

SMC ETHICS

Continuing a Dialogue on What We Do and How We Do It

Our Turn to Collaborate and Participate

What can a history professor and a dance professor teach each other about how to grade participation? So, a history professor and a dance professor walk into a bar...

But seriously, what's the connection?

A history professor, largely dealing with lecture and discussion, might mentally keep track of how regularly each student raises a hand to offer quality comments or questions, or gauge to what extent a student appears to be attentively listening to the lecture. A dance professor, working in a practice-based discipline, might judge effort by improvement in strength, flexibility, technique, and overall performance. On the surface, it may seem as if there is no common ground here. For example, it seems likely that a student who wanted to could spend a semester in a history course avoiding participation. Even to those of us who are exclusively dance floor observers, this prospect seems impossible in a dance studio.



The Participation Grade

A fairly ubiquitous grading category in SMC syllabi is the somewhat evasive “Participation” category. Those in the Humanities may use this category for 15, 20, even 25% of an overall grade, depending on the nature and structure of the course. However, there is a significant chance that many of us are also using this category to stimulate more regular attendance. Of course, the spirit of this approach is typically academic and defensible; we believe that our students stand the best chance of success and appropriate preparation by attending class. However, SMC has a policy that states we may not grade only on attendance (drop policies based on attendance are different), so it is a question of ethics how we utilize a participation grade.

This is a difficult relationship for many of us to navigate. Our job is built around maximizing our students’ attendance,

But thinking beyond conventional, discipline-specific participation practices may benefit classrooms and dance studios alike. What does dance have that history does not that creates this dynamic? This type of divergent thinking may get us a step closer to really creating a classroom that meets contemporary challenges and opportunities. At the very least, providing multiple opportunities for participation that, as a whole, are more reflective of the diverse backgrounds of students at SMC is a step towards making grading participation a more mindful and equitable form of assessment.

Some worth considering...

Encouraging students to come to office hours and/or email questions and comments

Offering extra problem sets or create a question of the day that students can submit in writing at the end of class

Setting up additional discussion forums in Canvas that students can engage in outside of the classroom.

Let's get creative! Join the conversation by participating in our discussion in the PERC Canvas shell [here](#).

On a Related Note...

As mentioned above, we have a new [Canvas shell](#)! Please think of joining and checking in on our discussions and various resources - we'll keep it up as long as we have an audience!

preparation, and involvement each day of class. We've all been astounded by a student's email asking, "I couldn't attend class today. Did we do anything important?". Of course we did! It's college! We all want our students to attend and participate in class, but there are two questions worth considering.

The first question is about the spirit of including a participation grade – is there structured participation? How is that participation measured? Essentially, this boils down to whether or not having a participation category in our assessment is sincere. While using a participation grade to necessitate attendance is not inherently a bad thing, we need to examine the spirit of our "no attendance grade" policy and ask ourselves if we might be acting disingenuously.

The second and more important question we need to be asking ourselves is whether or not using a participation grade fits with SMC's ultimate goal of equity. For example, if a participation grade favors students who have come to SMC with established agency or academic experience, how might that affect our first-generation students? What about disabled students? Would this negatively impact students of color? Even though we are encouraging preparation and involvement, it is worth examining if this approach is, in fact, having the opposite effect on "non-traditional" students.

This line of questioning is uncomfortable for a lot of us because it seems like another step away from the "good old days" of academia. And there is truth to that. Our population's demographics are changing, and we should all be happy that is so. That being said, it is understandable for us to be uncomfortable with not having the expectation of participation, but is that really what the participation grade does? Are there ways for students to participate who may struggle with certain disabilities or anxieties that hamper their ability to chime in during class? (See the sidebar!) Perhaps it is our job to shift away from an arbitrary mandate and consider what we might do pedagogically to ensure participation, genuine participation, that will then lead to more success in other areas of assessment.

CONTACT US!

If you have any ideas or issues you would like to submit to the Professional Ethics and Responsibilities Committee for future consideration, get in touch with us through the links below.

[PERC website](#)

[email](#)