

Evaluating Student Participation

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Abstract

There is a plethora of resources and research to support teachers in their efforts to maximize student participation in the classroom; however, assessing the quality of this participation presents its own unique set of challenges. From kindergarten to graduate school, most teachers include an element of class participation in their final grade calculations. Traditionally, these assessments of student participation are highly subjective – rewarding more talkative students and punishing quiet ones without any specific supporting evidence. This paper investigates current practices in evaluating both the quality and quantity of student participation to identify techniques aimed at eliminating the extroverted versus introverted student bias.

To Grade or Not to Grade

Before beginning the discussion on how to properly evaluate classroom participation, it is important to recognize that many scholars recommend that student participation should not be graded at all. The contention is that it is too difficult to identify consistent and objective criterion for evaluation of individual student participation, and, thus, such grading attempts are inherently unreliable (Carter, 1977). This problem is often compounded by a lack of supporting grade records – generating significant difficulty for teachers in justifying their participation grade assessment when responding to student challenges at the end of the term. Davis (1993) points out that classroom discussion could also be stifled through the use of a formal grading process and that shy students would be disadvantaged by such practices. Jacobs and Chase (1992) highlight these same concerns and further argue that professors rarely offer feedback to students in terms of class participation; preventing students from improving their performance in this area. Despite these compelling arguments, there are several techniques currently used in evaluating student participation that are directly aimed at addressing these concerns of reliability and fairness in grading practices.

Effective Evaluation Methods for Student Participation

The most common solution used to reduce the ambiguity associated with student participation grades is to incorporate an assessment rubric. This method utilizes a holistic approach to set clear standards of performance for students. Bean and Peterson (1998) describe a prototypical rubric based on a scale of 1-6 and highlight the importance of establishing these

metrics early in the course. They also suggest using an in-class exercise to identify the scoring standards – empowering the students in the evaluation process and eliminating many potential grade challenges at the end of the term. Maznevski (1996) uses a grading rubric scale of 0-4 based on behavioral indicators that correspond to Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives – providing students with a relatively objective list of evaluation criteria at the outset of a semester. For example, students achieve the highest score of 4 by demonstrating synthesis and evaluation in their class participation. Students are evaluated by the instructor immediately following each class session and provided interim feedback in the form of mid-term assessments and optional student-teacher conferences. This approach alleviates the subjective nature of class participation grades and offers students the opportunity to both recognize and improve poor performance.

Another effective method in evaluating student participation is the use of peer assessments. Melvin (1988) describes a process by which students rank their peers at the end of the term on a 3-point scale with a forced distribution designed to reduce grading leniency. The average peer evaluation score for each student is converted into a corresponding letter grade with C- representing the lowest possible score. As described by Love (1981), peer assessments generally receive a negative acceptance rating from rated individuals due to perceived friendship biases. Melvin's (1988) evaluation technique addresses such concerns by using the peer ranking results as a backup resource in assigning class participation grades – peer scores are only applied in instances when they are at least one letter grade higher than the instructor's assessment. Using an approach that can only benefit the final grade makes student acceptance a moot point. Melvin (1988) also points out the added benefit of using peer evaluations as further justification in the event of participation grade challenges – an event he has yet to experience with this grading system.

Assessment of class participation can also be accomplished through formal evaluation of student responses in the classroom. The technique of cold-calling is used when instructors select students for response involuntarily and without prior warning. Bean and Peterson (1998) describe a cold-calling strategy in which the instructor randomly selects students using a shuffled deck of 3x5 index cards with the name of one student on each card. The instructor then records an immediate assessment of the student's answer on the card as 2 (strong answer), 1 (satisfactory answer), and 0 (unsatisfactory answer or absence). Students receive guidance early in the term explaining the expectations for cold-call responses, as well as, an advanced list of topics that students are responsible to know for each reading assignment. A recent study by Dallimore et al. (2004) shows supportive evidence for the use of cold-calling as a motivational tool for class preparation, and, thus, increases student participation in many instances. Further study is required to analyze the benefits of the cold-calling when class participation is not a significant graded requirement.

Include discussion of journal entries, Blackboard quizzes, and other quantifiable metrics of class preparation that typically lead to better class participation.

Conclusion...

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Annotated Bibliography...