



## A 360 degree view of Class Participation

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Working Paper

## A 360 degree view of Class Participation

By

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### **Introduction:**

One of the challenges for success in classroom teaching, is student engagement. The lecture, a widely practiced mode of instruction is under severe criticism for its ability to contribute to students learning. Beyond thirty minutes, most lectures tend to become boring and retention of what is taught rapidly decreases with time. In a world with internet access and search engines like google, students no longer depend on the faculty for information and knowledge. Under such circumstance improving student engagement in class is no longer an option but a necessity to enhance learning in the classroom. According to Adler (quoted in Richardson, Morgan and Fleener, 2009) “genuine learning is active, not passive. It involves the use of the mind, not just the memory. It is the process of discovery in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher.” Towards this end, class participation is seen as an important aspect of education (Wright, 2014). Faculty members encourage participation in class because it breaks the monotony of the lecture and gets the attention of students. By participating in class discussions, students learn to express their ideas in a way that others can understand leading to improvement in communication skills. By seeking clarifications or asking questions, they learn how to obtain information that will enhance their own understanding of a topic. Class participation provides feedback to the faculty on whether the students have understood what is being taught and they can modify their delivery accordingly.

### **What inhibits class participation?**

Speaking in front of a group does not come naturally to many students and this struggle can manifest itself in the classroom in many ways (Shore, nd). For example students may not - volunteer to answer questions, seek clarifications when they do not understand and speak up in small-group activities. Faculty members need to understand why students hesitate to speak up if they are to motivate them to speak and participate in the discussions.

Karp and Yoels (1976) list out a number of factors that influence student participation in class. Class size, shyness, poor preparation and fear of ridicule are some of the factors inhibiting classroom participation. In contrast, a supportive attitude by the teacher, open questions to the class where the teacher looks for volunteers to respond increases interaction. Not wanting to look dumb or ignorant in the eyes of other students is one of the highest-ranked reasons for not participating in class. Many students do not seek clarification even when they have not understood because they fear their questions may appear foolish and they could be ridiculed by the faculty member or their peers. Knowledgeable students might also hesitate to participate for fear of being labelled as “the teacher’s pet” or “show-off”. Tatar

(2005) reports that non-native students find it difficult to participate in class discussions because they lack the language skills and their silence does not necessarily mean lack of knowledge. It is suggested that the student may be silent while being mentally active in the class. The cultural background of the students also influences class participation. Balas (2000) doubts if class participation helps in evaluating students' knowledge in a culturally diverse class. Tesfaye and Berhanu (2015) found that lack of preparation, poor communications skills (language skills) and shyness were among the top reasons that hinder student participation.

Rogers (1997) considers class participation very important for students' learning in class. According to him "It is almost a truism, then, that active participation by students is good-for many obvious reasons. It is easier for students to pay attention to a colloquy than to one person speaking. Also, students must follow a discussion if they are going to take part in it at some point. For these reasons, class participation by some students increases understanding by all the students". He suggests it also moderates the pace of teaching to a level that increases absorption by students.

### **Evaluating Class Participation:**

One way of enhancing class participation (CP) is to include it in the evaluation. This is popular among business and law schools. However, there is some opposition to evaluating class participation. According to Lyons (1989) faculty members' objectivity is a major concern while evaluating CP. The instructors' personal biases and opinions may affect how they assess student participation (Armstrong & Boud, 1983). Cross, Frary and Weber (1993) surveyed faculty members and found that 50% of them did not grade CP. They also found that some faculty members actually did not grade CP but used CP to adjust overall grades. This finding is in line with the findings of Bean and Peterson (1998) where they found faculty members mark CP based on their impression and use it as a fudge factor in calculating the final grades. Several authors opine that gender and socioeconomic background have a strong correlation with the likelihood of a student participating in classroom discussion (Fassinger, 1995; Krupnick, 1985; Crombie, 2003). If this observation is true, these students could be disadvantaged on grades they obtain for class participation. Larkin and Pines (2005) argue that the attempt to include students in the classroom discussion through cold calling can sometimes have undesired effects, leading to avoidance behaviour.

