

# The Power of Interim Participation Grades

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If you're reading a syllabus for a non-lecture class this coming term, I would bet that your grading breakdown includes a participation grade. Usually between 10 and 20 percent of a student's overall mark, the participation grade has become standard practice for many instructors.

The appeal is easy to see. Devoting a portion of your students' final grades to their participation signals to them that a significant part of their learning will depend upon their contributions in class. For those of us who believe in active learning, including a participation grade is putting our money where our mouths are. It puts in writing—in language students can understand—that we expect them to play an active role in the classroom.

There's also the hope that a participation mark will act as a spur to that participation. We want it to be both carrot and stick: a promised reward for those students who (blessedly) rescue class discussions with insightful comments and a threat of a penalty for those who doze through class after class.

I always make use of a participation grade, but it seems to me that the way I usually do it—calculating it at the end of the term as part of the students' final grades—has a couple of drawbacks.

The first is that it is difficult to accurately judge every student's contributions to class at the end of the semester. Keeping notes throughout the term can help; I've tried a system of symbols on the attendance sheet, noting when students made particularly strong contributions to class, or when they did the bare minimum. But the practice of grading a whole semester's worth of participation in retrospect can seem overly subjective, and sometimes arbitrary.

The second drawback is that, by only giving students their participation marks as part of their final grade, we take away much of the mark's usefulness as a catalyst for increased student involvement in class. It's as if you gave a number of assignments throughout the term but didn't give

students their grades until the end of the semester. Grades can work to motivate students, but the participation grade loses that function when it's held back until after the final class.

A solution to both problems is relatively simple: Give each student an interim participation grade every two weeks. This may seem like a lot of added work for the teacher, but I think you'll find it actually saves work in the long run. By keeping a running tally of each student's participation progress, you'll never again have to squint at a series of illegible pencil marks on your attendance sheet to work out whether a student spoke five times or six over the course of three months. It's much easier to assess each student's participation over a two-week period than it is over the whole term.

More importantly, students—and your class discussions—will benefit. Just as a bad grade on an essay can spur a student to put in extra work on subsequent assignments, a poor interim participation grade can be just the thing to motivate a quiet student to speak up and make a contribution to class discussions. Students will no longer be in the dark about how they are doing on this measure.

With more and more classes taking advantage of learning-management systems like Blackboard and Moodle, it's getting easier and easier to give students interim grades throughout the term. Of course, you don't need to do this as often as every two weeks; every month, or even just once, at the halfway point, would serve a similar function. Any of these options would go some distance to making the participation grade pull more of its weight.

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