

Thinking About Teaching - Class Participation

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I recently got a flash across my computer screen boldly announcing that grading students on class participation may not foster student learning. Two days later, I got another email from a major publisher touting important new breakthrough tools that it has developed to facilitate classroom engagement and measure outcomes, suggesting that class participation is a key component of student learning and assessment of participation is crucial. Is it?

Both pronouncements captured my attention. On my syllabus, I routinely include “class participation and attendance” as part of how I evaluate students.

Grading attendance is easy; just count the number of times a student shows up and deduct points for absences. Was it Woody Allen who said “showing up is 80% of success/life?”

Despite practically everyone agreeing that class participation is important, grading participation is not so easy.

Research shows that learning is an active process. Students are able to make connections and retain what they learn when they engage actively with the material and what is happening in the classroom.

Learning experts have also documented greater gains in confidence when students are able to write about, read, interact with, and discuss what they read when they participate in classroom discussions. Participation teaches students how to ask questions -- which we claim to value.

On the other hand, awarding points for participation can place quiet students at an unfair disadvantage. The quiet student might simply need more time to prepare a verbal response; perhaps they fear judgment from their classmates or they might come from a culture that values introversion.

Participation points might also lead to burnout. Worried about a final grade, an introverted student might play the part of an extrovert. But without sufficient time to unwind in between ‘performances’, it can take a toll. Although stretching ourselves fosters personal growth, it is difficult to continually fake extroversion. In the end, the same bold voices dominate the conversation; marginalizing soft-spoken students even more.

But the purpose of class participation is not to produce extroverts. It provides a reading on how well students understand the material. It is an indication of their willingness to share, to give and take, to contribute and become a ‘member’ of a group. I think this is important. The classroom should be a special space--one not just devoted to learning content but one where we learn how to ‘be’; a place of existential and phenomenological actuality, a radical, state of the art space where we rise above who we are. The work of the classroom is to prepare students for what they will be doing once they graduate. Thus, the classroom is a microclimate of sorts-one where students are trained to be leaders and advocates. The point of class participation is to enforce a routine similar to what is found in professional settings outside of the academic world.

We spend countless hours preparing exams that are reliable and valid -- with varying degrees of success. We all know that the ability of students to pass an exam does not guarantee success in practice. We also know that exams and even writing assignments are not the most effective way to evaluate each and every learning objective.

I suggest here that the quantity and quality of participation can be improved if the instructor develops consistent and articulable assessment standards. Unfortunately, as it stands now, it’s a guessing game – students guessing what teachers want and teachers guessing that students know what they want- autonomy gone awry. Attaching a grade to participation is a signifier of its importance. It also serves as both a carrot and a stick; motivation and reward. Participating is the responsibility that ensures the right; the price one pays for admission. Finding ways to assess and evaluate student classroom participation is necessary and important.

Do you include participation in your evaluation of students? How do you assess it? Care to share your thoughts?

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