On the other hand Petress (2006) is of the opinion that students are able to generalize better from active class participation than from merely watching, listening and reading. According to him, if retention is higher due to class participation and it increases learning, then it should be included in the evaluation. It is often seen during a class discussion where some students are presenting their views other students closely follow the discussion. Those who are not presenting options, appear to be weighing the various options presented and trying to decide which of the options is likely to result in the desirable outcome. Therefore even listening to an active class discussion results in learning. One of the most common arguments against evaluating class participation is that students could speak even when they do not have much to contribute, resulting in what is popularly known as participation for the sake of grades. Rogers (1997) counters this argument by saying "a teacher who knows how to keep discussion on track can deal with that. One can also advise students that credit for class

participation depends on quality, not quantity.” Another compelling reason for including class participation in the evaluation is that it improves the overall quality of grading by filling the gaps that are not filled by the other evaluation methods. According to Rogers (1997) “This practice is eminently warranted as an evaluative technique, even beyond its effectiveness as an incentive to participate in class”.

### **Cold Calling:**

Even when class participation is used for grading, it is found that not all students participate and therefore many faculty members use cold calling to prompt and urge non-participants to participate. However, the practice of cold calling is under fire by some researchers claiming that it puts some students at a disadvantage. While this might make sense in some environments, it does not make sense in a business school or a law school where speaking in a group and presenting one’s ideas are basic requirements of the career that the student is aspiring to pursue. The shy and unwilling students have to be motivated and urged to learn the behaviour that would help them in their career and in such cases, cold calling is the best method. Roger (1997) argues that “calling on students by name is a direct and effective way of getting students to participate in class. The alternative - waiting for volunteers - is much less satisfactory.” Students may not volunteer for a number of reasons and one of them is that they do not want appear as a show-off. According to Rogers (1997), “These concerns deter volunteering in class even by the best students”. If one of the goals of class participation is to help students overcome inhibitions and learn unfamiliar behaviour, the class is the best place. According to Rogers (1997), “it is possible to engage in a discussion with two or three bright or particularly confident students and leave the other students feeling lost, uncomfortable, and resolving not to learn from the teacher”. But this is not the objective of teacher or the institute. Therefore to ensure class participation includes a broad cross-section of the class, cold calling is a must.

### **Motivation for the Study:**

The present study is an attempt to understand the perceptions of different stakeholders on using CP for evaluation and cold calling as a method to improve participation. While a number of studies have examined the perceptions of students, the views of the other stakeholders have not been studied along with the views of the students. The stakeholders used as respondents in this study are faculty members, academic associates who assist the faculty members in recording and measuring class participation, post graduate students in a business school and executive post graduate students in the same school. The difference between the regular and executive post graduate students is that the executive post graduate students all have substantial work experience prior to their joining the programme ( a minimum of five years of work experience is an eligibility criteria to apply for the programme) whereas 60% of the regular post graduate students have no work experience and the remaining have on an average 1-2 years of work experience. The business school is a premier business school in India and among the top 10 in the country. The institution uses case study extensively in its classroom and class participation is considered an important aspect of learning. The teacher is not seen as the only source of knowledge and there is a

strong belief that learning is enhanced when students articulate their perspectives on the cases. This is particularly true when the students have work experience and are able to relate to the situation in the case.

**Method:**

A survey questionnaire was sent to all the stake holders using google forms. The stakeholders were requested to fill the structured questionnaire on class participation. Response rate for the survey is given below,

Group	No. of members	No. of respondents
Regular Post Graduate Student in Business	600	339
Executive Post Graduate students in Business	48	27
Faculty members	100	24
Academic Associates	74	29

Some of the questions were direct and requested a simple yes or no answer. The proportion of respondents in a group choosing yes was calculated for each of these questions. As the proportion for each group was different, it was decided to carry out a test to check if the difference in proportions was due to chance. The results of the tests are given below.

