

In the Classroom 123

Grading Class Participation and Attendance in College

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, and you're still hanging out with me. I really do appreciate it. This weekend, as I record this, this is Memorial Day weekend. I'm up in the Northeast part of the world, and it's rainy, and it's dreary, and it's cold, but that doesn't take away from what the holiday is about. This is a time to recognize veterans, past, present, and future veterans. First of all, thank you for that. Also, a special recognition for those who paid the ultimate price for what? Their service, what their country asked of them.

I can't even imagine the grief that families go through, but I also understand the level of patriotism that the men and women display every day, knowing that it could be their last time. Hats off. Truly, truly respect. Let's hope that we don't have to get into conflicts in the future. I know we're still in one, but let's see if we can get out of it and no more. No senseless killings. This week, basically going to take a look at grading participation and attendance. Question to you, are you doing it? Should you do it? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of doing it? Probably more importantly, what are some recommendations in getting it more right than wrong?

I have to be honest, I'm a little bit on the fence on this one. Primarily, I teach online classes, so participation and attendance are treated slightly different. I also believe that the more engaged somebody is in the course, and that usually involves participation in attendance, I know that they're going to do better. I also believe in treating adults like adults. They have obligations that they need to meet, and to put in draconian requirements, like mandatory attendance, I don't think it serves learning. I think as adults, they need to get to make their own decisions and must accept responsibility for the decisions they make. In my particular course, the courses I teach, nothing is mandatory.

There is nothing mandatory about higher ed, you volunteer to do it. You volunteer to participate. You volunteer to do everything in the class. There is nothing mandatory. Now with that said, I can't force somebody to attend. I can't force somebody to turn in assignments, but I do know if they don't turn in these things, I'm confident they're not going to do well in my class. All I can do is create the conditions that they're going to want to participate and want to succeed. That's all I can do. If I put in draconian things, they're going to fail. They're going to fail anyways if they didn't participate. There's no value added in my mind of having mandatory attendance.

I'll talk a little bit about that because I have a story that goes in with that mandatory attendance. What I will do in my classes is I do provide some incentives to have

students turn work in on time. As I mentioned, I use gamification a lot in my classes. My deadlines are typically the last day of class. I also know that if they wait till the last day of class, they probably not going to succeed. I have some incentives that prod them along, and I weave those into the class. The same with discussions. We have weekly discussions. I use incentives in order to get them to participate in the discussions earlier in the week so that way, there's ample material for the rest of the class to get involved in.

I use some gamification strategies in order to help guide behavior and I've talked about that in the past. The reason I'm looking at this particular topic today is that I have been helping faculty work on their courses because we're doing a learning management switch and so I get to see courses a lot more than I probably normally would. Participation and attendance have been elements that we've had to work out in this switch to the new LMS. Also, I have recently read some articles by James Lang in *The Chronicle of Higher Ed* on the topic of participation and attendance and grading all that. I thought the articles made a heck of a lot of sense, and I am certainly a fan of what Mr. Lang has to share.

I thought this was a good time to touch on this topic. Now, our reasons for grading participation and attendance are, in most cases, certainly noble. We recognize that engagement in the classroom leads to greater success. I noted that just a few seconds ago. Students also understand this. Students understand that, they know that if they participate and if they show up for class that they're going to do better. They know this. This has been drilled into them. We also know students also need to develop many of the skills to include soft skills, such as speaking in front of others, pulling together answers to questions that are on the fly, and they have to do it with minimal preparation. A lot of these other soft skills, being able to enter into dialogue and such.

James Lang, he changed his perspective. He used to grade participation and attendance and he said, he doesn't do it anymore. One of the primary reasons is that participation is an expectation in a class and there's many different ways to take account of participation. It's not just discussion, there's other ways that you can note participation, but it's an expectation. Just as I mentioned, that there's an expectation, if you attend and participate, that you will do better, that's built in to the class. I've said more than one time that learning is about discussion, and it's hard to discuss if you're not there.

