SPECIAL REPORT

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The Relationship Between Participation and Discussion

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

My interest in participation and discussion continues. How do we use them so that they more effectively promote engagement and learning? A couple of colleagues and I have been working on a paper that deals with how we define participation and discussion. (Side note: If you want to challenge your thinking about an aspect of teaching and learning, consider focused conversations with colleagues and the purposefulness of a writing project. I have said it before and will likely say it again: We have so much to learn from and with each other.) One of the new insights that has come to me out of this collaboration involves the relationship between participation and discussion. I used to think of them as being related, but I didn't see them as interrelated.

I'm convinced the effectiveness of participation and discussion in classrooms and online would improve if we highlighted the connections between the two. Participation can prepare students for discussion. It can be more than a single, linear, question-answer exchange between a teacher and a student that occurs in the presence of others.

But in order for participation to prepare students for discussion, it needs to have certain characteristics. It starts with us asking better questions, more open-ended ones, more provocative and stimulating ones, and, of course, we ask those better questions when we prepared them beforehand. This doesn't rule out spur-of-the-moment-questions and the answers that tell teachers what is and isn't understood. Generally, though, those aren't the kind of questions that engage students, promote thinking, or motivate the quest for answers. I also think we have to play more with those questions—hang them out there, repeat them, write them out, surround them with silence, and wait for more than the first hand.

"In order for participation to prepare students for discussion, it needs to have certain characteristics. It starts with us asking better questions, more open-ended ones, more provocative and stimulating ones..."

Participation prepares students for discussion when we collect answers. Students (especially beginning ones) are attentive (sometimes anxious, even frustrated) when there's the possibility of more than one answer to a question. Which one is correct? Which one will get me credit on the exam? The need to know sustains continued engagement, and while answer options are being explored, some

may see that “right” answers are often more tentative than they are definitive.

Participation prepares students for discussion when teachers hold back. Not every student response must be answered with a teacher comment. Students should be encouraged to respond to each other, to make comments about each other’s comments, and to speak directly to each other. The teacher moves out of the way and contributes by holding students to the topic. “Here’s the comment Jayla made … I’d love to hear more responses to that.”

Participation prepares students for discussion when the elements of discussion are incorporated into what may have started with a teacher’s question and a single student’s answer. If that answer is good, contains fresh ideas, offers different perspectives, draws on relevant experiences, or relates to course content, the teacher can use that answer to facilitate a mini-discussion before going to the next question. “Let’s work with those ideas for a bit.”

I see more clearly now that participation and discussion are ends of a continuum. There is no clear designated point where an exchange is participation or discussion except at those outer edges. In between they can morph partly or fully in and out of each other. A teacher-student exchange can launch a short discussion with multiple contributors. If the exchanges between students are no longer moving in new or interesting directions, then the teacher asks another question or introduces a different topic in the more structured format of participation. Perhaps the goal across a course is movement toward discussion, more interaction between students with teachers commenting less and facilitating more.

I think discussions often fail because we (who excel at academic discourse and can happily talk on topics of interest for hours and days, if not careers) expect too much. We want students to discuss the reading and sustain that interaction for 30 minutes. Why don’t we start by preparing students for discussions in shorter bursts? Why aren’t we using participation to provide the practice and feedback they need to develop discussion skills? Doing so has the potential to improve classroom interaction.

Roll the Dice and Students Participate

Kurtis J. Swope, PhD

I recently ran into a former student at a local restaurant. We talked for a few minutes about how his classes were going this semester and what his plans were following graduation. After we talked, it occurred to me that I had heard him speak more during this short conversation than he had during the entire semester he took my course. I was somewhat appalled, being that I’m an instructor who prides himself on engaging (or at least attempting to engage) students in active classroom participation. Here was a student who had done well

overall in the course but who had evidently made it through my class with only a modicum of vocal participation.

I wonder if your experience is like mine. I find that some students eagerly volunteer answers and often dominate discussions, while others listen, observe, or daydream while their classmates hold forth. I have always been somewhat hesitant to call on inattentive students for fear of embarrassing them or creating an awkward or uncomfortable classroom atmosphere. However, I have also found that those reluctant to volunteer often have quite worthwhile and interesting things to say when called upon.

I regularly teach a course in statistics, and a few semesters ago I began using index cards with students' names to randomly select them for various tasks, such as working homework problems on the board. I used this approach to reinforce the concepts of probability and sample selection, but I found that when I shuffled the cards prior to randomly drawing names, a wave of interest and excitement rippled through the class. Based on this favorable response, I started using the cards during classroom discussions and in other courses as well. Previously some students were justifiably confident that I would not call on them if they did not volunteer, but the cards

suddenly made everyone "fair game" every time.