**Findings and discussion:**

**Table No. 1: Should CP be used for grading**

			Yes	No	Total	Z Value
Should class participation be included in evaluation?	PGP Vs EPGP	PGP	181	158	339	-0.21690597
		EPGP	15	12	27	
	All Students (EPGP+PGP) Vs Faculty	(EPGP+PGP)	196	170	366	-4.04397001
		Faculty	23	1	24	
	PGP Vs Faculty	PGP	181	158	339	-4.04977388
		Faculty	23	1	24	
	PGP Vs Academic Associates	PGP	181	158	339	-2.69517815
		Academic Associates	23	6	29	
	Academic Associates Vs Faculty	Academic Associates	23	6	29	-1.76849249
		Faculty	23	1	24	

On the question whether CP should be graded or evaluated, the majority of the students responded with a yes. This was true for both the groups of students (regular and executive). With respect to the faculty group, the view was overwhelmingly in favour of using CP for grading. The academic associates were aligned with the faculty members on this question. However, the number of no sayers in this group were more than in the faculty group.

The conclusion based on the data is that faculty members and academic associates are strongly in favour of grading CP, whereas with respect to the students, while the majority are in favour, the number of students who would not like it to be graded is considerable (around 46%). The differences between the faculty (including associates) and student proportions are statistically significant at the level of 5%. This finding is in line with existing literature that many students are not comfortable with class participation for various reasons. However, it also brings to light that the majority of students (in business schools) want CP to be graded.

**Table No. 2: Is cold calling a good way to increase class participation:**

			Yes	No	Total	Z Value
Is cold calling a good way to improve class participation?	PGP Vs EPGP	PGP	132	207	339	0.957811769
		EPGP	8	19	27	
	All Students(EPGP+PGP) Vs Faculty	(EPGP+PGP)	140	226	366	-3.5526067
		Faculty	18	6	24	
	PGP Vs Faculty	PGP	132	207	339	-3.46714912
		Faculty	18	6	24	
	PGP Vs Academic Associates	PGP	132	207	339	-4.58321812
		Academic Associates	24	5	29	
	Academic Associates Vs Faculty	Academic Associates	24	5	29	0.693275874
		Faculty	18	6	24	

With respect to this question, a large portion of the students (close to 64%) were against the use of cold calling for increasing participation. The difference between proportions of the PGP and EPGP for this question was not significantly different. However, the faculty members (including associates) were largely in favour of using cold calling for increasing CP and the difference in proportions between students and faculty members on this was significantly different at 5% level.

It is not surprising that a large proportion of the students did not prefer cold calling. No one likes to be subject to an evaluation, particularly when they have not volunteered. Cold calling can create pressure, when students are unprepared for the class or they are by nature shy. When a student is cold called he or she becomes the focus of attention and this can be stressful to some. It is also not surprising that a large number of faculty members prefer cold calling, because it is one way to increase participation and spur shy or reluctant students to participate. In many classes, it would be difficult to get any participation unless cold calling is resorted to. It also gets students to prepare for the class and use the reading material.

**Table 3: Should we cap the maximum CP marks a student can secure in a session.**

			Yes	No	Total	Z Value
Should there be a maximum cap for class participation marks per individual per class?	PGP Vs EPGP	PGP	233	106	339	-2.20432371
		EPGP	24	3	27	
	All Students(EPGP+PGP) Vs Faculty	(EPGP+PGP)	257	109	366	2.074246072
		Faculty	12	12	24	
	PGP Vs Faculty	PGP	233	106	339	1.89325348
		Faculty	12	12	24	

	<b>PGP Vs Academic Associates</b>	PGP	233	106	339	2.250587851
		Academic Associates	14	15	29	
	<b>Academic Associates Vs Faculty</b>	Academic Associates	14	15	29	-0.12498158
		Faculty	12	12	24	

