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Running head: CREDIT FOR COMMENTS

Credit for Comments, Comments for Credit

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Abstract

A survey in 2 undergraduate psychology classes ($N = 93$) found ambivalent attitudes toward credit for classroom participation. Although students viewed credit as a way to increase interaction and improve attendance, it could also stimulate irrelevant comments and penalize shy students. The following year, in a class of 49 students, halfway through the course, the instructor offered a small amount of credit for office visits and for participation but only on alternate days. The implementation significantly increased the amount of class discussion, with students reporting an increase in discussion quality. The policy also increased office visits, but did not significantly improve class attendance.

Credit for Comments, Comments for Credit

Many instructors would agree that student participation in classroom discussion facilitates learning. Boniecki and Moore (2003) demonstrated that giving credit for comments and questions asked in class increased student participation. Perhaps instructors could use credit points to promote discussion, in the same way instructors have used credit to reward attendance (Thorne, 2000), reading journal articles (Carkenord, 1994), and serving as a research participant (Padilla-Walker, Zamboanga, Thompson, & Schermsal, 2005).

Whether in the lecture, after class at the podium, or during office hours, we appreciate student comments and questions. They provide a glimpse into what students are thinking, feedback as to unclear concepts, occasional new insights on the material, and allow interaction with students as individuals. In our large lecture classes, we get to know by name only the small percentage of students who tend to be active participants. The solution, as we see it, is to increase voluntary student participation in such a way that all students can earn a small fixed amount of credit for speaking in class or, as an alternative, visiting the instructor during office hours.

We pause several times during lectures to actively solicit comments and questions. Even so, these attempts are

often unsuccessful. Yet before awarding credit for participation, as Boniecki and Moore (2003) recommended, we wanted to find out what our students thought about this practice. It is easy to suppose they would welcome an additional opportunity to earn credit, resulting in a win-win situation for both students and instructor, in that the class becomes more interactive and students raise their grades.

Study 1. Student Survey

Method

We administered a 22-item survey to two psychology courses, one upper and one lower division ($N = 93$ respondents). There were two open-ended questions at the outset, followed by 18 Likert-type items answered on 5-point scales, one question about current class participation, and one question as to the respondent's gender. The instructions focused the survey on lecture courses (rather than seminars and discussion sections) and defined participation as "asking substantive questions and comments," specifically excluding procedural queries such as, "Can you repeat #3?" and "When will the exam be returned?"

Results

The first two open-ended questions asked about the advantages and disadvantages of offering credit for participation. Students could supply multiple reasons.

Advantages mentioned by 10 or more respondents were that the practice would make the class more interactive by increasing participation (71%), make students more attentive (20%), improve attendance (13%), benefit the rest of the class (12%), create a better learning environment (12%), clarify misunderstandings (11%), and encourage shy people to speak (11%).

Disadvantages listed were that credit would encourage irrelevant questions and comments without improving learning (52%), penalize shy students (35%), leave less time for the lecture (24%), and that the system was unfair in that a few vocal students would get the credit (17%).

Asked directly whether they were in favor of credit for participation, students were divided: 46% approved, 18% were undecided, and 36% disapproved. However, if an instructor "bumped up" grades (C+ to B-) as a reward for participation, two-thirds of the respondents supported the practice, provided the instructor announced it at the outset. There was virtually no support for lowering grades of nonparticipants.

We administered the questionnaire near the end of the two courses. When asked how many times they participated in class during the lecture, 51% of the students said they had never participated, 14% said once, 15% twice, 11% three times, and 10% said four or more times. Reported participation was positively correlated with a favorable

attitude toward credit for participation, $r(91) = .38, p < .001$; with the perceived importance of participation, $r(91) = .48, p < .001$; and with its perceived value for other students, $r(91) = .26, p < .02$. Not surprisingly, students most in favor of credit for participation were those who already participate. There was no gender difference in reported participation.

