

Grading class participation signals students the kind of learning and thinking an instructor values. This chapter describes three models of class participation, several models for assessment including a sample rubric, problems with assessing classroom participation, and strategies for overcoming these problems.

Grading Classroom Participation

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A recent study of core curriculum syllabi at Seattle University revealed that 93 percent of courses included class participation as a component of course grades. Our informal discussions with professors, however, suggest that most professors determine participation grades impressionistically using class participation largely as a fudge factor in computing final course grades. This phenomenon helps explain why assessment and measurement scholars almost universally advise against grading class participation (see Davis, 1993, pp. 80, 283). According to Jacobs and Chase (1992), weighing student behaviors into a course grade “contaminate {s the grade as a measure of achievement of the course objectives” (p. 195). Jacobs and Chase identify several reasons for not grading class participation: professors generally don’t provide instruction on how to improve participation; interpretation of student behavior is difficult and subjective; participation often depends on a student’s personality thus disadvantaging shy or introverted students; record-keeping is problematic: participation scores for a given individual are hard to justify if challenged.

Despite these objections, we believe that grading class participation can send positive signals to students about the kind of learning and thinking an instructor values, such as growth in critical thinking, active learning, development of listening and speaking skills needed for career success, and the ability to join a discipline’s conversation. By explaining these values to students, professors can justify the emphasis they place on class participation. Moreover, research reveals that students with a high grade orientation value only those portions of a course that are visibly graded (Marrano and others, 1988, p. 137; Janzow and Eison, 1990). When students see that their participation is being graded regularly and consistently, they adjust their study habits accordingly to be prepared for active participation.

We contend that the problem of impressionism in assessing classroom participation can be substantially alleviated through scoring rubrics analogous to holistic or analytic rubrics used in assessing writing (for example, White, 1994). In the following pages we describe three different modes of class participation and provide several models for assessment including a sample rubric. We then examine problems with assessing classroom participation and suggest strategies for overcoming them.

Modes of Classroom Participation

Before explaining how we grade class participation, we should identify briefly the various ways a participatory classroom can be structured. The most common participatory classroom uses what we might call open or whole-class discussion, wherein the instructor poses questions aimed at drawing all class members into conversation. To facilitate whole-class discussion, the instructor might request a U-shaped case classroom, move chairs into a horseshoe or circle, or otherwise adjust space so that students can address each other without passing all commentary through the instructor (Welty 1989).

Another method, common among professors who value think-on-your-feet Socratic examination, is the “cold-calling” mode, fixed in the popular imagination by Professor Kingsfield in the 1972 film *The Paper Chase*. In cold calling, the professor poses a question and then calls on students at random to formulate their answers. In assessing student responses, many professors take into account the difficulty level of the question posed, often using a taxonomy such as that of Bloom (1956). Whereas the open-discussion professor tends to value any kind of question or response from students, the cold-calling professor often assesses the student for quality of response during the Socratic examination.

Still another kind of participatory class employs collaborative learning, in which students work in small groups toward a consensus solution of problems designed by the instructor and then report their solutions in a plenary session. Differences among group solutions often lead to whole-class discussions during the plenary session (Johnson and Johnson, 1991; Bruffee, 1993).

In addition to these modes of class participation, some professors also count such out-of-class behaviors as email discussions on class listserves, timely completion of out-of-class journal entries, collaboration on group homework projects, or even conferences with the instructor during office hours.

Developing an Assessment Measure: A Prototype Example

In this section we'll outline a prototypical method for developing an assessment measure, in this case for a professor who combines whole-class discussion with occasional small group work. The instructor's first task is to envision what an ideal class session would look like. For example, during an ideal whole-class discussion, all students would participate, and the discussion itself would reveal dialogic inquiry characterized by empathic listening to other students' views as well as reasonably high levels of critical thinking. (For characteristics of an ideal class discussion, see Baron, 1987, pp. 230—31)

To develop an assessment measure, the prototypical instructor, near the outset of a course, negotiates with students the criteria for successful class participation. The instructor can begin by asking the class to think of times when class discussion has gone well for them: “What were the features of those discussions?” the professor can ask. “What behaviors did students exhibit? What was the professor's role versus the students' role in making good discussions happen?” As the instructor records students' responses on the chalkboard, he or she can add his or her own criteria to the list. The instructor's goal is to show how

effective discussion can develop critical thinking and lead to higher levels of learning.

Once a master list of the traits and features of an ideal discussion is on the board, the instructor and students can formulate guidelines for individual behaviors (both students' and instructor's) that will help create effective discussions. From this list, an instructor can create a holistic rubric for assessing class participation (see Exhibit 3.1). Using such a rubric, the instructor can assign students points for class discussion at several different times in the term.