The grade should not be the reason that somebody participates. They can get the grades through other means, other mechanisms, but that shouldn't be price of admission for the class that, "Oh, you'll get graded on participation" because what if you don't grade participation, do they stop participating? Probably not. Set up your class in such a way that it's just an expectation, to be a participant in this community, which we call a class, you have to participate. Definitely advantages for grading participation. Some faculty definitely don't want to give this up because it helps to modify student behavior.

First of all, that they can assess whether or not students have actively engaged in the material. Well, there's lots of different ways to do that, but they certainly can do it

with a participation grade. Also, controlling distractions like cell phones. You can have a mechanism that you can grade people up and down based on how behaved they are in the class,

or for simply just showing up to class or showing up on time, definitely, participation grades. You can control that behavior if you want in your class. Students are pretty smart in one aspect, they will do what is measured. They will, in fact, change their behavior to meet the needs of participation. I certainly did.

As I was a student, I would change my behavior to say, "What does the instructor want?" Oh, I have to respond two times? Sure, I'll do that," and I do and get the full marks. That's it. Now, I can't say a lot for the quality of the responses, I certainly tried, I believe, but students, they know what's needed in order to get the grade, and that's how they will respond. However, on the other hand, there are disadvantages to grading participation and attendance. The documentation is pretty. There's a lot of it that's talking about all the disadvantages to doing this, and yet, we still do it.

The first comes in in terms of bias. You may not even be conscious of it, this is all happening at a subconscious level, but one of the most important reasons for eliminating grades for participation is there's biases at work. Individuals who are shy, unconfident, they may not speak out. As a result, outspoken students will earn the participation point. There may be reasons why a student does not speak out. If you have international students, maybe they're not confident of their language skills. One of the languages that I've had time to learn is Dutch, but I am not confident to go out and speak it. I can read pretty well. I can listen quite well, but I don't feel as confident going out and speaking Dutch.

I may be trying, I may be understanding what's going on, but I just may not be giving back to the class. Should I be marked down because I'm not eloquent speaking in the Dutch language? Well, that's how individuals where English is the second language are feeling, but there may be other reasons. Reasons that a student has not yet reached out for an accommodation, but maybe part of the conversation further down the line. With this bias, you can have what's called the halo effect where participants are either subconsciously rewarded because they're participating, and non-participants are penalized, not only for that particular discussion but across the entire class.

The research is just rife with examples of unequal consideration drawn on the lines of gender, age, religion, culture, race, all that, that we have biases, and this is another place where you're being subjective. If you have a classroom, you may have a classroom where participation generally rewards students who actively communicate, but is a barrier for others. Another reason why you may want to reconsider grading participation or attendance is it can be challenging, especially participation scoring, how reliable is it? Are you certain that you've captured all the participation accurately? Have you become a slave to the system where rather than being engaged in the discussion, you're more focused on, "Did I give this person credit? Who was that? Oh." You start focusing more on that education system than the learning that's taking place in your classroom. It can be a distraction that takes away from your teaching. Also, what constitutes participation? Was the answer that

was just given, is that good enough to get participation or did it fall short of the mark? What is the mark? Do students know what the mark is?

Students, if they're being graded, are going to want to know, was that an answer enough to get me to the points that I need? Rather than having the discussion around the conversation. Grades should not be subjected like that. With that, can you go back later and justify why you gave a certain grade for participation? Participation grade can often mean the difference between one letter grade and another. It's a fudge factor. "Oh, I like how they participate in class. I'll give them the A. Oh, yes, they were pretty quiet. They didn't really participate. I think they were ignoring me. I'm not going to give them the A." Can you justify it? If somebody wanted to challenge your grading system, could you justify it?

In terms of attendance, simply because a student attends every single class doesn't mean they learned a thing. I've seen students go through the motions. I've taught classes where students would show up and I know they were not there other than they had to be there or they couldn't play on the sports team. The only reason they were in my class was so they can play sports, but they were otherwise disengaged. I could mark them as being present, physically present, but if I also had to have a mentally present, I probably would not be able to grade that.

