GUIDELINES FOR INCLUSIVE, FEMINIST PARTICIPATION PRACTICES & GRADING
by Charlotte Kent, Tessa Paneth-Pollak, Elaine Stiles, S. Surface

Why inclusive, feminist, participation guidelines?

In our discussion of what an inclusive, feminist, grading schema might look like, we began by noting some qualities of conventional participation grading schema at the college level in need of revision.

First, conventional participation and attendance grades place a high premium on students "showing up" in body, mind, and spirit. While we want our students to be engaged in our classes, we note that traditional classroom participation policies often end up reflecting culturally limited or ableist definitions of what it means to be or exhibit "presence" in a classroom. Recent research on shaping more culturally and neuro- diverse classroom spaces has begun to critique standard models for assessing and measuring student presence in the "kairotic" space of the classroom, a space that requires a high degree of in-person contact and impromptu communication.[1] In place of grading schemas that "accommodate" difference when it appears, we advocate for ones that presume the diversity of our classrooms.

Furthermore, participation grading tends to place a high premium on students speaking in class to indicate their presence of mind. We recognize that marginalization of all kinds (gender, race, class, and ability) is often experienced through subtle forms of silencing that impact a student's willingness to speak in class and that students with mental and physical disabilities may face particularly acute barriers to speaking in class.[2] The ideas outlined below advocate for participation rubrics that include alternatives by which students can contribute to classroom functioning.

Relatedly, participation grades tend to place a high premium on punctuality – in attendance as well as assignments – in ways that tend to moralize what is in fact a practical issue. As feminist educators, we value coordination, cooperation, and mutual respect between students and instructor(s) of one another's time, but inflexible definitions of punctuality can enforce ableist norms and reinforce marginalization. Providing clear guidelines around lateness and deadline-specific expectations can be opportunities to introduce students to time management skills that can serve them in their future. Yet, as instructors, we have observed that gradings schemas that automatically penalize students for lateness means we are more likely to penalize students already experiencing marginalization within the educational system--e.g., students who are clinically depressed or dealing with trauma, students with

---

[1] Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2011, 61.

[2] Allyson Julé, *Gender, Participation, and Silence in the Classroom: Sh-Shushing the Girls* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); John Wesley White, "Resistance to Classroom Participation: Minority Students, Academic Discourse, Cultural Conflicts, and Issues of Representation in Whole Class Discussions," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 10, no. 4 (2011), 250-265.

disabilities that make attentiveness to time or navigation to class a challenge, or students who are working multiple jobs in addition to their schoolwork. Encouraging reciprocal communication around deadlines and time markers can be an opportunity for the instructor to recognize students as individuals with complex lives.

Finally, we note that participation grades tend to focus on individual student performance. Thus, instructors who wish to assess students' contributions to classroom activity tend to measure only students' abilities to put forward their singular bodies and solo voices, rather than their equally important abilities to participate with peers. As a corrective to this tendency, the guidelines below suggest pathways for grading students' communication with and accountability to one another so that they may also have the opportunity to earn participation grades through their engagement with their classmates.

We offer these guidelines as a toolkit for aiding feminist educators to cultivate the diversity of our classrooms without having to play the role of nurturer, which can come with numerous professional and personal hazards, including instructor burnout. By making room in the very architecture of our grading rubrics for diverse abilities and experiences, we believe we can build more humane, compassionate, and equitable classrooms. We offer the following as ideas and suggestions. It is by no means a comprehensive nor a compulsory list of approaches.

In writing these guidelines, we adapted a number of the recommendations in the Event Accessibility checklist developed by Writing Resistance at http://bit.ly/1AVCh7R.

I. **SETTING THE TONE:**

There are a number of things instructors can do to set the stage for more robust participation from a more diverse array of students in their classrooms.