Additionally, the prototypical instructor can ask students to write a self-assessment of their own participation. The instructor might ask students questions such as these: (1) Where do you currently rank yourself on the scoring rubric? Why? (2) What might you do to improve the quality of your own participation? (3) What can the instructor do to help improve classroom discussions? (4) What do you like best and least about classroom discussions over the last two weeks? Such self-assessments encourage students to think reflectively about their role in class discussions and provide professors with useful data about students' perceptions of the classroom environment. When the student's self-assessment differs substantially from the instructor the self-evaluation can be a useful starting place for a student-professor conference. We have found, for example, that students whom we would rate as 5's or 6's on the rubric often fear that they are 4's; we occasionally find too that students with hostile or bored body language are actually enjoying discussions and are unaware of their body signals.

Finally some professors might ask students to rank each other on the scoring rubric. These peer rankings can then be averaged and compared to the instructor's ranking to increase the reliability of the measure.

Exhibit 3.1. Holistic Rubric for Scoring Class Participation

- 6 A student receiving a 6 comes to class prepared;¹ contributes readily to the conversation but doesn't dominate it: makes thoughtful contributions that advance the conversation; shows interest in and respect for others' views; participates actively in small groups.
- 5 Comes to class prepared and makes thoughtful comments when called upon, contributes occasionally without prompting: shows interest in and respect for others' views; participates actively in small groups. A 5 score may also be appropriate to an active participant whose contributions are less developed or cogent than those of a 6 but still advance the conversation.
- 4 A student receiving a 4 participates in discussion, but in a problematic way. Such students may talk too much, make rambling or tangential contributions, continually interrupt the instructor with digressive questions, bluff their way when unprepared, or otherwise dominate discussions, not acknowledging cues of annoyance from instructor or students. Students in this category often profit from a conference with the instructor.
- 3 A student receiving a 3 comes to class prepared, but does not voluntarily contribute to discussions and gives only minimal answers when called

- upon. Nevertheless these students show interest in the discussion, listen attentively, and take notes. Students in this category may be shy or introverted. The instructor may choose to give such students a 5 if they participate fully in small group discussions or if they make progress in overcoming shyness as the course progresses. Sympathetic counseling of such students often helps.²
- 2-1 Students in this range often seem on the margins of the class and may have a negative effect on the participation of others. Students receiving a 2 often don't participate because they haven't read the material or done the homework. Students receiving a 1 may be actually disruptive, radiating negative energy via hostile or bored body language, or be overtly rude.

NOTE. This scoring guide assumes regular attendance: the instructor may lower participation scores for absences or tardiness.

1. Preparation can be measured by quizzes, by brief writing assignments at the start of class, by completion of out-of-class journal entries or other homework, or by evidence from direct questioning.
2. During class discussions of this rubric, we have found that students often want to reverse the 4's and the 3's. They will argue that a quiet student who actively listens deserves more points than the dominating/annoying student. Teachers may wish to follow this suggestion.

Varying the Prototype: Alternative Ways to Assess Participation

In this section, we turn from a hypothetical instructor to actual case examples of two professors whose strategies for assessing class participation vary from the preceding prototype. Our goal in this section is to emphasize the range of options that professors have for assessing participation.

Our first example of an alternative assessment strategy—based on a cold-calling approach—is used by co-author Dean Peterson in his Principles of Macroeconomics class. At the beginning of the term, Peterson announces that classroom participation will be graded and included as a part of the homework component for the computation of final grades. Students are told to expect to be called on individually to give definitions, explain relationships, or respond to articles taken from popular media sources such as the New York Times or Business Week. Peterson determines which students he will query by drawing names from a randomly shuffled deck of 3 x 5 cards, each card bearing the name of one student. Satisfactory answers are recorded on the cards as a 2 (strong answer), 1 (satisfactory answer), or 0 (unsatisfactory answer or absence). At the end of the term, Peterson uses the numbers to create a ratio, the numerator determined by the sum of the points received and the denominator by the number of questions a student was asked times 2 (the maximum points possible for each question). The resultant ratio is then multiplied by the total number of points allotted for class participation in Peterson's grading scheme for the course.

Peterson's random cold calling motivates students to become energetic readers of assigned material. Peterson channels this energy by distributing in

advance lists of topics from assigned readings (terms, concepts, questions requiring critical thinking) for which students will be responsible during each day's cold calls. (Additionally all previously discussed material is fair game for cold calls.) Peterson uses cold-calling in roughly three quarters of his class sessions. The number of questions asked and the time devoted to this technique vary considerably depending on the amount of study material distributed in advance.

A possible weakness of Peterson's card approach is that it does not take into account the difficulty level of the question asked. Professors wishing to construct a more sophisticated measure can adopt strategies suggested by Stiggins, Rubel, and Quellmalz (1986), who present a scoring chart based on Blooms taxonomy of educational objectives. A similar grading scheme (Sanders, 1966) allows professors to measure student performance on a 1 – 10 point scale with the most points allotted to satisfactory answers to difficult questions.

