“I Hope It’s Just Attendance”:
What Does Participation Mean to
Freshman Composition Students and Instructors?

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Participation, a commonly graded component of composition classrooms, is rarely the focus of current research studies. While some discussions have addressed grading practices or ways to increase participation, student and instructor voices have yet to be included in studies of classroom participation in composition courses. Yet these voices are necessary to discover how students and instructors define participation, as well as to determine their beliefs about, and justifications for, grading this activity. There is reason to suppose that students and instructors often have disparate ideas about what constitutes composition classroom participation. When asked why he or she grades participation, one instructor explained:

Participation is extremely important. The students are not passive vessels in which I pour information. I tell them that they are the best teachers they will ever have. But, to teach themselves they need to question, discuss, share their ideas and insights with others. They learn from each other. Without participation we might as well plop them down in front of a computer or television and have them watch. They learn by doing, by writing.

It would be difficult to disagree with this instructor’s justification for choosing to include participation as a requirement for the course. Yet the responses from the students in the study that follows suggest that they place less value on this part of the course. One student wrote, “As long as you don’t fall asleep, you will be alright.” As this response reveals, there seems to be a wide discrepancy between instructor and student beliefs about what qualifies as participation in the classroom. The findings that I report in the remainder of this article reveal not only troubling definitions of participation but also nebulous grading practices of this classroom component.

Review of Literature

The composition classroom is often thought to be a prime location for fostering critical thinking skills and creating active learners. Since process pedagogy’s rise in the 1970s, many composition classes continue to utilize activities that developed out of this movement, such as workshops, revision strategies, free writing, class discussion, and group work (Tobin). Many
of us would agree with Peter Elbow’s belief that “writing is a way to end up thinking something you couldn’t have started out thinking” (Writing 15) or with Donald Murray’s assertion that “we certainly should allow time within the curriculum for prewriting, and we should work with our students to help them understand the process of rehearsal, to allow them the experience of rehearsing what they will write in their minds, on the paper, and with collaborators” (380-81). Scholars such as Kenneth Bruffee and John Trimbur have also argued convincingly that the exchange of ideas within the classroom is essential to student learning. While Bruffee argues that “writing always has its roots deep in the acquired ability to carry on the social symbolic exchange we call conversation” (641-42) and understands the goal of collaborative learning to be consensus among students, Trimbur claims that he is “less interested in students achieving consensus (although of course this happens at times) as in their using consensus as a critical instrument to open gaps in the conversation through which differences may emerge” (614). Consensus or not, classroom discussion, along with these other in-class activities, has become an integral part of the writing classroom.

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to trace the development of these activities in the contemporary classroom. More recently, however, John Bean’s Engaging Ideas has provided instructors with detailed writing activities for all disciplines. He explains that the premise of his book is “that integrating writing and other critical thinking activities into a course increases students’ learning while teaching them thinking skills for posing questions, proposing hypotheses, gathering and analyzing data, and making arguments” (1). Many of Bean’s activities make use of collaborative methods, and he additionally includes activities that center on group work, revision, journals, and portfolios—all of which stem from process pedagogy.

To make students accountable for these classroom activities, composition instructors often include classroom involvement as participation and include participation within the overall course grade. Email responses from a listserv of freshman composition instructors, as well as an email to writing instructors in my department, confirmed that this criterion is standard in freshman composition as well and that it accounted for an average of 15% of a student’s grade. Bean and Peterson argue that “grading class participation can send positive signals to students about the kind of learning and thinking an instructor values, such as growth in critical thinking, active learning, development of listening and speaking skills needed for career success, and the ability to join a discipline’s conversation” (33). Clearly, these outcomes are desirable, making the inclusion of a participation grade seem to be a logical choice among instructors.

Composition class aside, participation seems to be most often defined as verbal contributions to class, including asking and answering questions and
participating in class discussions. Indeed, most scholars who have conducted studies of student participation have approached the concept of participation with this definition (Auster and MacRone; Crombie et al.; Fassinger; Nunn; Ryan, Marshall, and Haomiao). As a result, these studies have focused on issues rooted in class discussions, such as the effects of instructor and student genders and students’ perceptions of their level of contribution.