CLASSROOM POLICY and REDEFINING "PRESENCE"

- Encourage students to listen to and take care of their bodies throughout class and across the semester. Consider a policy whereby students are "free to move about the cabin."
- Acknowledge and encourage the activation of diverse learning styles (spoken, read, etc.).
- Consider making children, babies, and nursing welcome in class – childcare should not be a barrier to attending class.
- Start by centering the needs of students with disabilities, rather than framing "accommodations" as something extra.
- Consider allowing students to use laptops, tablets, and even smartphones, as long as they are used for note-taking and viewing assigned discussion material. Encourage students to be mindful of whether their use of a device precludes – rather than facilitates – their and others' learning and participation. This may involve a discussion that introduces students to mindfulness and how to identify when they are not. (Define this process in terms of *learning* rather than *presence.*)
- Alternately, consider a classroom setup where laptop users face backwards so that you (as instructor) can see their screen, but they are also compelled to face their peers.

NAMING & ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

One way to lay the groundwork for an inclusive environment, especially in a discussion-based course, is to acknowledge and affirm students in their identities. This sets the groundwork for students not only to show up, but to show up as their most authentic selves.

- On the first day of class, ask: "What name does each person in the classroom go by?" (This is also a good opportunity for the instructor to clarify address preferences: Do you prefer to be "Dr. ____," or Firstname, etc.?)
- Encourage students to identify their pronoun preference; "What pronoun do you use?"
- Alternately, at the start of the semester, bring in name-tags that students can fill out for themselves with the name and pronouns by which they prefer to be addressed. This strategy is more implementable in a large lecture course.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE BODY

- Consider beginning class sessions with a mood/wellness check-in, especially as current news items may impact students' ability to engage with the day's topic: how are people feeling that day? What can they take on? Is there anything urgent to address or anything that they don't have the stamina to work with at this moment?
- Consider including a break time (or break times) for longer class sessions.

ACKNOWLEDGE CLASS
- Acknowledge diversity of student workloads. Empower students who are working full-time jobs while in school by reminding them that they are working TWO full-time jobs.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION: SETTING THE TONE
- Include students in the task of coming up with discussion ground rules and participation ground rules. Hold this discussion in a way that enables different communication styles to contribute **(**see below). Consider assessing students according to their adherence to these collaboratively-established discussion ground rules.
- Similarly, at the start of the semester, have a conversation with students about how to make the organization of the classroom as accessible as possible. Have this conversation in a way that students don't feel pressured to disclose personal information.
- Establish classroom discussion as a space in which everyone can learn *together* – teachers and students – and learn together how to find answers (as opposed to already *having* answers or knowledge). Also permit discussions that do not have final answers to show students how their ideas participate in creating social dynamics for the culture.
- As appropriate for the course, begin the semester with a discussion about classroom discussion patterns and how they are inflected by gender, race, ability, etc. Introduce students early on to the notions of "power" and "privilege" and how these things operate in the classroom, as well as some tools for navigating them. Introduce students to the concept of "centering" so that, throughout the semester, the class can check in about "whose experience is being centered?" in a particular topic unit, discussion, or text.

SETTING BOUNDARIES
Setting clear boundaries with students can allow you to move your classroom from a "rules" framework to a win-win power dynamic. It also helps the instructor to protect herself from overextension and burnout.

- Set clear boundaries with students, while keeping communication lines open with students. Encourage students to communicate when those boundaries come into conflict with their own constraints or responsibilities.
- By the same token, as the instructor, you can acknowledge your own position and limitations: "deadlines help me to keep in touch with your learning process," "I have institutional requirements, time management, and constraints that put pressure on me too - here's what they are…"
- Practice transparency with students about demands you are under as an instructor/employee.
    - "It's my job…" "It's my labor…" "My responsibility to you is…" "Your responsibility to me is…"
- As much as possible, be clear about what it is you need from students and why you need it: "I need this so that I can get your grade in on time…"
- Explain to students that you consider work in the class to be 50/50 (instructor/student) and that you will work as hard as they do. "It's on you…"

4

- For more on setting boundaries with students, see Jane Bluestein's [Nine Things to Remember When Setting a Boundary](#) (written for young students, but adaptable to college-level teaching).

SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT COMMUNICATION
Communicating with a professor – and knowing communication conventions in academia – presumes a certain amount of cultural capital. As intersectional feminist educators, we consider it our job to initiate students into these conventions, rather than simply penalizing them for not already knowing them.