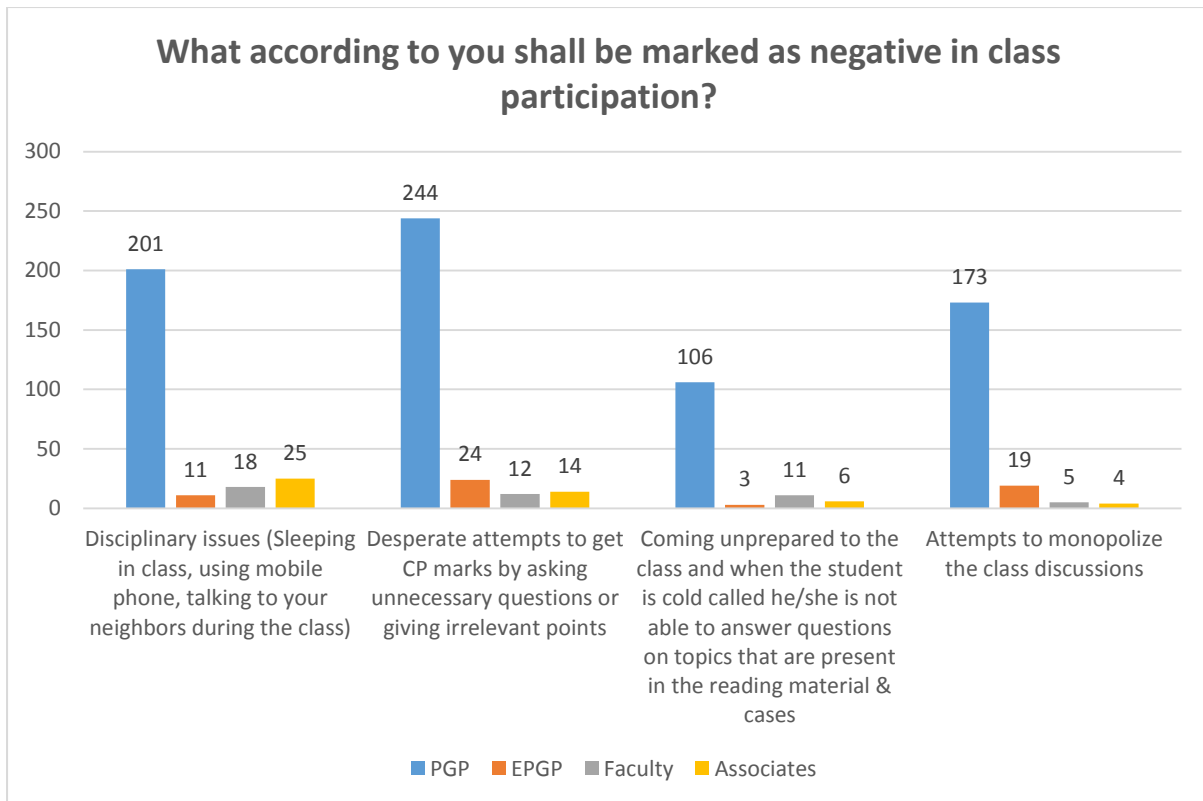
Should there be a maximum cap on the CP marks a person can get in a class was an interesting question. Both the students groups overwhelmingly supported the view that there should be a cap. The support for capping participation marks in a class per person was very high with the executive participants compared to the regular participants. This could be due to their experience of one or two student (s) monopolizing the discussion in some class. The faculty members were equally divided on this question, suggesting that the apprehensions of the students could be genuine. Here also the academic associates were aligned with the faculty members and had similar response profile. The difference in proportions between student groups and students and faculty members (including associates) were significant at the 5% level.

#### Negative marking in CP:

			Yes	No	Total	Z Value
<b>Is there any negative marking used while evaluating class participation?</b>	<b>PGP Vs EPGP</b>	PGP	172	167	339	2.111413086
		EPGP	8	19	27	
	<b>All Students(EPGP+PGP) Vs Faculty</b>	(EPGP+PGP)	180	186	366	-0.07781
		Faculty	12	12	24	
	<b>PGP Vs Faculty</b>	PGP	172	167	339	0.069833477
		Faculty	12	12	24	
	<b>PGP Vs Academic Associates</b>	PGP	172	167	339	-0.10200858
		Academic Associates	15	14	29	
	<b>Academic Associates Vs Faculty</b>	Academic Associates	15	14	29	0.124981578
		Faculty	12	12	24	

To this question, the regular students responded positively with more than 50% claiming that negative markings were used for evaluating CP. The response from the executive students also indicated that negative marking was used in class but to a lesser extent compared to regular students. The faculty members and associates were equally divided on this. The difference between different groups and between students and faculty members (including associates) was significant on this question at the 5% level. It appears that while negative marking is used in CP, it is not used all the faculty members and not in every class.