The only study that has specifically focused on definitions of participation was conducted by Linda Fritschner, who found that quiet and talkative students define participation in two very different ways: “‘Talkers,’ those students who made two or more comments per class, tended to define participation as simply ‘voluntarily speaking out in class.’ Quiet students defined participation as . . . attendance, active listening, sitting in their seats, doing the assignments, and being prepared for class” (352). Further, she found that instructors most commonly grouped participation into one of six levels. Surprisingly, students in Fritschner’s study seemed to define participation at levels higher on Fritschner’s scale than most surveyed instructors, many of whom felt they had too much information to present, leaving no time for much beyond lecture.

However, unlike instructors of lecture-based classrooms, most composition instructors expect students to participate at high levels, as student involvement often comprises the core of the writing classroom experience. Bean and Peterson hope that “when students see that their participation is being graded regularly and consistently, they adjust their study habits accordingly to be prepared for active participation” (33). Unfortunately, despite their being graded for participation, students often choose not to participate as much as instructors would like. A recent survey, which focused on students’ first college year, found that freshman had a lack of interest in academic study, choosing instead to focus their attention on social activities such as texting or blogging (Bauerlein). These results are problematic, as the connection between student engagement and the improved development of critical thinking skills has long been established (Halpern; McKeachie; Smith; Tsui).

A recent study of the relation between critical thinking and academic control among first year students found that students who feel more in control of their academic experience are more likely to engage in critical thinking and to have improved learning experience (Stupnisky, et al.). Citing previous studies by Perry, which link perceived academic control to academic success, the researchers argue that students in college are often in situations over which they feel little control. As a result, Stupnisky et al. posit: “students who believe they can influence their academic outcomes (i.e., high perceived control) should be more willing to put forth the effort to think critically (i.e., high critical thinking)” (517). Consequently, they recommend that to increase students’ disposition to think critically, instructors
should create a high-control environment by providing detailed assignments, study suggestions, instructor availability, etc. Furthermore, students should have a clear understanding of how to succeed, as Stupnisky et al. found that “students who felt more in control of their academic outcomes at the start of the academic year were more likely to think critically later in the year” (524). However, if instructors have unclear participation expectations and are using ambiguous grading practices, then it would not be surprising to find that students believe they have little control over their participation grade, possibly creating further disengagement and a decreased inclination to develop critical thinking skills.

These previous studies, which mostly assume the definition of participation to be discussion, limit the chance to study the wide variations of definitions of participation that may be used in composition classrooms, in particular. No research on the meaning of participation within the composition classroom has been done, and no research has compared student and instructor definitions to see if discrepancies occur. Additionally, despite the fact that most instructors choose to include participation in their overall course grade, no studies in composition have surveyed instructors about their use of this grading practice. To discover whether students are indeed aware of their instructors’ expectations for participation, and to learn how instructors grade participation, I conducted the following study. If students are being graded for participation (and many are), then it is important that they understand what is required of them in order to receive full credit, as this greater control over their grades may also further the development of their critical thinking skills through their engagement in classroom activities.

The purpose of this study was to determine how students define participation within the composition classroom and to compare that definition to their instructors’, as well as to the definitions of students taking different sections of the same course. It was also designed to determine how instructors grade participation and why. The study was designed to consider the following questions:

1. How much is participation worth in most composition classes? Are students aware of this percentage?
2. How do instructors define participation?
3. How do instructors grade participation?
4. How do students define participation?
5. What do students believe is most important for them to earn their participation grade?
6. How do students believe their instructors will grade participation?
7. Why do instructors choose to include participation as a part of their course grade?
Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study included 20 freshman composition instructors and 344 students enrolled in freshman composition courses at a medium-sized, public, doctoral-granting institution located in the Midwest. Freshman composition courses at this university are taught primarily by graduate students, although adjunct and full-time faculty teach several sections each quarter. While there is some variety in materials used for these courses, all freshman composition courses share four common goals for students: reading rhetorically, researching rhetorically, writing rhetorically, and responding rhetorically. Instructors are permitted to create their own syllabi for these courses and to determine their own grading criteria.