Another approach to grading class participation, vastly different from Peterson's cold-calling method, is taken by history professor Arthur Fisher of Seattle University, who rejects holistic scales, record-keeping, and other attempts to create empirical data. In an email message to us, Fisher stated, "I believe that all grading is primarily subjective, and I tell students so on the first day . . . What I measure, I tell them, is whether I think that they are adults with respect to the material, or if not, then what share of adult they are." In some of his history classes, Fisher bases up to half the course grade on students' ability to carry on committed and sustained discussion. Students are expected to come to class having actively grappled with the course readings, which are predominately primary sources. In his syllabus, Fisher explains that during class discussion "the authors' assumptions, objectives, forms of argument, adduced evidence, and conclusions will all be laid bare. Along with participating in the daily classroom discussion, students are required to keep a notebook "in which they are to accumulate their jottings and reflections on the readings" (course syllabus).

On a typical day Fisher initiates the day's discussion and then intervenes only when needed to ensure that important points are covered. At the end of the term, Fisher grades the participation subjectively based on his impressions of students' performance and his evaluation of the reading notebooks which he collects periodically during the course at random. By not creating point systems, scales, and other attempts to objectify classroom performance. Fisher assumes the role of supportive but demanding coach interested in holistic performance. Unable to accumulate points (and bicker about them), students set out simply to impress the professor that they are "adults with respect to the material." Fisher's results, based on peer observations, on student performance on papers and exams, and on student ratings, are excellent.

The strength of Fisher's approach is that the extensive weight placed on class participation, combined with Fisher's careful observation and coaching of students' behaviors, leads to high-level performance. A weakness, some might argue, is that the lack of regularly assigned points may limit students' opportunity to evaluate and improve their performance and may make the final class participation grade seem more arbitrary.

Problem Areas and Suggestions for Overcoming Them

The assessment of class participation raises knotty problems about how to distribute participation so that the most extroverted students don't dominate the discussion while others sit silently. To grade class participation fairly the instructor needs to create an environment that gives all students an opportunity to participate. Many of these problems are solved by Peterson's cold-calling method since the opportunity to speak is distributed randomly by the shuffling of the cards. But for professors who use whole-class discussion with limited prompting from the instructor, they need other means of inviting the silent to speak and quieting the extroverts. This section offers several strategies.

Strategy 1: Create Activities in Which Participants Report on Homework Already Prepared. Often, quiet people are more comfortable speaking in class if they can prepare ahead of time. Co-author John Bean assigns "guided journals" in which students write a one-page journal entry prior to each class in response to a question passed out in advance (Bean, 1996, pp. 107 – 108). A student can be called on to summarize what he or she wrote in a journal, thus reducing the anxiety of having to respond to a question extemporaneously. A related strategy is reported by Angelo and Cross (1993), who describe how a calculus instructor modified a student learning assessment technique to promote active participation in discussions (pp. 38 – 40).

Strategy 2: Include an Email Component for Class Participation. Another strategy is to conduct some class discussions on email. Many students who are pathologically quiet in class come to life through email. Reports of successful strategies for incorporating email in a course are becoming more common in the literature (Meacham, 1994; Bhide, 1996).

Strategy 3: Increase Wait Time. A third method of leveling the playing field in classroom participation is to pose a question and then to enforce a minute or so of silence for students to structure their reply. Some professors ask students to write non-stop during this time to get initial ideas down on paper. After a minute or so, the instructor asks for volunteers or calls on a selected student.

Strategy 4: Use a "Card System" for Shy Students. Professors might also consider using "comment cards" for shy students. Students who are reluctant to participate in class might be allowed to turn in 3 x 5 cards bearing their responses to questions posed during discussion.

Strategy 5: Develop Techniques for Quieting Discussion Dominators (rubric category 4 in Figure 3.1). A number of writers have addressed the problem of the overly talkative or rambling student. McKeachie (1986, p. 37) for example, suggests that professors assign one or two students to act as "observers" with the duty of reporting to the class the extent to which participation is evenly distributed. The instructor might even assign a discussion monopolizer to be an observer for a day (See Davis, 1993, p. 79 for a helpful summary of strategies for quieting discussion dominators).

Strategy 6: Coach Problematic Students and Reward Progress. Professors can also invite students who are not successfully participating in class to an office conference where the instructor can speak honestly about the

problem and listen to students perspectives and concerns. Through supportive coaching, students may begin to make small steps toward progress—steps which the instructor can visibly reward.

Conclusion

Our premise in this article is that the quality of student performance during class discussions can be improved if the instructor develops consistent and articulable standards for assessing classroom participation. We suggest several options for assessing participation and believe that professors must choose the approach that best matches their course goals and pedagogical methods. In conjunction with effective writing assignments and with examinations that test at the higher levels of Bloom taxonomy an instructor's method for assessing classroom participation is one of a whole set of signals about the kind of thinking and learning valued in a course.

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