

Participation Points A System for Encouraging and Rewarding Participation in Class

Background

It started when I went to college and one discussion point in math education concerned the amount of attention boys received over girls. Boys tended to get called on more often. My second year of teaching, I decided to see if I fell into this category. I started charting when I called on students by putting a checkmark on the seating chart when I'd call on someone. This evolved into a small dot.

At a certain point, I noticed that some students were dominating the conversation. They would have a large number of dots while others would have none. I also realized that, by calling on the first hand you saw, there was not sufficient 'hang time' to allow other students to have a chance at answering. This was a cue for me to slow down and pause when calling on students. I would wait for 4 or 5 hands before asking for an answer. This made the lesson more slowly but it also made sure I wasn't losing a lot of students along the way.

I realized, for those students who did not participate, there was no motivation to be part of the discussion. That's when I incentivized the dots by making participation a quiz grade. This has evolved over the years to become the system I use today. At one school where I taught, a student commented that there was a lot more participation in my class than other classes. I responded, "That's because I'm the Dot Master."

To that, the student responded, "No. You're the Dot Master T!" And that became my first email address: dotmastert@... Later, when that email company went bust, I switched to a new email provider that only allowed 8 letter email names. That's when I became dmastert@... I've kept this email name with two different providers and utilize it as my primary email today.

At that same school, a group of students 'broke into' my room one afternoon and covered the walls with cut out construction paper dots. What a surprise when I came in the next morning! It was a thoughtful way to tell me that something I was doing made a difference.

Implementation (the basics)

- 1) You will need a seating chart with boxes that have enough room to hold 10-15 dots.
- 2) When you call on students and they answer correctly, give them a dot.
- 3) Twice a quarter, convert these dots to a quiz grade. I use my grading rubric to convert the dots. You can find it under my resources.

Evolution of the system

I now use it to reward any positive participation to the class. This can include instances where the student:

- 1) points out an error I made (very infrequent!)
- 2) answers a challenge question I have on the board
- 3) asks a great question
- 4) is able to explain something to a fellow student
- 5) gives a response to 'something I learned today' at the end of the class
- 6) reads a slide from the presentation
- 7) has the shortest time on the weekly circuit card competition (every student in the winning class gets a dot)

Here are other behaviors that you can reward with dots. Note: these are not necessarily academic in nature so use these as long as it is in the spirit of awarding grades in your school. That said, you can limit how many of the 10 dots are awarded for these activities (change pen color) and thus justify the grade is still academic in nature:

- 1) makes you laugh
- 2) erases the board
- 3) gives answers to any fun games you may play in class, like "Name That Tune"
- 4) serves as student aide for the week (my student aides get 5 dots at the end of the week for fulfilling the requirements of the position)
- 5) reads the quote of the day at the beginning of the period
- 6) puts away the materials you used for class that day

Modifications

There are some students who cannot answer questions in time. That is why I incorporated the 'tell me one thing you learned today' question at the end of class. I tell the student in advance that I will be calling on them at the end of class. I encourage students to read ahead in the material. All my lecture Powerpoints are posted in advance. Any student who reads ahead will gain a nice advantage when answering questions the next day.

Bonus Points

It is not unusual to have some students earn their 10 dots early. I always say, "and you just made 100 club" when they reach this point. After that, I try not to call on that student when other students have an answer. However, 100 club students want to continue to participate. Sometimes, they are the only ones with an answer. I continue to award up to an additional 5 dots. These 5 dots convert to 5 points added to their quiz point numerator, using the Extra Credit field provided by most learning management systems. However, I usually roll these dots over into the second dot recording session of the quarter, which tends to be shorter (4 weeks versus 5). That way, those students make 100 club quickly and it gives more opportunities to the other students. At the end of the quarter, any bonus points become extra credit.

PacMan

Sometimes, you need something simple to stop a negative behavior in class. I have only used this a few times. If you get issued a PacMan (I draw a circle instead of a dot), it 'eats' one of your participation points. Now, you are thinking – "my school does not allow me to use grades for discipline". As a general philosophy, I do not either. However, PacMan can only eat a bonus dot. It cannot eat any of the first 10. Therefore, even a misbehaving student with a PacMan can still make a 100 for participation.

Closing notes

You will be surprised at how competitive your students will become for dots. They will have a happy look (sometimes relieved) when they make 100 club. One class this past year would clap when someone made the 100 club. I do not allow dot charity – "give my extra dots to..." Every student needs to earn their own dots. I try hard to use a preferential system to call on those students who need the dots the most.