- Reflect on what you need from students in terms of communication; then tell your students how to succeed in communicating with you. Consider having your syllabus articulate into steps the kinds of communication you want to see from your students.
- Go over these skills in class. Tell students that these guidelines will help them in communicating with any faculty member and can also help them professionally.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION: FACILITATION TECHNIQUES
- Pause to define terms and pause students to ask them to define terms that may not be accessible to non-majors, underclassmen, or a general audience.
- Include brief text and verbal definitions in slideshows. This will also make it easier for non-specialist interpreters to communicate your meanings. (e.g. a slide that says "Intersectionality: the idea that multiple systems of identity, such as race, class, and gender, all affect each other" while you are verbally expanding on that concept.)
- Avoid using slides that have small text, long blocks of text, dense spreadsheets, etc. Images, simple and clear diagrams, and short titles/captions using bullet points work best and require that students take notes on the additional information you provide in class.

II. <u>ALTERING THE RUBRIC:</u>

ATTENDANCE
- Consider implementing an Equitable Attendance policy in which you discuss and acknowledge transit needs, travel affordability, jobs, family commitment. Education should not only be for those who are available full time and who have access to reliable transit.
- Using the technology available at your institution (Zoom, Bluejeans, etc.), consider providing students the option to teleconference into the class. Or, livestream the class with a chat room (Google Hangouts is free).
- Reflect on what counts for you as an "excused absence" and on whether you want to be in the position of excusing certain of students' absence. Reflect on the types of documentation you require: what kinds of personal information must a student disclose to provide you with this documentation? Instead, consider offering students unlimited

'excused' absences so long as they communicate with the instructor according to certain parameters that you make explicit.

GROUP WORK:
Creating opportunities for group work that feeds into students' participation grades allows participation to include more reciprocal and collaborative modes and accountability to peers.

- Allow students to decide if they would like to work on a given assignment in a group or solo.
- When responding to group presentations, consider asking students to report on how they divided the labor. Having to answer this question in front of the class encourages students to be cognizant of making divisions of labor more equitable.
- In preparing students for group projects, guide students through some of the practices of good boundary-setting with one another.
- Find ways to assess student performance based on their accountability to one another.

REWARD OTHER MODES:
1. **LISTENING/ABSORBING IS PARTICIPATION**
- Consider offering "learning/absorbing" opportunities (attending a lecture, watching a film, etc.) and "contribution to the field" opportunities for out-of-class engagement.
- Consider offering students the opportunity to produce class notes on the lecture and discussion to be shared with other students through whatever technology the university permits.
- Consider awarding participation grades for active listening; you may wish to provide guidelines of what "active listening" means to you. (Keep in mind, however, that these behaviors are not the *only* evidence that a student is listening.)
- Create opportunities for anonymous participation: have a feed open during class for anonymous questions; or, if the classroom is not tech-enabled, this could be a physical comment box.
- Encourage more talkative students to self-moderate and manage their own tendencies to speak and to make room for other, quieter, students to talk: Come up with a system for rewarding students when they make room for other students to speak. **SAMPLE LANGUAGE:** "Be aware of how much time and space you take up in the discussion. If you find yourself with a lot to say regularly, make sure you are leaving time for others to speak. If you are usually reticent, you are encouraged to speak up more often."
- Consider a discussion model in which students 'call on' each other. After one student speaks, s/he can nominate another student to speak "I'd like to know what [so-and-so] thinks about this... " (The called-on student has the right to decline.) Come up with a system to reward students who make room for and solicit other voices in this way.

2. **ASKING FOR HELP IS PARTICIPATION**
- Consider counting students' after-class questions, clarifications, email inquiries, and office hours meetings in the participation grade.

6

- You may wish to start the next session by presenting some of the questions and clarifications that those students requested since others may have the same need. This also shows those students that their questions are worth the time and space of class.

