receive the invitations, and has eventually spoken in class.

The key is to create a welcoming environment for students, ensure that they have had time to think or write prior to a discussion, and give them the option to pass. Making participation an ungraded classroom norm might be one of the most inclusive practices we could undertake as teachers. It can [help students find their lost voices](#), empower those who feel deprived of agency in other parts of their lives, and prevent discussions from being dominated by students who talk over their peers and crowd out other voices.

In a classroom in which everyone participates, everyone is equal. The discussions are not combat rings in which students battle one another for airtime in order to earn good grades. They are opportunities for us all to think together and learn from one another.

If you believe student participation in your courses benefits your students, give that benefit to every student. Use invitational participation or other engagement strategies to ensure that every student has a voice in your classroom — and not just the ones who are competing for a grade.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

TEACHING & LEARNING

FACULTY LIFE

GRADUATE EDUCATION

James M. Lang

James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption University, in Worcester, Mass. His [new book](#) is *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It*, published by Basic Books in October. He also is the [author of](#) *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning*. His Twitter handle is [@LangOnCourse](#).

1255 23rd Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037

© 2021 The Chronicle of Higher Education