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# Treating Participation as an Assignment

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Treating Participation as an Assignment  
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Participation is a funny thing. Some of us grade it obliquely, bumping up the final grades for students that were truly exceptional at it. Some of us explicitly state on the syllabus how important it is for students to come to class “ready and willing to participate,” but only allocate 10% of the overall grade to this supposedly valued activity.

But perhaps the most common thing that we do as instructors with participation is this: despite the fact that participation is one of the most commonly “submitted” activities in a class, very few instructors treat participation like an actual assignment.

Treating participation as a non-assignment has several important consequences. First, it means that instructors recuse themselves of the responsibilities associated with assignments. Most educators would be ashamed to provide feedback on an assignment several months after the fact. However, many students may go an entire semester without receiving any grades or useful feedback on their participation.

Second, since participation is not viewed as an assignment, we often do not give it any rubric. Consequently, students (and instructors) can be left in the dark on what successful participation actually looks like. It is entirely possible for no one to know exactly how a student is doing on participation until the final grades are submitted.

Now, many of us probably provide in-class feedback on participation to our students. By using terms like “excellent,” “exceptional,” “good, but I need a bit more,” and “I’m not sure I remember that part from the reading,” we can give fairly straightforward feedback.

However, few of us probably jot down how many times we told a particular student “great comment.” Instead, we likely wait until the end of the semester to determine the participation grade. Although we might tell ourselves that we need an entire semester to correctly gauge the “real” participation grade, the basic limits of human memory prevent us from really evaluating the entire semester. Instead, we are evaluating what we can *recall* of student performance. In other words, we probably rely on the most dramatic, emotional examples of student behavior (both positive and negative) as well as what happened in the last several weeks of the semester. Naturally, this approach is subject to being gamed by students, who know that a strong performance in the last month of class is probably worth more than the same performance in the first month of class.

Fortunately, there are a few simple ways to avoid some of the aforementioned problems. First, we can provide a simple rubric to clarify how participation (and absences) will be assessed. In

order to move beyond the problem of memory when grading participation, we might consider grading participation more often. This could be done by simply updating a student's participation grade every few weeks. Alternately, one can decide ahead of time which students will be graded for a particular class and take the average of these installments. In either case, if the instructor posts the participation grades, students will get the same type of timely feedback that we provide with our other assignments.

Some instructors have raised a valid criticism which is that we should not even be grading participation in the first place because it unfairly penalizes people who are shy, introverted, and uncomfortable with public speaking. This is absolutely true—grading participation *does* penalize those students (or encourages them to improve upon a weakness, depending on your view).

However *all* assignments penalize some type of student (e.g., take-home essays penalize procrastinators and weak writers, in-class exams penalize those that struggle with writing quickly and taking timed tests, and group work penalizes those that work poorly in groups).

So why do we single out participation as being “unfair?” Arguably, because most of us never thought of participation as being a real assignment in the first place.

I am not saying that participation should necessarily be given regular grades and a rubric. But if we tell our students that it is important, and if participation will ultimately affect their grades, I think we need to ask ourselves why we do not treat it like any other graded work by students. If we do not accord participation the same level of respect that we do other assignments, we should not be surprised when students follow our lead.

*[Note: Please contact the author at [bbosch2@unl.edu](mailto:bbosch2@unl.edu) if you are interested in examples of my participation rubric.]*