An associated question was - when should negative marks be awarded. The response to this question is shown below,

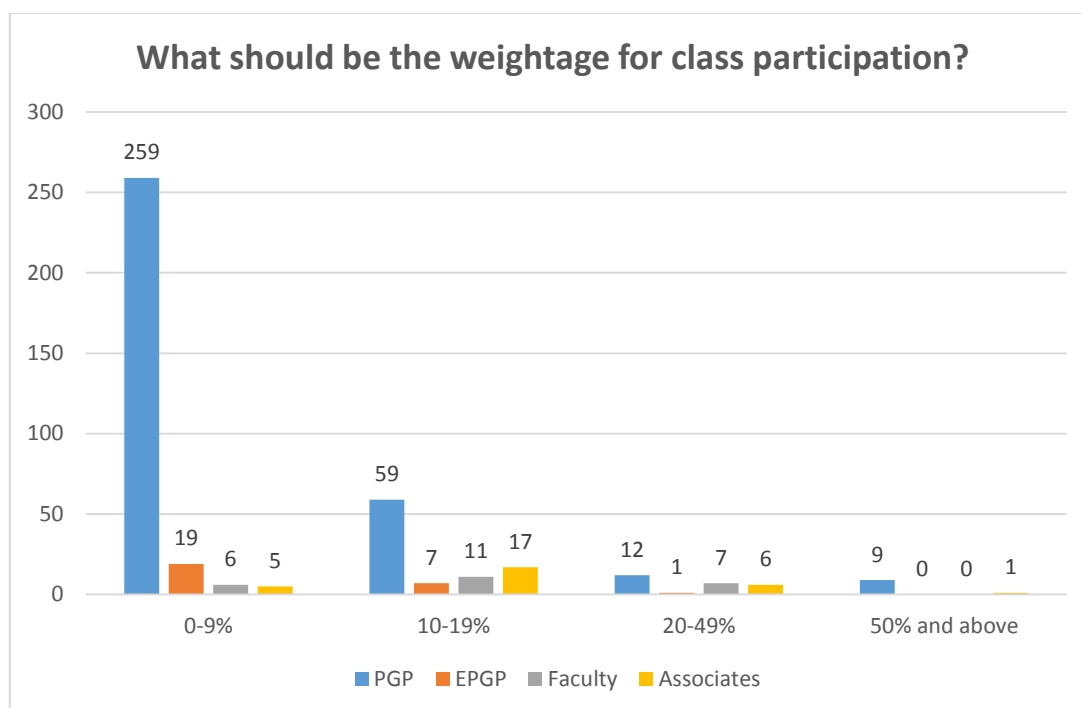


According to students, attempts to monopolize the class discussions, desperate attempts at CP and disciplinary issues are good reasons to award negative marks. To a lesser extent coming unprepared to the class was also considered a good reason for negative marking. Faculty members and associates had similar views on desperate attempts at CP and disciplinary issues. However, many of them felt coming unprepared for the class deserved negative marks. Very few members of the faculty felt that attempts to monopolize the CP deserved negative marks. This could be due to the reason that faculty members have the power to stop any attempt to monopolize class participation and most of them use it.

#### **Weightage for Class Participation:**

The weightage given to class participation varies across business schools and also within the business schools depending on the person who teaches the subject. The frequency diagram shows the preferences for the weightage for CP across different groups.





Most of the students prefer the weightage to be below 10%. On the other hand, most of the faculty and associates prefer the weightage to be between 10% and 20% with a smaller number of them indicating it should be above 20%

### The weightage for CP in practice:

The author collated the weightage awarded to CP for various courses offered during the year. The data is given in the table below.

Table 5: The weightage given to CP in various courses.