It was my wife who suggested that I use dice rolls to simplify and expedite the selection process. She actually found some many-sided dice at a local game store that are perfect for the smaller-sized classes at my institution. However, dice rolls can also be easily adapted to larger class sizes by breaking the section list into several smaller subsections (for example, groups of 10 to 20) and then using two dice rolls—one to pick the subsection and one to pick the student.

I found that using the dice rolls frequently to elicit student responses in various contexts has several important advantages: (1) it provides a convenient avenue for looking past the overeager student who participates too frequently; (2) it removes the awkwardness associated with intentionally calling on inattentive students; (3) it generates a sense of anticipation and attention because any student can be called upon at any time; (4) it provides a convenient method of calling on somebody when nobody seems willing to volunteer an answer; and (5) it generates greater variety in student responses.

While I do not have any rigorous empirical analysis to prove that frequent use of random selection improves overall learning outcomes, my personal experience has been overwhelmingly positive. Students seem very receptive and good humored toward random selection. I am certain that it improves student attention, which is often the greatest challenge. Moreover, most students seem to welcome the dice roll as an alternative to discussions dominated by a few classmates. On the other hand, responses are more frequently wrong or at least not well formulated. But these types of responses actually stimulate greater and deeper discussion because we, as a class, can

stop and analyze the responses.

I still use "open" discussion quite often, but the dice rolls are very effective at initiating or changing the pace of a discussion. I roll the dice whenever I need to select or assign students to a task. In fact, I now use the dice rolls so often in class that a student this semester asked, "Sir, do you always carry that thing around in your pocket?" I don't—but maybe I should. I have a feeling it could come in handy unexpectedly, like when I can't decide which spaghetti sauce to buy.

Online Discussion Strategies That Create Community

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

One of the biggest complaints about online courses is that students feel disconnected. They don't know the teacher or fellow students in the class. In online courses, teachers regularly use discussion to make connections with and between students. In a survey of over 350 faculty, 95 percent used it and 87 percent required student participation in online exchanges.

The authors of the paper referenced below used a "Community of Inquiry" framework for their exploration-specific strategies that can be used to build community through discussion in online courses. "The purpose of this paper is to discuss specific strategies that have been proven through empirical research to support online CoIs [Communities of Inquiry]." (p. 155) They note that the literature on online discussion is voluminous, but to be included in their review, "the study had to have taken place in a fully online, higher education setting, utilized text-based asynchronous discussion, focused on the influence of a specific strategy, employed at least one direct research measure … and been peer reviewed." (p. 155) They retrieved 220 potential studies, but only 36 of them met their criteria.

The Community of Inquiry model proposes three essential elements needed to make an educational experience successful: social presence, cognitive presence, and teacher presence. The authors explore the role of these elements and strategies that can be used online to support them.

Social Presence

"One comment often heard from online instructors and students is the loss of human touch in a fully online course." (p. 155) How do instructors go about creating a positive and supportive environment when students are not physically connected? Based on their review of the literature, the authors recommend two strategies: instructor modeling of social presence and required and graded discussions. They suggest that online instructors be personal in their communications with students. They should use students' names, express humor, and introduce personal stories that are relevant.

Research does not establish that social presence causes learning. It's something closer

to creating a climate that makes learning more likely to occur. Students build interpersonal connections when they interact with each other, which is the justification for requiring participation in these exchanges. Research indicates that when those discussions count for between 10 and 20 percent of the student's grade, the number of messages students post increases and their sense of classroom community is heightened. Interestingly, increasing the grade percentage to 25 to 35 percent garners no further benefits.

Cognitive Presence

The problem that needs to be addressed here is the frequent failure of online discussions to go beyond idea exploration. "Students may be exchanging information and ideas, [but] they are rarely connecting and expanding on ideas, or applying new ideas to other contexts." (p. 156) This can also be a problem in face-to-face discussions when students simply share their ideas without responding to the contributions of others. The authors cite research documenting that prompts teachers use to promote online interaction play an important role.

"Discussion prompts that inherently guide students to progress through the phases of cognitive presence were more successful in eliciting integration and resolution." (p. 157) The cognitive phases referenced here include identification of an issue, the exchange of ideas and information about it, the connection of those ideas, and their application to new ideas. "Select a discussion prompt that encourages structured interaction and critical thinking, while also supporting the specific learning objectives." (p. 161)

The prompts are important, and so are the facilitation methods used. "We argue it is not the mere presence of a facilitator that is effective, but rather the techniques employed." (p. 158) For example, they recommend that teachers sometimes take a "challenging stance" by asking students to defend their positions or by highlighting different viewpoints and asking for responses to those.