In order to select participants, I identified and emailed each instructor of freshman composition for Winter Quarter of 2007. Of the 50 instructors who were emailed, 20 agreed to let me visit their class and to give students my survey. These instructors also agreed to fill out a survey designed for them.

Materials

With the help of other experienced instructors of composition, I designed two surveys to be used in this study (See Appendices A & B). The survey intended for the students included questions concerning their definitions of participation in their composition courses, and the survey for the instructors included questions concerning their definitions of participation for these courses. The questions were purposely made open-ended to allow for a greater variety of responses.

Procedure

This study was conducted during weeks seven through ten of a ten-week quarter to assure that students had ample time to become familiar with their classes. I visited each of the twenty classes sometime during its regularly scheduled meeting, at which time I passed out the surveys. I briefly explained the nature of the study, and students were given as much time as needed to complete the surveys. This process took ten to twenty minutes. I collected the surveys from students as they completed them. I also handed out instructor surveys at this time, although instructors were permitted to complete them on their own time and to put them in my departmental mailbox.

Analysis

In order to study the data carefully, I began by identifying and tallying the various responses for each class. I noticed that students’ definitions of
participation were similar despite the open-ended questions on the survey, making it easier than expected to combine the data. For example, I counted how many students mentioned activities such as attendance, discussion, and peer review under the question that asked them what their instructor counts as participation. Further, I counted two seemingly identical yet differently named activities as one activity; for example, I grouped “paying attention” and “listening” into the same category, as well as “free writes” and “in-class writing.” I also chose not to group together activities that many instructors might have counted as the same. For example, “asking questions” and “answering questions” could be seen as inclusive of class discussion, but both instructors and students most often listed these in addition to class discussion.

After completing this process for each class, I added the data from the classes together. I decided to focus on four things:

1. The students’ understanding of how much attendance is worth.
2. The students’ explanation of what they believe counts toward their participation grade.
3. The students’ ranking of the top four activities they must do to earn their participation grade.
4. The students’ understanding of how their instructors grade their participation.

I approached the instructors’ data in the same manner and also found many similarities in responses. To correspond to the student data, I decided to focus on the following:

1. The percentage of the grades which instructors make participation worth.
2. The top four activities instructors count as part of the participation grade.
3. The instructors’ explanations of how they grade participation.
4. The reasons why instructors choose to grade participation.

This method of analysis allowed me to compare student responses, instructor responses, and student-instructor responses.

**Student Results**

In these twenty classes, participation ranged from 0-20% of the students’ grade (See Table 1). Four of the instructors did not include participation as a part of their core course grade; participation was not graded at all in two
of the classes, and in the other two courses, it could only positively affect a student’s grade as extra credit. In general, the participation grade was significant enough to affect the overall class grade. One might suppose that students would want to succeed in class and would show awareness of how much participation might affect their final grade. However, only 90 out of 344 (26.2%) of the students who answered this question knew how much participation was worth as a part of their course grade.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Instructors</th>
<th>Percent of Grade Participation is Worth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Participation Grade Percentages*

When students were asked to list everything that they believe their instructor counts toward their participation grade, students most often listed class discussions (77.0%), attendance (34.4%), homework (28.8%), and in-class writing (20.3%)(See Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Number of students out of 344 who included this activity</th>
<th>Percentage of students who included this activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Discussion</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>77.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class Writing</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer Questions</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay attention</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask questions</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Review</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read aloud</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice Opinion</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Activities Students Believe Count for Participation*

Students were also asked to rank the top four things they believed they had to do to earn their participation grade. While the activities listed were very diverse, including reading, group work, peer review, being polite, and thinking, among others, there were also several activities that were repeatedly ranked in the top four. Of the 334 students who listed a top activity,
35.9% listed class discussion, 28.7% listed attendance, 11.4% listed homework, and 6.0% listed answering questions. For the second most important activity which 315 students ranked, students most commonly identified class discussion (26.0%), homework (16.2%), attendance (8.6%), and paying attention. Of the 282 students who identified a third most important activity, 17.8% listed class discussion, 16.7% listed homework, 8.5% listed attendance, and 7.1% listed paying attention. And finally, homework (15%), attendance (11.1%), class discussion (9.7%), and paying attention (9.2%) were most commonly listed as the fourth most important activity by the 207 students who provided a response. While these percentages may seem low, they also attest to the wide variety of activities that students listed.