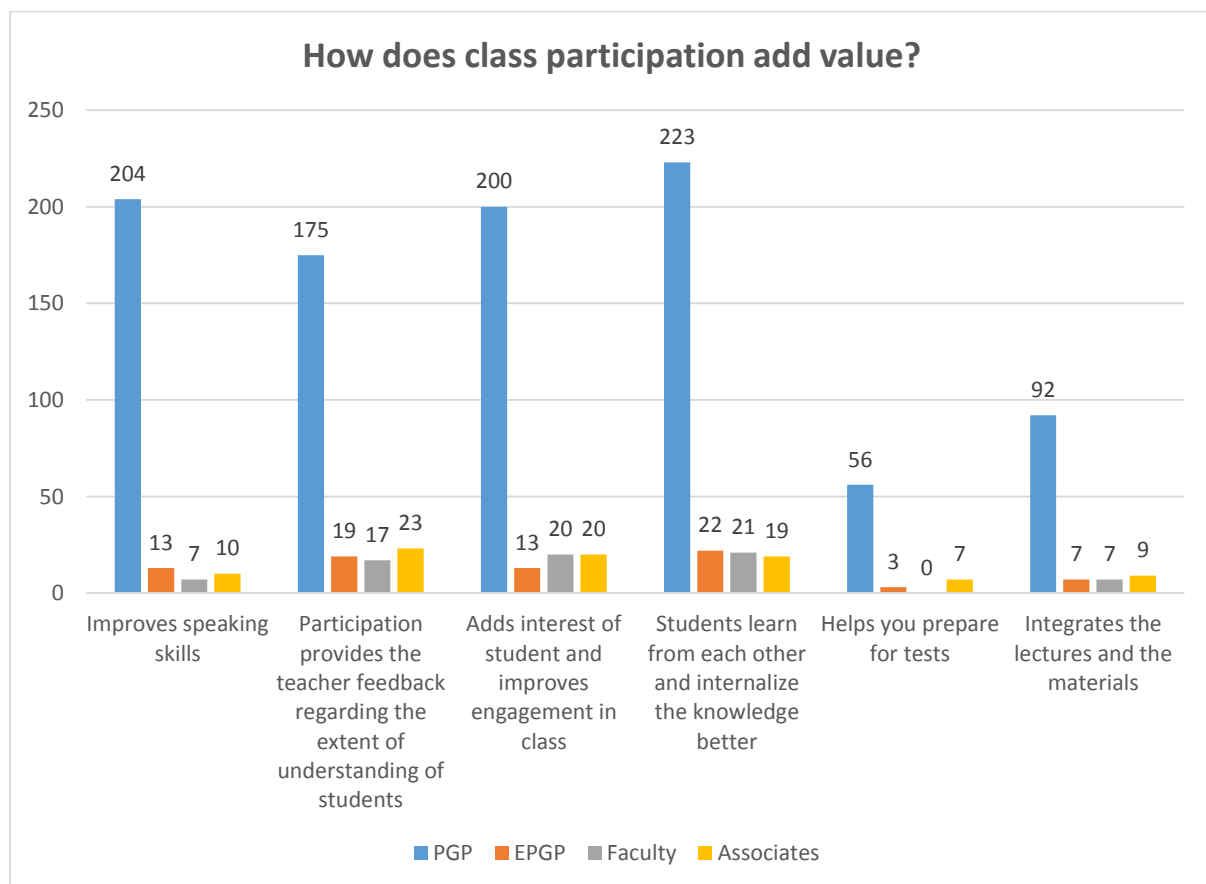
Term	Course Type	0-9%	10-19%	20-49%	50% & above
I	Core Course	3	2	1	0
	SDC	4	0	0	0
II	Core Course	0	5	3	0
	SDC	2	0	1	0
III	Core Course	2	1	2	0
	Elective	1	2	1	0
	SDC	2	0	2	0
IV	Elective	8	15	10	0
	Workshop	2	0	1	0
V	Elective	10	11	15	0
	Workshop	5	0	0	1
VI	Elective	6	6	11	0
	Workshop	5	0	5	2

It is clear that the weightage assigned to CP is almost equally spread across the intervals 0% to 9%, 10% to 19% and 20% to 49%.

## How does CP contribute to learning?

Many students are not motivated to participate in the class discussions and it is important faculty understand how to motivate students to participate. Grading CP is one way of motivating participation. It is understood that students value grades and any component that substantially contributes to the grade will influence their behaviour. This suggests assigning higher weightage to CP. However, it is seen that while a large proportion of students wad CP to be graded, they prefer its weight to be less than 10%. This a paradox that requires resolving. With respect to faculty members, the majority of them prefer grading CP, but when it comes to practice very few of them assign weightage of 30% or above. This again is a contradiction that needs to be resolved.

