

Is Class Participation Too Arbitrary to Grade Fairly?

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Communication Skills

How one teacher quit “hanging a grade-based incentive over my students’ heads” and offered different, more inclusive ways for students to participate.

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As a novice teacher, James M. Lang kept track of how often and how much his students spoke in class, and allotted 10 percent of final grades to participation. That’s a practice he now describes as “a poor pedagogical choice” that should be replaced by more inclusive alternatives that don’t involve grade-based incentives, Lang writes for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

“Making participation an ungraded classroom norm might be one of the most inclusive practices we could undertake as teachers,” writes Lang, a professor of English and director of the D’Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption University in Worcester, Massachusetts.

When participation is graded, Lang says it can become “subject to every kind of bias imaginable.” This might include unconscious bias based on identity, or “looking more favorably on a student whose comments or demeanor remind me a little of myself—or unfavorably on a student who reminds me of someone I dislike.” And even when teachers are “fair-minded graders of class participation,” he notes, there are still difficult questions to consider such as: “Are all comments equal? What counts as a comment worthy of a good grade? How am I tracking the quality of the comments, as opposed to the sheer quantity?”

There's deep value when students participate in classroom discussions, including opportunities to develop and articulate thinking, deliver and receive feedback, and hone speaking and listening skills. And while many K-12 schools and districts require participation grading, and some educators argue that it's a motivator that keeps kids focused and engaged, Lang says he quit grading student participation in order to "help students find their lost voices, empower those who feel deprived of agency in other parts of their lives, and prevent discussion from being dominated by students who talk over their peers and crowd out other voices."

Creating incentives for students to participate once grades have been removed from the equation requires some reframing. To encourage contributions, Lang nurtures an important feedback loop in his classroom, noting for example that "invitations [to students to participate] are premised on the fact that their comments matter. We can all learn from what they have to offer to the discussion." He reinforces this mindset by "expressing my gratitude for participation on a regular basis, both in class and outside of it."

Here are a few strategies from Lang and from our *Edutopia* archives designed to encourage more inclusive, low-stakes (or no stakes) class participation.

Setting up Low-Stakes, Relaxed Discussions

At the beginning of the school year, Lang sets the parameters for participation, explaining that though it's not graded, participation is not "some optional extra." Participating, he impresses on students, "is as essential to the course as writing the assigned papers and taking the final exam. You can't be a full member of our community without participating in class."

And while he does plan for classwide discussions, Lang also intentionally sets up a variety of other opportunities for students to speak in low-stakes, relaxed situations. "Students in my courses will be speaking with one another in pairs or small groups as they complete some assigned task," he writes. "In a literature course, I might ask them to annotate a certain poem in groups; in a writing class, I might ask pairs of students to identify the three most effective qualities of a piece of writing."

Throughout the semester, students receive multiple opportunities to speak, express their opinions, and work through differences in thinking with classmates—but in informal setups where even the most reticent speaker may participate. "We all know—or have been—students who are made anxious at the thought of class

participation, or who have learning challenges or disabilities that prevent them from engaging in a whole-class discussion as actively as do their peers,” Lang writes. “Should they be punished for their character traits or anxieties?”

Use Digital Tools For Asynchronous Participation

Broaden your notion of class participation—it doesn’t always need to be vocal, or during class time. Starting classroom discussions on a shared Google Doc allows teachers to “see a student’s level of understanding—through both their questions and answers—without waiting for them to speak in class,” writes [Katy Farber](#), a professional development coordinator and former sixth-grade teacher. It can also provide an equitable entry point into discussions for all students, including introverted ones. “Students can use the digital discussions as a basis for approaching, exploring, processing, or reflecting on content,” says Sam Nelson, a teacher who shared the practice with Farber. “While we can review the discussion trackers [in the Google doc] out loud, we can also use small groups or independent review protocols to get students following the digital discussions.”

During brainstorming sessions, consider supplementing classroom conversations with a [Padlet](#) where students can post ideas and everyone’s contributions are visible to the group. For reflection exercises, try giving students some choice in how they share their thoughts—they might doodle their reflection in Google Draw, or record their voices on [VoiceThread](#) or [Flipgrid](#), Farber suggests. “Yes, we need to encourage them to use their voices, but students need to take small steps and be encouraged along the way.”

Prepare Students Before Cold-Calling

Lang likes to kick off whole-class discussions with small-group activities, or individual writing exercises where students write a short response to a question, allowing each student time to prepare and gain confidence in their thinking before opening up the classroom discussion. Following this warm-up step, “even the most introverted or anxious students can usually muster the energy to report a group’s conclusion or summarize a writing exercise,” Lang notes.

When he asks questions during whole class discussions, Lang gives students the choice to decline answering. “I make it clear in the way I frame the invitations: ‘Kiara, you’ve been quiet for a while, but you look thoughtful. Do you have something you want to add, or do you want to just keep thinking?’” he might ask. “I always try to frame invitations to imply: I bet you have something important to add here; any chance you want to join the conversation?”