When students were asked how they believe that their instructor grades participation, the majority of the 336 students who responded (44.9%) either referred me to previous questions they had answered or simply listed the same activities they had already identified. However, 18.8% of students admitted that they did not know how participation was graded, which may also have been true of those students who simply re-listed activities. Of the remaining students who answered this question, 4.2% said from memory, 6.8% said from observation, 2.7% said it wasn’t graded, 6.8% said that points were given, and 15.8% simply offered descriptions such as fairly, generously, or by effort.

**Instructor Results**

When asked to list everything that counts toward the participation grade for their class, the majority of the instructors listed class discussion (75.0%) and in-class writing (55.0%) (See Table 3). Interestingly, two of the four instructors who said that participation did not make up a percentage of the course grade still chose to list activities when asked what counted toward the participation grade. When asked what they most valued, instructors often ranked attendance as being most important for participation, with 40% listing this activity first. Other activities listed first included in-class writing, class discussion, group work, and homework.

When instructors were asked how they graded participation, the most common response was said to be by observing students during class (20.0%). Other responses were by taking notes (15.0%), by adding points (15.0%), by rounding/not rounding up the grade (10.0%), by peer review (10.0%), and by not grading (10.0%). Each of the following responses was given by 5.0% of instructors: check marks, graded written responses, and by giving the student what he/she deserves. These responses, in addition to details about why instructors chose to grade participation, will be discussed in detail in the next section.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Number of instructors out of 20 who included this activity</th>
<th>Percentage of instructors who included this activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Discussion</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class Writing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Work</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Critique</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay alert</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc. (effort, presentations, laughing, reading, respect, debates, motivation)</td>
<td>1 each</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Activities Instructors Count Toward Participation Grade

Discussion

It is somewhat surprising that the majority of students reproduced that they had no idea what their participation was worth in their composition courses. Even though this information could probably be found on the students’ course syllabi, the students’ lack of knowledge about this grade was disconcerting simply because participation was usually worth enough to alter the students’ final grade, often somewhat substantially. However, because students were so varied in their responses to what they believed participation meant in this course, it appears that the majority of students seemed to have only a slight understanding of what was expected of them. And ironically, many students were also unaware that participation was not being graded in some of these classes, often listing various activities they believed counted toward this grade when in fact none did. However, students might have been inclined to believe that their participation would be graded due to past experiences in high school or other college courses.

Students and instructors seemed to be in some agreement about what participation meant, although major discrepancies were still apparent. Class discussion was a common expectation among both students and instructors, which was not surprising as participation is often used interchangeably with discussion in the previous studies I reviewed. Attendance and homework were also listed often, although there was disagreement among instructors about the relation of these activities to participation. One instructor wrote, “Some students assume that things like being present in class and having completed a reading response count as participation; they don’t, and I make sure that students know that.” Initially, it was surprising that so many instructors ranked attendance first, as this seems contradictory.
to what we know about active learning requiring more than one’s presence in class. Of course, it is likely that instructors saw attendance as a necessary precursor to other activities, and this seemed to be reaffirmed in instructors’ discussions of grading, as no instructor actually mentioned attendance as a necessary factor. Yet many students listed only attendance, suggesting that many students felt that simply being in class was enough. Unfortunately, this finding seems to be consistent with those of the previously mentioned study on student disengagement (see Bauerlein), as students may come to class but not see any reason to become involved with classroom activities.

Even more perplexing than beliefs about attendance was the finding that so many students and even a few instructors saw homework as being a relevant part of a participation grade. Homework, an out-of-class activity, does not seem to be a way for students to participate in class. But grading out-of-class activities does not seem to be uncommon, as professors often include these activities as a part of the participation grade (Bean and Peterson). Yet one instructor who did not grade participation wrote, “The students receive credit for turning in their rewrites as we do them. For more in-depth homework assignments, I may assign a 2 or a 1 as a grade for effort. But that isn’t really participation, is it?” Apparently, many students and instructors thought that completing homework was a way for students to participate, possibly due to a belief that students were then better prepared to do in-class activities.

