



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## Grading Class Participation

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In my experience, grading class participation is one of the most difficult aspects of student evaluation. Over the past few years I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out why I expect students to participate, how I want them to participate, how to communicate those expectations to them, and, finally, how to grade it. What follows is the system that I currently use. The system is in a state of continual improvement, and hence is never static. Nevertheless, it provides me with a set of guidelines for the answers to these tough questions.

### Why do I want students to participate in class discussions?

I want students to participate so they can learn from each other. We know that active involvement in learning increases what is remembered, how well it is assimilated, and how the learning is used in new situations. In making statements to peers about their own thoughts on a class topic, students must articulate those thoughts and also submit them to (hopefully constructive) examination by others. In listening to their peers, students hear many different ways of interpreting and applying class material, and thus are able to integrate many examples of how to use the information. Especially in a course that stresses application of material, extensive participation in class discussions is an essential element of students' learning.

### What class participation behaviors contribute to others' learning?

In organizational behavior and management classes, we teach that one of the best ways to evaluate performance on the job is to develop a set of behavioral indicators of good performance specific for a given job. Behavioral indicators can be evaluated much more objectively than, say, characteristics or traits (e.g., positive outlook, enthusiasm, commitment). Furthermore, they can be assessed at frequent intervals, unlike final output which can only be assessed irregularly. So, in part to practice what I preach, and in part to demonstrate to the students that I believe what I teach, I developed a set of behavioral indicators of good class participation. A perfect score ("4" on a 4-point scale) is then assigned to the behaviors that are indicators of ideal participation, a score of "3" (equivalent to "B") is assigned to the behaviors I expect on average from most students in order for the class to meet its learning objectives. Scores of "2" and below are assigned to behavioral indicators of less participation. I depend on Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives to provide guidelines for developing the criteria, since I can link them clearly with the learning objectives for the course. For example, the criteria for "4" always include synthesis and evaluation (Bloom's highest levels of learning objectives). Included below is the list of indicators I use for my current courses (which consist of about one-third cases, one-third involvement exercises, and one-third other types of sessions). It is critical that the

expectations for participation, i.e., the list of behavioral indicators of good participation, match the goals and type of course. For example, in an accounting or math class, knowing facts from a case or reading may be irrelevant, and good completion of homework problems may become more important.

### **How can participation be graded?**

Once the behavioral list is created, it provides a fairly simple mechanism for grading participation. First, it should be given to students at the beginning of the semester so they know which behaviors will be rewarded with high participation grades. At this time an additional advantage of the behavioral approach becomes apparent: even students who are wary of the "subjective" nature of grading participation are less anxious when presented with this relatively objective set of criteria. Second, at the end of each class the professor can sit down with a class list and give each person a rating on the 4-point scale (this requires knowing students' names quickly; in the past I've taken photographs on the first day and referred to them frequently). After a couple of classes, this procedure becomes fairly easy. Of course, not every student will receive a rating every day, especially in a larger class. But it quickly becomes obvious if the professor is consistently "missing" a particular student or set of students, and early intervention in improving participation and learning is possible. If I haven't watched a specific student closely enough to rate him or her for three classes in a row, then I make a particular point of watching that student in the next class and "cold calling" him or her (in a supportive way) fairly early if no active contribution is volunteered.

Interim feedback is important to students, and can be provided in various forms. About mid-way through the semester I provide feedback to each student in memo form, re-articulating the criteria and giving each student an interim grade on the 4-point scale. I also conduct conferences with students if they request them. Prior to the interim assessment, and at the beginning of any conference I conduct, I ask students to think about how they would rate themselves on these criteria. Low assessments by either myself or the student provide stimulus for discussion about improvement, and together we develop strategies to help the student overcome shyness or other difficulties. For example, I may agree that a particular student can "start" the next class by addressing a previously agreed-upon set of issues, so s/he has reduced ambiguity concerning when s/he will be participating and what the content will be. It is important that the students take the responsibility for their own behaviors, though. While I may promise to try to "invite" their participation more explicitly over the next few classes, I ensure they understand it is up to them to be prepared, respond to these invitations, and eventually contribute without the need to be explicitly invited.

### **Continuous Improvement**

I have used the basic approach outlined here with undergraduates, graduate, and MBA students (highly competitive and vocal), and in continuing education settings; and it has been refined extensively over the years. I am sure this is not the final version, but it does help with handling the sticky elements of evaluating class participation.

**Expectations for Class Participation**  
(Information Given to the Students)

Participation is graded on a scale from 0 (lowest) through 4 (highest), using the criteria below. The criteria focus on what you demonstrate and do not presume to guess at what you know but do not demonstrate. This is because what you offer to the class is what you and others learn from. I expect the average level of participation to satisfy the criteria for a "3".

Grade	Criteria
0	Absent.
1	Present, not disruptive. Tries to respond when called on but does not offer much. Demonstrates very infrequent involvement in discussion.
2	Demonstrates adequate preparation: knows basic case or reading facts, but does not show evidence of trying to interpret or analyze them. Offers straightforward information (e.g., straight from the case or reading), without elaboration or very infrequently (perhaps once a class). Does not offer to contribute to discussion, but contributes to a moderate degree when called on. Demonstrates sporadic involvement.
3	Demonstrates good preparation: knows case or reading facts well, has thought through implications of them. Offers interpretations and analysis of case material (more than just facts) to class. Contributes well to discussion in an ongoing way: responds to other students' points, thinks through own points, questions others in a constructive way, offers and supports suggestions that may be counter to the majority opinion. Demonstrates consistent ongoing involvement.
4	Demonstrates excellent preparation: has analyzed case exceptionally well, relating it to readings and other material (e.g., readings, course material, discussions, experiences, etc.). Offers analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of case material, e.g., puts together pieces of the discussion to develop new approaches that take the class further. Contributes in a very significant way to ongoing discussion: keeps analysis focused, responds very thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to the cooperative argument-building, suggests alternative ways of approaching material and helps class analyze which approaches are appropriate, etc. Demonstrates ongoing very active involvement.