To check if students understood the value added by class participation, they were asked to tick different options on how CP adds value. The responses were tabulated and the frequency chart is given below. According to students and faculty members (including associates) CP adds value by providing opportunities to learn from each other and helps in internalizing the knowledge. Another important contribution is - increased student interest and engagement in class. CP provides feedback to faculty members on the extent to which students have understood what is being taught. One additional benefit mentioned by a large number of students is that it improves speaking skills. While some students have mentioned that CP helps in preparing for tests and integrating reading material with the lecture, only a few felt that these were important.



## **Conclusion:**

It is clear from the foregoing that B-school students understand the benefits of class participation and are largely in favour of using CP for grading. The same is true for faculty members and associates who are overwhelmingly in favour of using CP for grading. So whether or not to use CP for grading is not the question. The important question is what should be the weightage assigned to CP. The responses to the survey shows both students and faculty members are divided on this. An interesting paradox highlighted in the student responses is that while a large proportion of them want it to be graded, they prefer a low weightage assigned to it. The paradox can be resolved if we understand why students prefer a low weightage for CP. This stems from a fear that even if they perform well, they will not receive the grades they deserve. Many students believe that CP marking is subjective and the process does not give everyone an equal opportunity to participate. Because every student is not asked the same question or required to participate in every class, a sense of unfairness prevails.

With respect to faculty members, the survey results show that almost all of them want CP to be graded. Faculty members are aware that students do not take class participation seriously or come prepared, unless the weightage is high. Therefore it is expected that faculty would assign higher weightage to CP to motivate students to participate and come prepared to class. However, the prevailing trend shows that though CP is graded, the weightage is by and large 20% or lower. This appears contrary to the practice followed in some Ivy League schools in the USA where the CP weightage is as high as 50%. So the question is why faculty members are assigning low weightage to CP. This contradiction can be resolved if we understand the process used by faculty members in awarding grades for CP. Marking and grading CP is difficult (Lord and Melvin, 1994; Armstrong & Boud, 1983; Lyons, 1989). This is probably the reason why few faculty members assign more than 20% weightage to CP. If one assigns a higher weightage, then the faculty member has to work hard to avoid biases and dispel students' apprehensions on fairness and subjectivity. While some subjectivity cannot be avoided and students recognize this, the process should be transparent for students to gain confidence. Faculty members should, in advance, provide details of the process used for marking CP and explain what they consider as good participation and poor participation. This assumes significance when negative marking is used. They should also at periodic intervals inform students where they stand with respect to CP. If the weightage associated with CP is high, then students receiving low grades may require the faculty members to justify their grades and if this not done satisfactorily, it can result in grievances. If the grading system is not seen as fair, it will reflect in the faculty feedback given by the students.

To understand why the faculty members in India assign lower weightage for CP compared to Ivy League B-schools in USA, we also need to consider the work experience profile of business school students in India and USA. Most management students in India are fresh from their undergraduate program, while those in USA have an average of five or more years of work experience. Having worked for a number years, probably at the middle management level, they understand how things work in the industry and are able to relate with the cases they discuss. Indian students having no work experience, or less than two years of

experience find it difficult to relate with the cases. Cultural difference on attitude towards authority may also contribute to the behaviour in class. These are some reasons why most faculty members assign a weightage of 10% to 20% for CP in Indian B schools.

Class participation offers a number of benefits. It leads to a better understanding of the subject. Retention is higher, and the ability to apply the learning to practice is also high. Some essential career skills like speaking in a group and making presentations to an audience can be developed through class participation. Classes with high participation provide faculty members a sense of satisfaction. CP provides for continuous evaluation and complements other methods like written exams, quizzes and assignments. All the above appear to point in the direction of increasing weightage for class participation above the existing levels. The instructor's attitude and behaviour in class may be key to successfully increase the weightage for CP. When the professor exhibits a supportive attitude, listens to students and gives them time to answer, participation increases. The instructor should create an environment where asking questions and seeking clarifications is not seen as an exhibition of ignorance but as an essential part of the learning process. With an open approach that uses creativity and experimentation, each faculty member can devise a process that best meets his or her needs.

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