The Participation Grading Project

Fairness and inclusion in the classroom

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Study Details

✗ "Active Teaching, Assessment, and Evaluation in Political Science"
  - Survey of political science-affiliated professors in Canada (~300)
  - 63 follow-up interviews

✗ "Participation Grading Project"
  - 4 case study courses
  - 2 sets of student surveys
  - 2 sets of instructor interviews

✗ Reflection on practice & literature review (2021-2022)

Overview

1. What is the problem?

2. Three types of solutions

3. Lessons learned

1.

What's the Problem

with participation grading?

Participation Grading Challenges

✗ Attendance =/= participation

✗ Quantity =/= quality

✗ Recency bias from end-of-term grading

✗ How to capture spurts, improvement, slumps,etc?

✗ Shyness and social anxiety can present barriers

What's the Problem? (Instructors)

✗ Many instructors report lower confidence in evaluating participation

✗ Instructors are varied in the value placed upon oral communication

✗ Fairness to shy students is a common concern

What's the Problem? (Students)

✗ Students who self-identify as frequent participants tend to have higher confidence in their grades

✗ Students who are shy feel disadvantaged by oral participation grades

✗ Overall, students report lower confidence, especially:
  ○ marked by a TA
  ○ no rubric or written expectations are provided
  ○ no feedback is provided with the mark

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"I think I get screwed a lot because I don't like talking in large groups. I also think participation grade are often handed out quite randomly."

—*Student survey response*

2.

Three Types of Solutions

Technical, Replacement, Addition

What Kinds of Solutions are Possible?

Technical solutions

✗ Improving design and practices relating to participation grading

Replacement solutions

✗ Removing participation grades and implementing a different assessment

Addition solutions

✗ Alternatives to participation offered as options for students

Technical Solutions

✗ "What helps is doing the assessment right after each class…if you wait until the end of the term, some bias can come in" (instructor)

✗ "I would say maybe half the class…found it daunting or wasn't interested in offering their hot takes in plenary. But they were really active in smaller groups" (instructor)

✗ Self- assessment (with/instead of) instructor assessment

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"When I asked them to self-evaluate… they don't evaluate themselves in terms of what I told them what was a high participation grade in the syllabus. They evaluate themselves in relation to other students."

—*PGP Interviewee*

Replacement Solutions

✗ Removing participation grades in favour of written submissions, discussion boards, or other non-verbal communication

✗ "I think the model of participation grading that works best is as a reward/punishment for doing the minimum (e.g., readings, answering questions) that should be effort based as there enough other assessments of the quality of our work."

✗ Can shift from spontaneous participation to prepared presentation

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"I don't think it's fair to grade personalities. Some people are naturally talkative…other people may have done the readings, may have thought about the readings, but are more reluctant to share them in a group… So I don't although I do know a lot of scholars do use participation grades."

—*ATAEPS Interviewee*

Addition Solutions (from Students)

✗ "I am against mandatory online discussion boards because they are a waste of time/tedious. I support optional discussion boards to use if you were sick or had a good reason to miss class but still want participation."

✗ "I don't think office hours participation reflects dedication to the course. It only reflects how much free time a student has."

✗ "Very important for individuals with social anxiety, levels the playing field. This may however detract from the quality of participation."

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"I found the discussion board was much less used this term than it had been in previous terms, even though attendance was kind of bleak… Having the discussion boards up did almost nothing, but it also cost me nothing."

—*PGP Interviewee*

3.

Lessons Learned

From universal solutions to responsible choices

Technical Considerations

✗ Does participation relate to the course learning objectives?

✗ Are expectations and feedback clearly shared?

✗ What systems have I implemented to track participation? Do these systems capture many modes of participation?

Broader Considerations

✗ Oral and written communication
  ○ Different anxieties
  ○ Cultures of orature/literature
  ○ Voice and confidence

✗ Is it fair/inclusive for students to be given different qualities of experience in the classroom?

A Mindset Shift in Course Design

Best practices → Intentional decisions
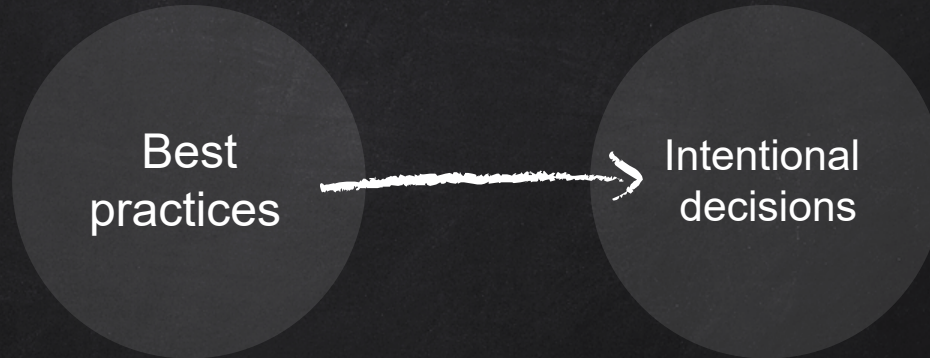
Questions?

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