3. TEACH THY TONGUE TO SAY "I DO NOT KNOW"

- Recognize students for saying "I don't know."
- Include in your syllabus some "silence breaker" sentence starters for building constructive questions in moments of uncertainty rather than saying silent.
    - "I'm really nervous/scared/uncomfortable saying this and/but …"
    - "I'm afraid I may offend someone, and please let know if I do, but …"
    - "It feels risky to say this and/but …"
    - "I'm not sure if this will make any sense, and/but …"
    - "Can you help me understand whether what I'm thinking right now might be problematic?"
    - "This is what I understand you to be saying: … Is that accurate?"
    - "I've been wondering about something since we started this discussion: …"
    - "Is … a good example of what the author was saying?"
    - "I am having a "yeah but." Can you help me work through it?"
    - "This perspective is new to me, but I'm wondering if it is accurate to say that...?"[3]
- Communicate with students that it is always OK to ask or clarify when they do not know something. Encourage students to ask each other for ideas/support.
- Encourage students to take risks in class discussion. Come up with a system for rewarding students for taking risks.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY TO CLASSMATES IS PARTICIPATION

- Consider creating systems that encourage students to begin responding to each other's comments or to each other's work displays/presentations – in class or online. Openly address with students how classroom design that places the instructor at the front reproduces a form of education that focuses on the lecturer's pronouncements instead of valuing the exchange of ideas possible when students respond to each other as well as the instructor. Come up with ideas together for how to resist this convention of classroom architecture.
- Encourage students to talk to each other outside of class time. At the beginning of the semester, have students turn to their right and left to get numbers of other students (not already their friends) whom they can contact for help.
- To facilitate student interaction, consider grouping students into "discussion sections," provided they aren't already sorted into them, or assigning them "buddies" in a smaller class.

---

[3] Examples from Robin DiAngelo and Özlem Sensoy, "Calling In: Strategies for Cultivating Humility and Critical Thinking in Antiracism Education," *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege* 4, no. 2 (August 2014), 191-203

FLEXIBILITY AROUND TIME MARKERS

By building a degree of time-flexibility into our participation rubrics, we can build classrooms that respect students' differing experiences of time and the diverse sets of (equally valid) priorities that operate within our classrooms.[4]

- Consider implementing an Equitable Deadlines policy, which recognizes the fact that there are different cultural norms about time. Acknowledge that sometimes deep learning happens at different paces.
- During in-class exercises, make space and time for students who learn at different paces. You can empower students around in-class time boundaries by saying: "It's time for you to share your work with me now, wherever you are in your process - but doesn't mean you have to stop working on it forever."
- Again, practice good boundaries. Be transparent with students about what you need from them and why you need it. "I need this so that I can get your grades in on time."

CONSENT

As feminist educators, we know that consent is a fundamental to the learning process and that students can not learn when pushed beyond their own sense of safety. We also recognize that students often bring trauma into the classroom which can impact their classroom behaviors and ability to learn.

- Acknowledge the existence of trauma and make room for it. If you are going to discuss potentially upsetting topics, give a content notice upfront and give students the option or opportunity to leave or prepare themselves.
- Consider adopting some practices from trauma-informed educational approaches. In brief: "A trauma-informed educator never forgets that students bring their entire lives into the classroom every day, and that on some days, students will be actively responding to trauma (Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012)." For a trauma-informed approach, see Shannon Davidson, Ph.D. *Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide*.
- Read Carrie Moylan's tips for "Conducting Safe Classroom Discussions on Sexual Assault," MSU School of Social Work News: Special Edition (Spring 2018).
- Be aware that certain student groups are at elevated risk for past or ongoing trauma. These groups include: veterans, current and former foster youth, American Indian/Alaska Native students, refugee students, LGBTQ+ students, and nontraditional adult learners.[5]
- Consider the possibility that a student's "no" can, also, be a form of engagement and participation, particularly if the student communicates responsibly and effectively about their objection to a discussion or assignment. (Remain aware, however, that a student activated by trauma may not be capable in the moment of communicating their inability to participate.)

---

[4] Price, *Mad at School*, 62-63.
[5] Shannon Davidson, Ph.D. (Education Northwest) *Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide*.