Discussion

Although a majority of respondents valued participation and saw it as furthering desirable educational ends, they were opposed to what they viewed as forced or pressured comments. In the worst case, they believed students would make irrelevant statements and ask obvious questions that would consume valuable class time and the instructor would have to keep detailed records of all interaction. They commented that shy students are reluctant to speak in large lecture courses and would be selectively penalized by credit for participation. They saw a few students speaking disproportionately in class and, similar to faculty surveyed by Norcross, Dooley, and Stevenson (1993), opposed credit that benefits only a select few.

Study 2. Increasing Participation and Office Visits

Based on the survey results, we hypothesized that giving credit would increase participation. As students could not receive participation credits unless they attended

class, we hypothesized that credit for participation would increase classroom attendance.

Method

The following summer, when the senior author (RS) taught one of the same courses ($N = 49$), he undertook an experiment giving a small amount of credit for participation and, to assist shy students, credit also for office visits. The class met four times a week for six weeks. Credit was available only for substantive comments and questions on Tuesdays and Thursdays, with *no credit* on Mondays and Wednesdays. He announced this policy midway through the course. This design compares participation, office visits, and attendance before and after the announcement of credit, and compares Monday/Wednesday (no credit days) with Tuesday/Thursday (credit days). The TA recorded all participation and the instructor recorded class attendance and office visits. We hypothesized that credit would increase office visits, increase participation on credit days, and improve attendance.

As part of the course evaluation on the last day of class, the instructor asked students whether they approved of his having given credit for participation, whether this credit increased the amount of participation, how it affected the quality of participation, and whether the practice affected their personal participation.

Results

Credit effect on participation. The possibility of credit significantly raised the number of substantive questions and comments from a precredit average of 2.5 per class to an average of 10.8 on credit days and 6.2 on noncredit days, $F(2, 17) = 14.1, p < .001$. The increase was significant *both* on credit days and noncredit days, with participation significantly higher on credit than on noncredit days.

Credit effects on office visits. There had been 0 visits to the instructor's office hours before the announcement of credit was made, compared to 10 individual visits by 7 students after we offered credit.

Credit effects on attendance. The offer of credit for participation did not significantly affect attendance, $t(11) = .994, p = NS$.

Survey of student opinion. Of the 29 students in class on the day of the course evaluation, 72% approved of the instructor having given credit for participation, 10% were undecided, and 17% disapproved. Ninety percent of the students believed that the possibility of credit increased the amount of class participation.

Further, 71% believed that credit raised the quality of class participation, with 29% saying it had no effect. No one maintained that credit lowered discussion quality.

When asked directly how the possibility of credit affected their own participation, two-thirds of students claimed it had no effect, 31% said it had increased their participation, and 3% said it had decreased their participation.

Discussion

The survey results in Study 1 had suggested the value of offering a small amount of credit (no more than 3% of the final grade) for increasing class participation and an office visit option for students reluctant to speak in class. When implemented the following year, this practice proved successful in increasing class discussion and office visits. Furthermore, students stated that credit enhanced the quality of student comments and questions. This response addresses the issue of whether students received anything other than points from the reinforcement system. At least in the students' minds, the quality as well as the amount of participation increased. The instructor too, believed that the additional participation improved the class by providing glimpses into what students were thinking, feedback as to when something was unclear, occasional new insights on the material, and allowed interaction with students as individuals. Unlike the survey respondents in Study 1 who expressed considerable ambivalence about a hypothetical policy of credit for participation, students in Study 2 actually experienced the policy, and three-quarters approved

of it. The denial that the policy had affected their own participation may have been a reactance effect with students not wanting to admit they had been influenced by an explicit reinforcement schedule.

The increase in participation generalized to both credit and noncredit days, but was greater on credit days. Students in the habit of making comments, continued to do so on noncredit as well as credit days.

The increase in office visits from 0 to 10 following the credit announcement is equally impressive. Over decades of teaching we have struggled with ways to motivate students to come to office hours, recognized as a widespread problem on our campus. Reinforcement seems far more effective than exhortation.

Class attendance did not improve significantly with credit offered for participation. There was a trend in this direction but it did not reach statistical significance. It seems likely that credit for attendance would be successful but we prefer the indirect approach of credit for participation, combined with offering students the option of receiving credit for office hour visits.

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Note

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