Grading Participation: An Alternative to Talking for Points

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Is there a way to motivate and improve student participation without grading it? I raise the question because I think grading contributions gets students talking for points, not talking to make points. Verbal students make sure they say something, but often without listening to or connecting with the comments of others.

Is grading participation an effective way for students to discover how and why classroom interaction promotes learning? I’ve been considering alternatives, including this one: “Participation, as in what you contribute verbally, is not graded in this course, but your writing about participation is.”

With this approach, students would write a series of short papers (I’m thinking 1-2 pages) which aim to make them more aware of classroom interaction generally and their contribution to it specifically. They would write the papers in response to the following prompts.

**My Participation Skills** – Do you participate? Why? Why not? What do you do when you participate? Ask questions? Answer questions? Only answer when you know the right answer? Make comments? What participation skills would you like to develop? How might you go about working on these skills? At the end of the course, how will you know if your skills in this area have improved?

**Observing Participation** – For the next two weeks observe participation as it occurs in this class. What do students do when they participate? How does the teacher respond? How well are students listening to each other? What’s the most interesting student comment or question you heard during this observation period? How could participation be improved in this class? What could you do to improve the interaction in this classroom?

Or, for two weeks observe participation in your other courses. How does participation there compare with what’s happening in this course? Be specific—
write about behaviors. What are students doing? What is the teacher doing? If there are differences between courses, what are they and to what would you attribute these differences?

**The Role of Participation in Learning** – Write about any or all of these participation policy questions and, using your answer(s), conclude with a paragraph that discusses the role of participation in learning.

- Should students have the right to remain silent in a course if they can learn the content without talking about it?
- Should teachers call on students if they haven’t volunteered? Explain why.
- If participation is graded, does that motivate students to answer questions and make comments? Does it motivate verbal contributions for the right reasons?
- If participation is graded, how much should it count?
- Do students learn things from the comments and questions of other students? Could they learn more than they do? How?
- What kind of feedback from the teacher and classmates would help improve your contributions in class?
- The ability to answer questions when called on and to speak up in a group are important skills, how do these skills factor into your future career plans?

**My Participation Skills Revisited** – Reread your three participation papers and then answer these prompts. Compare your participation skills now with your description of them written at the beginning of the course. Has your thinking about the role of participation in learning changed? What needs to happen now for you to take your participation skills to the next level?

Faculty, I know you are probably thinking, “That’s a lot of papers to grade.” But I think the learning benefit here comes from writing these papers, not from teacher feedback. The objective is to hone observational skills, encourage reflection, and get students engaged in some serious self-reflection. I’d assess these papers with a rubric that mostly looks at whether the student took the task seriously. I’d limit written feedback to one pithy question raised by what the student has written. Some of the feedback will likely apply to many students and that can be delivered in class or online. In either venue, you could use it to encourage discussion about interaction in the class (or online discussion board). And certainly you can modify the assignment structure to better fit your needs—shorter papers, fewer papers, etc.

Do you think the learning potential of student interaction is lost or compromised when we fuel students’ contributions by giving them points? An assignment option like this doesn’t totally change that dynamic—there’s still a grade involved—but it does offer students a different perspective.

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