



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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An Evaluation Problem: Class Participation

Instructors often take student effort or class participation into account as a specific point value in the computation of a final course grade. Indeed, every instructor has an opinion about students participating in class—even if we admit it only to ourselves.

In the Physical Therapist Assistant Program at Housatonic Community College, I have coaxed, cajoled, and, in desperation, required students to "...actively participate" in learning. To my dismay, I found that my estimations of participation were often at odds with those of my students. I also found that my opinions were frequently based on subjective rather than verifiable data, and limited by my own ability to remember who spoke up in class (difficult during lively discussions) or who appeared for (instructor-set) office hours.

In response to this dilemma, I have attempted to incorporate more objective methods of evaluating class participation. While the primary goal of these methods was to improve the fairness of my grading, I also wanted to use methods that would foster team building, encourage networking, and teach students that participation means more than simply standing up in front of the class.



Included here are some of the techniques that do not require students to speak up in class and can be generalized to any curriculum.

1. **Bookmarks:** For each chapter of text assigned as reading, students receive an index card to use as a bookmark. On this card they write their questions about specific passages, conflicts with lecture notes, and so forth. If they have no questions, they are to write a test question and answer. Cards are submitted each week, and questions are answered either in writing or during the first few minutes of class (as time permits). A grade may or may not be assigned, but each submission is worth a specified percentage of the participation grade.
2. **Student Outlines:** Those students who use outlines of text chapters or lectures sign up as a group and take turns preparing each outline. Students who sign up must prepare equal numbers of outlines, which I correct and share with the group. Students benefit by refining their outlining technique, checking their information, and learning to cooperate. This activity is extra credit for participation, as not all students choose to participate.
3. **Class-Generated "Crib Sheets":** Before tests, students generate "crib sheets." I review them for thoroughness and emphasis, sharing my findings with the entire class. Occasionally, with a very cohesive class, we vote on the best, and I award extra points. No sheets are allowed during the test, but all make excellent study tools.
4. **Term Paper Critiques:** When papers are assigned, a timeline is provided for specific steps. Students may request instructor feedback at any point in the process without affecting their grades. On the date the rough draft is due, each student brings in a copy of his or her own paper and exchanges with another student. Each student must read and critique another's paper (called a Peer Critique). Each review is graded for thoroughness, fairness, and clarity—while the papers themselves are not graded or even seen by the instructor. A copy of the corrected review is then sent to both the reviewer and the paper's author. Students learn to be more cautious in interpreting research data, become more comfortable with their own papers, and benefit from the research of their peers. (An aside: I now get fewer late papers!)
5. **Doing It Wrong:** Since many health care classes include laboratory periods for practice of clinical skills, videotapes often help convey what lectures cannot. After showing a professionally made but terrible video, I realized that students loved being able to critique this anonymous person and suggest ways that the actors could have done it better. I now let small groups of students make up vignettes—complete with mistakes! The actors and production staff receive credit for a list of planned mistakes. These "shorts" have enabled students to work together (often with new and unfamiliar equipment)



and to laugh while learning. For them, it is being up in front of the class without really being there.

6. **Cartoons, Crosswords, and Other Hobbies to Show Off:** Occasionally, I have encountered students who enjoy drawing, crossword puzzles, limericks, and so on. I encourage these pursuits and have used student contributions as test items, homework, or extra credit. All items are posted and judged at the end of the semester. Points are given in categories such as Best Pun, Most Unbelievable, Funniest, and the like. Not only has this "show and tell" brought us smiles; it has also taught future health professionals about where the lay public gets some of its beliefs and how to evaluate strange-sounding claims.



Finding and using more objective methods to assess student involvement in the classroom have been difficult, but rewarding, instructional efforts. I have gotten to know the students better; moreover, they have tried harder, knowing that the efforts, rather than the results, are being evaluated. Given a variety of participation methods, students have been more willing to participate in all ways. I have found myself, therefore, in the position of reviewer and counselor rather than pacesetter and evaluator.

Reisa Fedorchuck, Coordinator, Physical Therapist Assistant Program

For further information, contact the author at Housatonic Community College, 510 Barnum Avenue, Bridgeport, CT 06608.

Suanna D. Rotache, Editor

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