Perhaps the most intriguing results, however, were those produced by the questions about grading. Instructors valued rather vague activities for participation. How, one might ask, does an instructor grade a student for things such as effort, looking alert, or even contributing to class discussions? Or how might an instructor grade a student for in class writing, when the instructor rarely sees the end result? Students were by far the most perplexed by the question about grading, as shown by the fact that nearly half of the students simply repeated the same activities that they listed in response to previous questions. In fact, some students even seemed irritated by this question, often referring me back to previous questions. One student even went so far as to write, “This question is redundant,” failing to see that identifying what activities were being graded for participation is not the same thing as understanding how those activities were being graded.

Even those students who attempted to answer this question gave unsatisfying responses. Many students admitted to having no idea how their participation was being graded, although some displayed a degree of humor in their comments. One student wrote, “Hopefully, generously. Other than that I’m not sure,” while another stated, “Not sure, but I hope I get an A.” Other students showed slight worries about their lack of knowledge, writing, “I don’t even know. I have no idea if all the volunteering I

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have done in class is even counting towards participation,” and, “I hope/think it’s just attendance” (It was not). One student quite bluntly wrote: “I don’t know how people grade anything, so I couldn’t tell you.” Some students also displayed a perhaps overly confident belief about how their participation was being graded, writing “As long as you don’t fall asleep or have never talked, you will be alright,” and “He’s not too harsh on us; very lenient.” While these answers more precisely attempted to answer the question of how rather than what, they still show that students were, overall, confused.

Many students believed that participation was graded based on the instructors’ general observations of them during class. Several students made comments to this end, expressing views such as the following: “I think she just at the end of the grading period goes through each student’s name and tries to recall events to give a grade. Possibly some bias involved”; “It is a random thought. No actual evidence just based on her recollection of your participation”; “I don’t think there’s a grading criteria on participation. I think the grade is probably her opinion”; “I think at the end of the quarter they think back on each person and how outspoken and involved they were during the quarter and judge the grade accordingly”; “[I’m] not really all that sure. I think it is more of a feel thing that she will come up with at the end of the quarter.” Perhaps these comments are the most disturbing, as they suggest that students felt that they had little control over their grade.

Unfortunately, the students’ beliefs that the grading would be based on the instructor’s observation of them were perhaps the most accurate of any expressed in response to the survey. One student wrote in response to my question on grading, “Why don’t you just ask them yourself?” Having done so (although not upon the recommendation of the student), I found that the instructors were often no more specific in their answers than the students and were at times even contradictory. Basing the participation grade upon the instructors’ perception of the students was not uncommon; instructors provided responses such as the following: “It’s quite subjective, frankly. I emerge from the quarter with a general impression of each student’s participation”; “I give one participation and attendance grade at the end of the quarter based on 2 things – 1) attendance 2) a general impression of the student’s participation level throughout the quarter”; “I’m afraid I can’t be very specific. I assign a grade that I feel the student deserves”; “I grade based on my impressions, on how well I ‘know’ the students at the end of the quarter, how much they talk and how much effort they put forth”; “Overall impression from each student. I consider their contributions in both class discussion and group work.” These responses, obviously highly subjective, lack a solid explanation of how this grade is determined. But Bean and Peterson note that in their “informal discussions with professors . . . most professors determine
participation grades impressionistically, using class participation largely as a fudge factor in computing final course grades” (33), so perhaps this type of instructor response should not be too surprising.

Other responses from instructors were equally vague. One instructor claimed: “I will count the points for the most eligible candidate and deduct points from those who fail to meet the standard.” This seems problematic for at least two reasons: only one student can receive the full points for participation, and students did not seem to know that their participation grades were curved. Another instructor wrote: “Participation is not an end of the quarter grade. Students may get as many as 4 check marks/week. At the end of the quarter check marks are counted.” But how does a student get a check mark? And how many check marks are needed to receive the full participation points? An equally vague response involved rewarding students by altering their final grades, with instructors writing, “I either round up or don’t round up the grade depending on participation,” and “In practice, some students receive an additional ‘bump’ if I consider them to be engaged members in class, but I don’t penalize introverted students.” While at least this grading method does not punish students, the use of the participation grade as a reward is problematic. Students may see participation as an extra, rather than necessary, part of learning and thus refrain from becoming involved if they feel they can receive a good grade regardless of how much they participate.

