

Common Forms of Assessment: Participation and Professionalism Grades

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The inclusion of participation or professionalism grades can be argued for or against. For example, Fassinger (2000) found that instructors who promote participation by including it in the course grade (and encourage group discussions) tend to have higher participation. Yet, it has also been found that while overt, physical engagement (such as vocal participation) may correlate with mental engagement this is not always the case. If good assessment cognitively engages the student, as suggested by Bloxham and Boyd (2007), and participation does not always guarantee mental engagement, should it be assessed?

In the end, if participation (or professionalism) is part of your course learning outcomes it can (and should) be assessed. However, it is important to consider *how* these aspects will be assessed. For example, attendance may not be the best measure of participation; just because a student is present, does it mean they are cognitively engaged? It is important measures of participation and professionalism are meaningful. The method of assessment for participation or professionalism, like all methods of assessment, depend on the learning outcomes used in the course. For example, if a course included a learning outcome such as “By the end of the course students will be able to formulate effective arguments for and against public policy and clearly explain these arguments **verbally** and in writing”, the instructor may choose to assess students’ participation by evaluating their contribution to discussion and the clarity of this contribution. This pushes students to participate more than by being present, they need to effectively contribute and argue their ideas.

Participation versus Professionalism

Often, professors include a participation grade in their course but they are actually assessing students on their professionalism. To us, participation assessment can be considered a subset of professionalism assessment:



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Participation grades should evaluate students on behaviours specific to engagement with the course material. Some examples of participation include:

- sharing insightful questions and comments to engage others in the class;
- appropriate and thoughtful contribution to class discussion; and,
- being on task and cognitively present.

Professionalism grades evaluate participation behaviours but also include behaviours of professionals or those specific to a profession or discipline. Some examples of professionalism, beyond those stated in participation include:

- attendance/punctuality in all matters;
- regard for others in tone, address, attention, and body language;
- respect for authority, position, expertise, and colleagues;
- showing a positive and open attitude;
- receiving feedback respectfully and implementing it; and,
- considerations for dress specific to the profession.

Before including a participation grade in your course syllabus, it is important to consider: (1) whether you are truly assessing only participation or if you are also evaluating students on their professionalism; and (2) what your learning outcomes permit you to assess.

Problems in Participation or Professionalism Assessment

One of the key aspects to assessing participation or professionalism is to be clear and transparent with your students. Participation or professionalism grades are easily contested by students unless the assessment is clearly outlined. Write a clear policy explaining what good participation/professionalism looks like, when you expect it from students, and how it will be graded. Using this policy, give feedback on participation throughout the term by highlighting good examples of participation or giving formative feedback on student performance mid-way through the course. Always give students a chance to improve, and let them know the areas in which they need to improve. Clear and transparent guidelines that are constantly reinforced will give students little doubt that this grade is supported by evidence.

It can be tempting to use participation or professionalism grades as a chance to move student final grades to 'where they should be'; this is not the purpose of this grade. This grade should be based on evidence of support collected throughout the entire term. Hence, one strategy to avoid this is to assign a participation or professionalism grade *before* marking final papers or exams. To make this even more grounded in evidence, show the student their participation grade before they undertake their exam. Professionalism or participation grades are meant to provide evaluation on student contribution and behaviours, not to be used for grade movement.



Evidence for a Grade

You, reader, may have noticed that I continue to use the word ‘evidence’ throughout this chapter; this is because when grading participation or professionalism, like any other assessment, evidence provides reason to assign a specific grade. For participation and professionalism grades, it is best if evidence is collected over time and a record of contribution maintained. One strategy for this could be to provide students with a small rubric (as shown below) and record after each class how a student as scored out of three.

Grade	Descriptor
Excellent (3/3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student contributes insightful comments and questions to the class discussion • Student encourages other classmates to talk and does not dominate the discussion • Student effectively, and professionally, argues their ideas and opinions using evidence from literature and life as support
Good (2/3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student regularly contributes to the class discussion • Student contributes appropriate comments and questions to the class discussion • Student is able to argue their ideas and opinions but often only uses personal examples
Satisfactory (1/3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student occasionally contributes to the class discussion <i>or</i> student dominates the discussion leaving little room for others to contribute • Student contributes comments or questions which are inappropriate or neglectful of the comment of the day • Student argues ideas and opinions with little or no evidentiary support
Unacceptable (0/3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student rarely contributes to the class discussion • Student exhibits inappropriate behaviour during the class discussion (i.e. berating, ignoring comments, etc.) • Student frequently appears disengaged from the class

This rubric can be used for feedback throughout the term, or even self-evaluation by having a student give themselves a grade out of three. At the end of the semester, you have a full term of evidence with which to base your decision. You may average these numbers to get a score or perhaps only those days *after* the mid-term feedback count; this is your discretion as an instructor, but, remember to be *clear* with students about how you will determine this grade. As participation or professionalism grades are easily contested, it is important you collect concrete, evidentiary support throughout the term with which an evaluation can be made.



Conclusions

Grading participation or professionalism can provide students a chance to effectively engage with a course; assessing an aspect of the course forces students to engage with that concept (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). However, it is important to ensure that your learning outcomes are such that participation or professionalism should be assessed. Should you decide to assess one (or both) of these, be clear about whether you are assessing behaviours related to participation or professionalism. Also, be clear with your students about what you expect in your course. Finally, routinely collect evidence to support the assigned participation grade and share feedback with your students on their progress and potential ways to improve. Assessing participation or professionalism can ensure high levels of engagement within a course, but be sure to go in with a plan!