Also, we're creating conditions. Once upon a time, it was really thought, I don't want to use the word heroic, but that somebody would show up to work in spite of the fact that they were sick. Well, with the whole COVID-19 thing, we certainly don't want people who are sick showing up in the workplace. When you have a mandatory attendance that you will be in my class regardless of what condition you're in, you're putting the rest of your class at risk. With the COVID-19, the college that I'm working out at, we were able to control that pretty well through a lot of discipline. The other side effect, which was noted nationally, was that the number of cases of flu was down drastically compared to previous years.

This was in a large part because we did the right thing. We didn't come to school when we were sick. Mandatory attendance policies, and you're dragging in who's sick, I would rethink that. The other one is sometimes life happens. More and more of our students also work. They have to work or they're not going to be able to participate in college. They got really two jobs going on. They've got school and they've got work, and they certainly are distractors. Every once in a while, your boss says, "You've got to work" as in the case of mine. I was tasked to go to one of the counties while I was in Wyoming. One of my instructors had a mandatory policy. I pleaded that I do whatever I could to make up for that.

I would create videos, all kinds of things, in order to do that but she said, "No, if you miss a class, you're going to get dropped a letter grade." I dropped the class. At that time said, "I'm not going to forfeit what I was pursuing at the time because of this hard and fast policy," so I dropped the class. I'm still a little ticked about that. Because I was certainly grasping the material, there was no reason I needed to drop the class. I just was not treated as an adult. Those are some of the reasons, some of the disadvantages, and why you should probably not have attendance policies or participation policies like that.

However, if you're going to do it, there's probably other ways that you can do it. Here are some strategies to consider. First of all, change the language. If you change the language on something, it can make a world of difference. There is one example that I have happened in a class where the instructor basically said that we had these two tests to do. What they were were just case studies we had to complete. I recommend to the instructor that we just change the language to these reports or case studies rather than use the word test because there was a lot of anxiety around the word test. He did that for future classes.

Well, the same thing, Stephanie Almagno recommends changing the phrase, participation to engagement, and switching the emphasis on earning that grade to becoming lifelong learners. We enter her class, she uses a rubric where she has monthly engagement assessments that she uses a rubric where the students self-assess. Part of that self-assessment is students must support their observation of themselves with justification, why they deserve that, earn those certain points. That's probably a big part of it. It's just not "Raise your hand, answer the question," but part of it is, "Why did you think that? Support it with some justification."

Those are when she's talking about in class answering questions and things like that, but she basically has students self-assess what they think they have earned as far as that class.

This other one was just interesting. As I was looking at the research on this, that in one study, having an attendance policy does improve attendance. Now, I'm not a fan of attendance policies, but when they did use them, attendance improved. Interesting enough, the students actually expected a policy to be in place. I'm always hoping that one is not in place, but students, they expected, they said this drew the line for them that, "Oh, I better attend because there's a policy there."

I think in order to really make this work goes back to the whole thing of answering why. Why does participation matter? Why does attendance matter? Start off your class explaining the science behind learning and why these things are important and why that they should be there, and why they should be engaged. That also goes a long way. While you're doing this, if you are tracking participation or attendance grade, then periodically, through the semester, report these out to the students so they have time to make course corrections.

If they're lagging behind in participation, bringing it to their attention, letting them know where they stand, where they should be, and setting up opportunities to coach them will be useful.

Now, earlier I mentioned that James Lang was getting away from participation and assessment or attendance grades, but he was also asked to give some alternatives. "To reconsider this, how could you possibly do it?" He outlined a couple of ways to do it that I thought were quite interesting. One is, tie participation to an activity that produces a tangible product that could be collected and assessed. He recommends a worksheet where students work as a group and everyone puts their name on it. He collects these and then he checks off who participated, but this can be done in all kinds of ways.

