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Making Class Participation Grades Meaningful

Benjamin Rifkin calls for incentivizing preparation for class discussions and making expectations for student engagement more transparent.

By [Benjamin Rifkin](#)



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I read with interest [Anna Broadbent's essay](#) on the benefits and pitfalls of class participation grades. From my perch as a provost, former dean and former department chair, I find that the grade for class participation is often one of the sources of misunderstanding that leads to grade appeals. That misunderstanding

often reflects a missed opportunity for a faculty member to communicate with students about how to engage successfully in classroom-based activities.

I look at the issue of class participation, which I prefer to construe as “class engagement,” as an opportunity to incentivize deep learning, taking a transformational rather than a transactional approach to the topic. Accordingly, I offer these principle-based suggestions.

Let's Reframe Class Participation as Class Engagement

Many class participation policies I have seen in course syllabi reward students for contributing to classwide discussion, regardless of the quality of their contributions—even if they are irrelevant or suggest that students either have not done the reading or have not been listening to their classmates. Such policies incentivize students to say something, even if it doesn't advance the learning experience. At the same time, this approach doesn't reward the shy student who is engaging thoughtfully with their peers' ideas in a pair or group conversation.

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Instead of thinking about participation in this way, let's reframe class participation as engagement in classroom-based activities. This approach is more inclusive of pair and group discussions, to which some students are more comfortable contributing, and recognizes that only relevant and meaningful contributions to class discussion reflect engagement. Furthermore, successful engagement depends on meaningful preparation for class.

Let's Incentivize Preparation for Class Engagement

Successful class discussions depend on student preparation. We assign reading or viewing or other at-home work, and some of our students will complete those at-home assignments prior to the relevant class discussion and remember what they've read and viewed in ways that prepare them to engage successfully. Other students will do the assigned reading or viewing but not be able to retrieve their impressions and reactions to inform class discussions. And then, of course, many students won't do the reading or viewing at all, or at least not prior to the relevant class discussion, because they have little incentive to do so and many incentives to do other things (e.g., prepare for another class, do their laundry or play games on the internet). After all, they have the experience of sitting back in class discussion while others contribute, or of contributing something themselves in reaction to something another student has said.

I have had great success incentivizing student preparation for class by conducting short quizzes at every class meeting. These quizzes, graded on a credit–no credit basis, consist of eight questions, all true-false, multiple choice or fill-in-the blank, with five or six questions based on the assigned reading or viewing for that class day and two or three based on the discussion from the previous class. All the questions are designed around the lowest levels of Bloom's taxonomy (not interpretation, but fact recall) and the quizzes are all open-note, which incentivizes students to take

notes on their reading and the class discussion. (Sometimes I pose a question in which I name the student who made a particular contribution to class discussion; I have found that students try to contribute ideas that wind up being the focus of a quiz question.)

The grade for quizzes for the semester is the percentage of quizzes the students have passed, and I drop three failed quizzes before I calculate the quiz grade, which further reduces the stress of the quizzing. I administer the quizzes in the first five minutes of class and do not allow latecomers to take the quiz. This approach has yielded two benefits for me: Most of my students come to class on time all the time, and most of my students do the reading or viewing for each class meeting, which makes discussion far more powerful.

Let's Take Advantage of Opportunities for Actionable Feedback

When students receive a class participation grade only at the end of the semester, or they never get a class participation grade at all, they have not been given any feedback that they could have used to improve their performance in class discussions. Giving frequent and detailed feedback about class engagement, however, can be burdensome for faculty, who have so many other responsibilities.

I recommend establishing a daily point system for class engagement in which students can earn one point for meaningful engagement in every 10 minutes of classroom-based activities and then letting students know that they have earned all the possible points unless you tell them otherwise. I generally don't provide any comments on class engagement unless a student has demonstrated engagement at a level below the highest mark possible.

I provide the daily class engagement grades (e.g., five points for yesterday's 50-minute class) in my class's electronic grade book and on the returned paper-based

quizzes so students get that flow of information. I mark students down in class engagement (i.e., do not give them all the points available) for behaviors that are counterproductive, disrespectful or evidence of lack of engagement, as well as for arriving late to class, and I always provide a brief comment explaining how students missed the mark when they do not earn all the possible points. The course grade for class engagement is calculated as a percentage of class engagement points earned of all those class engagement points available, allowing for excused absences.

Typical comments for class engagement might include “Great question about the text’s connection to this week’s news” or “You were distracted by your phone in class today.” This approach, with a rubric defining productive and nonproductive behaviors provided in the course syllabus, helps to insulate instructors from accusations of subjectivity in assigning grades for class engagement. And giving students a grade on their class engagement with such comments constitutes actionable feedback they can use to do better if they want. By assuming that all students will earn all the class engagement points for each class session until and unless they prove otherwise, the process of recording those grades takes very little time, even for a large class.

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Let's Design Our Class-Based Activities to Prioritize Synchronous Human Interaction

Class engagement depends on activities in which students can engage. Accordingly, we need to prioritize synchronous human interaction in our classroom-based lessons. For me, this has meant planning lessons in which students engage in activities based on the reading that require them to work in pairs or groups before sharing comments with the entire class. I structure these activities to be at the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy, engaging students in analytical, interpretative or creative work based on the work they did to prepare for class.

For example, in an applied linguistics class in which the students read about baby and toddler language acquisition at home, I had the students listen (audio only) to YouTube recordings of children, made by their proud parents, and had the students discuss with one another what features of language they hear in each child's speech and estimate, on that basis, the age of the given child.

In a history class, I've asked students to reflect on what they read in the textbook about a particular event and then consider it from the perspective of different ethnic groups or social classes of the population of the given country; in a literature class, I've asked students to reflect on a passage of the assigned text from the perspective of another character in the same work or of a character in a different work, or to rewrite a passage in the style of a different author we read earlier in the course. The students find these classroom-based activities engaging and easily understand how class preparation is critical for successful engagement in them.

Let's Engage in a Pedagogy of Kindness

Last, but not least, let's reframe our approach to assessing student engagement in classroom-based activities based on Catherine Denial's *A Pedagogy of Kindness*

([University of Oklahoma Press, 2024](#)). In that context, let's remember that each of our students is an individual with individual learner characteristics (for example, some are introverts, and some are extroverts). Furthermore, our students face distinctive challenges: some are native speakers of English and some are not; some are first-generation college students and some grew up with clear expectations about the college experience; some are single parents taking care of toddlers and some have no family responsibilities; some have physical health challenges and some have mental health challenges. We can't know all the burdens faced by each of our students and we shouldn't intrude in their personal lives, but we do owe it to all our students to be supportive, respectful and kind.

In redesigning our approach to class participation to focus on engagement in classroom-based activities in accordance with the principles outlined above, we shift our educational paradigm from a transactional experience to a transformational one. This is a way to trigger learner motivation, which is, I would argue, the key to deep student learning.

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