But the most disconcerting response about grading practices came from an instructor who explained the participation grade in rather contradictory terms. In response to one question, the instructor initially wrote, “To count for full participation, if they are generally alert and awake I’ll give them full points.” But this same instructor, when asked about grading, stated, “If they have no marks against them and they talk in class they get the full 100 points. If they have no marks and don’t talk, they get 90 points.” It cannot be that the students can both get full points just for being alert and awake and also lose points for not talking, as talking is not necessarily a part of being alert and awake.

Since there was such a discrepancy among students and even instructors about these expectations and grading practices, one cannot help but to question why participation needs to be included as a part of the composition course grade. After all, several instructors chose not to include it, and they voiced no complaints about a lack of engagement. Perhaps the most unique method of encouraging participation came from one instructor who did not include participation in the course grade: “On the first day of class, I explained that I expected students to participate in group work and in class writing projects. If they declined to participate, I would ask them to leave and mark the day as an absence (This has never happened).” This approach might help to increase student accountability, as participation is no longer

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a specific grade to be earned but an expectation for those who come to class. Elbow believes “that when we ‘motivate’ students with grades, we are not building motivation but undermining it: we are gradually sapping the ability to work or think or wonder under their own steam” (13). It is true with the case of the aforementioned instructor that students’ course grades can still be affected if students are being marked absent when they fail to participate, but it is also true that her expectations for participation are much clearer than any other instructor surveyed. This instructor justified her method as follows: “I don’t count it as a grade because I see my role as instructional leader in the classroom. To that end, I use a variety of strategies to motivate students intrinsically to participate when possible, and to draw out reluctant students. I’m not comfortable grading students on participation, because I don’t see a way to make those kinds of expectations reliably quantifiable.” Based on the vague responses from other instructors, it seems that making this grade quantifiable is indeed challenging. And this is problematic, as this inability to clarify expectations for students may encourage them to feel less in control of their grades and therefore less inclined to think critically in the writing classroom. If instructors are unable to explain how they grade this fairly significant portion of the overall course grade, then perhaps instructors need to consider how this lack of clarity might disadvantage their students.

The instructors seemed to have good intentions for grading participation, and most instructors seemed to be in agreement about why they chose to include participation in their course grade. A common justification given by instructors was that participation was always included in the courses they took as students. Other instructors seemed to fear that without a participation grade, students would choose not to be involved with the class: “It’s sort of put out there that students won’t talk if they aren’t directly graded on it. I think I’m too afraid to try it (going without the participation grade that is).” While it may be true that students will participate less if they are not graded for it, it may also be true that this fear is unfounded; as mentioned before, the majority of students saw participation as an expected part of the course even when it was not graded. One student even wrote, “He just wants all of his students to learn so as long as we’re all participating we’re all learning.” And it seems that this is why the instructors chose to grade participation—to encourage students to engage in the classroom. The instructors’ goals for including participation are clearly worthwhile, and several of the goals instructors provided in their responses are worth listing in their entirety:

“I count it to encourage lively discussions and to foster a stronger sense of community. Participation increases learning and retention of new knowledge, so I consider it an important component of success in the classroom.”
“It’s a largely discussion-oriented class and would fail without participation. I’ve learned through experience—I’ve never had an English class as an undergrad or grad that didn’t emphasize participation.”

“I count participation as part of the course grade because the students have to discuss and if they didn’t have to participate then they probably wouldn’t discuss.”

“As courses like 151 depend so much upon the involvement and contribution of the students, it is absolutely desirable that a participation grade be there. I have always felt that some students deserve to be considered more generously than others. However, I don’t let allow anything of a personal or sentimental/subjective kind to interfere with my evaluation. The discretion is acquired purely during the term.”