You can use the polling system, poll anywhere, plickers, you can also use a clicker system that you can have these online polls. That's a way to see who's participating, how well they're doing. You can assess different things at the same time. You can go back and work on retrieval practices, tapping into previously learned content, touch upon that. Muddiest point, require students to turn in a muddiest 0.3 by five-card. Students can also contribute to a shared document where maybe you have a Google Doc and you can track who has participated on a particular document. Doing low-stakes quizzes, also good for retrieval practice.

Have those at the beginning or end of the class, few moments that they do this, or you could have just any other writing activity, but basically, you're looking for a tangible product, something that students have turned in. That's different than raising their hand and, "Yes, was that a good answer or not?" by having that tangible document. Another way, and I've already mentioned this before, so James Lang touched upon it, but others have already touched upon it, is rather than, all the weights on the instructor that the students take on the onus of grading.

He recommends creating a rubric that highlights the various ways that a student could participate in a class and ask students to periodically do a self-assessment. How have you participated here? How would you rate yourself? When you create this rubric, you should at least have a minimum of three different criteria as an attempt to capture the students' personality and learning styles or different styles of how they operate in the classroom. I would say, and I'm not the only one, another professor has recommended that students also provide justification or reflection on how they came up with the score. Provide examples, what they did in order to get that score. That way they have to think about their learning, they study their learning. This next example was an example called cold calling tracking, and I think I like it. Dean Peterson uses a cold calling strategy where he asked students questions on definitions concepts, current events, things that are certainly related to his class. What he does is he randomly draws a name from a stack of 3x5 cards. He shuffles the deck, pulls a name, and the answers to the questions are written on a scale zero to two, where zero, student didn't answer, one, gave an answer but wasn't a stellar answer, and two, just crushed it, gave a stellar answer.

Then at the end of the term, he will take those 3x5 because he'll mark a score on the back of each one for each question and what the response was. Do some math, calculates the final participation score, and that's what they'll use. Others have made further recommendations that you can factor in a scale of difficulty for the question that is tied maybe to Bloom's taxonomy where you have some basic definitions remembering memorization stuff. Then later, you get into analysis and synthesis and those are much harder questions. You can factor in difficulty if you want. Also in this paper, John Bean and Dean Peterson, they offered some additional strategies to engage students.

One way is to, if they have homework, give them a guided journal, something that they have to take notes in a certain way so they can summarize what they learned in their homework session and then pull it all together. When you ask them a question, they'll have that summary there that will let them feel a little more comfortable in answering that particular question. Another way is not all discussions have to be

done in a face-to-face manner, in a classroom. That students may respond to a discussion question via email or on a discussion board. Reason is some students, that happens to be their mode where they give these stellar answers.

They're not able to find the right words in a verbal situation, talking in a classroom, but when they sit down to write, they're able to compose their thoughts and that's where the real power is. It gives them an opportunity to participate in that way. Another strategy is floating a question, letting it sit for a minute, 60 seconds, so that students have an opportunity to compose their thoughts, maybe write it down on a piece of paper before they respond. Once you get them floating the question, you can ask somebody, maybe cold calling or something like that.

A lot of these strategies are really geared to students who are reluctant to speak up in class. You're giving them additional opportunity in order to get more comfortable with doing that. There is a lot of things in life that I have some regrets that I do not do, never learned to do because of experiences in classes when I was in primary and secondary school that have shut me down, and over all these years, I'm recognizing it and trying to control those things. Sometimes you just need encouragement and coaching to get going, and that's kind of the last strategy that Bean and Peterson offered.

When you recognize that you have a student who is not participating, maybe due to not being confident is have the students come in and chat and offer strategies for how to improve in this area because it is important that they learn to participate and get comfortable with participation. There's a lot that we can do to help this. Those are some strategies where if you are grading, let's turn it into a learning activity rather than just something that where we're measuring that somebody's hand went up or not. Turning it into an opportunity where we can actually develop some skills and help with that retention of previous knowledge or letting them make those connections with new knowledge that we're presenting.

Those are some strategies, please certainly take them into consideration as you're working on your course for the fall. Before I let you go, here's a quick plug from my book.