

ON CLASS PARTICIPATION

If you read the course syllabus, you may note that 20 percent of your final grade in this course will depend on your PARTICIPATION in class discussions.

My experience is that at least half of my students are unwilling or feel unable to participate. Their reasons range from anxiety and fear to shyness or lack of self-confidence. I imagine many tell themselves that if they do well on their mid-term and final exams, their lack of participation won't be a big problem. So they plan to sit in the back of the room and hide out, so to speak.

But as a practical matter, it doesn't work out the way they think it will—and here's why: Let's say, for the sake of this illustration, that you do very poorly on your mid-term and final exams—you flunk both or barely get the equivalent of a D-minus grade. That means you would have failed to earn a potential 90 points between the two exams; you earned 55 on each out of a possible 100 on each, i.e., you earned a total of 110 out of a possible 200, so you lost about 90 points.

Now suppose you sit in the back of the class and virtually never participate. Maybe you earn only five or 10 participation points throughout the semester (out of a possible 100), losing 90 points.

The moral of the story is that failing to participate regularly in class discussions is like failing both the mid-term and final exams. The bottom line is that students who don't participate don't get an A or a B in my classes; some don't even get a C or D if their other grades are mediocre.

At the end of every semester, after course grades are turned in, I invariably get at least a dozen emails from students who are shocked by the final grade they earned. In every case, despite what's explained in the syllabus and my comments in class about the importance of participation, these students typically didn't bother to participate in class discussions, and thus they earned few participation points.

Now suppose you're one of those students who experiences fear and anxiety or is shy or lacking self-confidence. How are you going to deal with this requirement to participate in class discussions?

Here's what I recommend: Do at least some of the assigned reading for each class session. As you read, write down a question or comment you have about the material. At the beginning of virtually every class session, I'll ask if anyone has a question or comment about the assigned reading. That's your cue to raise your hand and simply read aloud your question or comment. It doesn't have to be brilliant or insightful—simply relevant to the subject matter of the class.

What are the absolutely worst things that can happen if you raise your hand and speak up? You may say something mistaken or silly, you may mispronounce a word, you may not have an answer if I ask you a follow-up question, etc.—and then the whole class will start laughing and pointing at you! Which, of course, only happens in the movies.

But in the worst-case scenario, you have found yourself embarrassed by speaking up in class. So what's going to happen under those circumstances? It's a multiple-choice question:

1. You're going to shatter into a million pieces.
2. You're going to find the nearest bridge over the LA River and jump, hoping there's some water below.
3. You going to drop the class and postpone your graduation.
4. You're going to “pick yourself up, wipe yourself off, and start all over again” (like falling of a horse)—telling yourself that you earned the participation points, you survived, and you're not so fragile you have to spend your life hiding in corners.

Keep in mind that courage is not the absence of fear. People who act courageously feel fear, but they make up their minds not to respond to their fear; they feel the fear but refuse to let it dictate their decisions and actions.

You may be asking yourself why I make such a big deal about class participation. My job is to do what I can to help you succeed in your professional life after graduation. When you graduate you will be entering a competitive job market. You'll be competing for jobs with other graduates from top-tier universities, like UCLA, UC Berkeley, Stanford, and USC in California. If you're lucky enough to get hired in the field for which you've been educated, you'll be a probationary employee for the first three to six months. If your new employer discovers that you're reluctant or resistant to actively speak up and participate in group discussions, for whatever reasons, it's very possible you will lose the job. Having the confidence and ability to share your professional opinions and speak up on behalf of your organization is a fundamental requirement of virtually all employment as a professional social worker.

You may not be given the chance to develop that self-confidence and capability on the job. So my view is that here's where you need to begin developing it, in your university classroom, where mistakes and missteps may cause you some embarrassment at worst. But at best you'll develop the needed self-confidence and ability to speak up in a formal group setting—and, of course, you'll earn participation points for this class.

Good luck,

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