“I genuinely believe that regular participation results in a more fun and more successful classroom experience for my students as well as for me. To me participation is not some arbitrary category of ‘college requirements.’ I want to encourage and recognize those students who help make class fun and interesting while punishing (to some degree) those who are unwilling or unable to make a contribution. To me it’s like hosting a party: some folks in attendance will help make the party successful and fun while others refuse to contribute to the environment and prefer to stay in the corner of the room as spectators. It seems there are always givers and takers, but I want there to be as many givers as possible.”

What is perhaps most interesting about these comments is that the first three instructors explained why they feel that participation is necessary rather than why they grade it, while the remaining two instructors showed a belief that grading participation is necessary in order to manage the classroom. It may be possible that the former instructors chose to include graded participation in the composition classroom because it is a tradition rather than because of an actual need to do so. And the latter instructors seemed to fear a classroom without a nebulous participation grade with which to maintain control. One of Stupinsky et al.’s recommendations, based on the results of their own study, is for instructors to create a high-control environment for their students, and providing clear expectations for earning a participation grade is one crucial factor in creating such an environment. However, if instructors want their students to be inclined to think critically, and the above statements seem to indicate that they do, then instructors may need to return some control to the students by making their expectations for participation more explicit, if they choose to grade participation at all.

Despite the limited size of my study, it has uncovered many troubling beliefs about participation among composition instructors and students and about nebulous grading practices among instructors. Studies such as

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my own may be especially useful in composition courses that depend on
participation and are not often lecture-based. In addition, further studies
are necessary to determine how different methods of grading participation
affect students in terms of motivation, effort, and a disposition to think
critically. Specifically, research needs to be done which compares composi-
tion classes that use participation grades to those that do not. Such stud-
ies would help to clarify whether participation grades are in fact needed
to maintain control over students, or whether it may be more beneficial
to give additional control to the students, as it may actually help them to
succeed academically.

**Implications**

Instructors in this study seemed to desire primarily two things: engage-
ment among the students and a way to encourage this engagement. Grading
participation seems to be a tool used by many instructors to achieve this
result, but student engagement achieved this way may come at the expense
of the students. If it is true, as Stupinsky et al. suggest, “that creating a high
control environment during the first year of college fosters a critical think-
ing disposition and bolsters academic success” (527), then it seems that
instructors have reason to make participation requirements more tangible
for students. If instructors do this, students may come to feel more in control
of their ability to meet this expectation and thus develop a greater tendency
to use critical thinking skills. But of equal importance is the possibility that
students may simply become more motivated, as Perry et al. found that
“compared with their moderate-control counterparts, high-academic-control
students exerted more effort, reported less boredom and anxiety, expressed
greater motivation, used self-monitoring strategies more often, felt more
control over their course assignments and life in general, believed they per-
formed better at the beginning and end of their course, and obtained higher
final grades” (785). These desirable student outcomes alone are possible
reasons to consider increasing student control by providing more explicit
requirements for participation.

Because many students in this study believed that coming to class and
doing homework were enough to earn participation points, it may be that
students saw themselves as passive learners. But most instructors wanted
students involved in class as well, and this is not surprising, as I cannot
imagine a composition instructor who would not desire some form of par-
ticipation from his/her students. While some students may choose to engage
in the course regardless of the grade, other students may choose not to
engage if they do not believe that their efforts matter. And why would they
consider their efforts to be worthwhile if their grade is simply the result of
their instructors’ opinion of them? Stupinsky et al. argue, “First-year college

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students experience a substantial transition from high school to college that involves increased responsibilities in a new and challenging environment. These early experiences can make some students feel ‘out of control’ leading them to perceive college as a low-control environment characterized by academic struggles” (514). Freshman composition is often one of the first college experiences that a student has, and if academic control helps students to become better students, then composition instructors have reason to help their students to gain this control.

Because there does not seem to be a way to make the participation grade quantifiable enough for students to feel control over this course requirement, there is reason to suppose that participation should not be a part of a student’s freshman composition grade. It may be important to note here that it is the grading of participation, not the act, of which I am wary. Elbow, who sees all grading as problematic anyway, argues that grades are not trustworthy, often have unclear meaning, and are difficult to determine (6). And whether or not this is true of all grading, his belief seems to be confirmed with regard to participation by my findings, as his description adequately describes the grading processes of the instructors I surveyed. While grading is often a subjective, slightly frustrating process anyway, it becomes even more challenging when trying to grade student participation. Many of these instructors claimed to rely on a feeling, and it is, after all, unclear as to as to how a feeling translates into a grade. It is not surprising that Elbow believes that “conventional grading often makes students feel a bit mystified, helpless, and even paranoid about what they will ‘get’ for the course” (10). This description is not that of a student who feels in control of his/her grade, and perhaps this inability to make the participation grade quantifiable for the student is “why assessment and measurement scholars almost universally advise against grading class participation” (Bean and Peterson 33).

When I completed a pilot study for this project, my grading of participation was much like those of the instructors discussed above: a completely subjective tool used to alter students’ grades to my liking. It was also a way to make me feel more in control of my course. Because I became unsure about my own practice of grading participation, in the following quarters I awarded each student all of the possible participation points out of guilt, as I felt that I could not adequately judge their participation when I was so unsure about it myself. Later, I tried asking students to turn in pieces of paper each day telling me what they did to participate. Yet this method still came down to my own opinion of the students, and I began to question why grading participation is even necessary. Deciding to practice what I preach, I chose not to grade participation in my current class, and I can honestly say that students are no less engaged than before. The only difference that I see is that I no longer have to worry about how to grade this troublesome
component. Elbow challenges us with the following questions for consideration: “Instead of asking, ‘Grading – yes or no?’ let’s ask, ‘Grading – when and how much?’” (“Taking” 7). Perhaps participation should not be graded in the composition classroom, as it is apparently difficult to quantify and confusing to define. At the very least, instructors need to make their expectations and requirements for the participation grade as explicit as possible, even if this means relinquishing the control that comes from having a nebulous participation grade. As a result, students might feel greater control over their grade, thus resulting in increased motivation, engagement, and a disposition to think critically.

Notes

1. In most classes, participation is included as a part of a student’s course grade, with a study at one university finding that 93 percent of all courses included this grade factor (Bean & Peterson).

2. According to Fritschner, “Breathing and staying awake were level one. Level two included students who came to class, took notes, and did the assignments. The third level included writing papers that were reflective and thoughtful. Level four included asking questions in class, making comments, and providing input for class discussions. The fifth level was doing additional kinds of research or coming to class with additional questions, and level six included oral presentations where the students themselves became the teachers” (354).

3. Stupnisky et al. focused their study on students’ “disposition to think critically” (514), as this disposition is meant “to ensure the development and use of critical thinking skills” (515). They define perceived academic control as “a person’s general belief in his or her capacity to influence and predict some aspect of the environment” (515).

Works Cited


Crombie, Gail, et al. “Students’ Perceptions of Their Classroom Participation and


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Appendix A

Participation in English 151 – Instructor Survey
Course/Section number _____________

1. How much is participation worth in this class? __________

2. Did you explain to students what you expect for participation in this class?
   
   YES              NO
   
   If you checked yes, when did you explain this to your students?

3. What do you count toward the participation grade in this class? Please explain in detail.

4. Please list, in order of importance, the top four things students need to do in order to receive credit for participation in this class.

   1. __________________________
   2. __________________________
   3. __________________________
   4. __________________________

5. How do you encourage participation in your class? Please be specific.

6. Is it possible for students to lose participation points? How?

7. How do you grade participation at the end of the quarter? Please be as specific as possible.

8. Why do you count participation as a part of the course grade? Were you taught that it should be a part of the course grade? If so, when?
Appendix B

Participation in English 151 – Student Survey
Course/Section Number _________________

1. What percentage of your grade in this class is based on participation? __________

2. Did your instructor explain what he/she expects in terms of participation for this class?

   YES   NO
   If you checked yes, please explain what your instructor said as best as you can remember.

3. What do you think your instructors counts as participation in this class? Please list everything that you think counts toward your participation grade.

4. Please list, in order of importance, the top four things you believe you must do in order to receive participation points in this class.

   1. ________________________________
   2. ________________________________
   3. ________________________________
   4. ________________________________

5. How does your instructor encourage participation in this class?

6. How do you think that your instructor grades participation? Please be as specific as possible.