Teaching Presence

Here one of the issues is the amount of time teacher facilitation of online discussions can take. If teachers are providing feedback to individual students and actively participating in the discussion, the time investment can be huge. And there's the ongoing question of how much instructors should participate in online discussions. Research documents that teacher presence is the "backbone" (p. 159) of creating community, which makes these important issues.

Among the authors' recommendations is the provision of "prompt but modest instructor feedback." (p. 159) Multiple interventions by the instructor in online discussions do not lead to increases in student interaction. In fact, the research reveals that modest instructor feedback encourages students to take more ownership of the discussion, which increases the number of student-to-student exchanges. They also recommend the use of peer facilitators. Students may feel more comfortable in discussions led by peers.

Peer discussion leaders post more messages than do teachers, research has shown. The authors point out that peer facilitators will likely need development, including specific instruction on what techniques they should use. Sometimes it helps to assign students facilitator roles such as discussion starter (the role of launching the discussion) and wrapper (the role of summarizing an exchange).

Research also shows positive benefits of what the authors describe as "protocol

prompts," which are "a structured method of having discussions by establishing a well-defined goal, clear roles, rules for interactions, and specific deadlines for posting." (p. 160) Teachers might also want to consider creating teaching presence by providing audio or video feedback. Software (some of it free) makes it possible for teachers to verbally comment on a discussion exchange and post that feedback on a discussion board or send it via email. Students then get to hear the instructor, and additional messages are conveyed by tone of voice.

This is a helpful piece of scholarship. It tackles some of the challenges presented by online environments, suggesting research-tested strategies that have been shown to improve discussions and increase the sense of community in online courses.

Reference: deNoyelles, A., Zydney, J. M., and Chen, B. (2014). Strategies for creating a community of inquiry through online asynchronous discussions. Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 10 (1), 153-165.

Assessing Class Participation: One Useful Strategy

Denise D. Knight

One of the changes we have seen in academia in the last 30 years or so is the shift from lecture-based classes to courses that encourage a student-centered approach. Few instructors would quibble with the notion that promoting active participation helps students to think critically and to argue more effectively. However, even the most savvy instructors are still confounded about how to best evaluate participation, particularly when it is graded along with more traditional assessment measures, such as essays, exams, and oral presentations. Type the words "class participation" and "assessment" into www.google.com/, and you will get close to 700,000 hits.

Providing students with a clear, fair, and useful assessment of their class participation is challenging for even the most seasoned educator. Even when I provide a rubric that distinguishes every category of participation from outstanding to poor, students are often still confused about precisely what it is that I expect from them. It is not unusual, for example, for students to believe that attendance and participation are synonymous. On the other hand, when we attempt to spell out too precisely what it is we expect in the way of contributions, we run the risk

Providing students with a clear, fair, and useful assessment of their class participation is challenging for even the most seasoned educator.

of closing down participation. In one online site that offers assessment guidelines, the course instructor characterizes "unsatisfactory" participation as follows:

"Contributions in class reflect inadequate preparation. Ideas offered are seldom substantive, provide few if any insights and never a constructive direction for the class. Integrative comments and effective challenges are absent. If this person were not a member of the class, valuable airtime would be saved." The language used in the description—"inadequate," "seldom," "few," "never," and "absent"—hardly encourages positive results. The final sentence is both dismissive and insensitive. Shy students are unlikely to risk airing an opinion in a classroom climate that is negatively charged. Certainly, the same point can be made by simply informing students, in writing, that infrequent contributions to class discussions will be deemed unsatisfactory and merit a "D" for the participation grade.

While there are a number of constructive guidelines online for generating and assessing participation, the dichotomy between the students' perception of their contributions and the instructor's assessment of participation is still often a problem. One tool that I have found particularly effective is to administer a brief questionnaire early in the semester (as soon as I have learned everyone's name), which asks students to assess their own participation to date. Specifically, I ask that students do the following: "Please check the statement below that best corresponds to your honest assessment of your contribution to class discussion thus far:

_____ I contribute several times during every class discussion. (A)

_____ I contribute at least once during virtually every class discussion. (B)

_____ I often contribute to class discussion. (C)

_____ I occasionally contribute to class discussion. (D)

_____ I rarely contribute to class discussion. (F)

I then provide a space on the form for the student to write a brief rationale for their grade, along with the option to write additional comments if they so choose. Finally, I include a section on the form for instructor response. I collect the forms, read them, offer a brief response, and return them at the next class.

This informal self-assessment exercise does not take long, and it always provides intriguing results. More often than not, students will award themselves a higher participation grade than I would have. Their rationale often yields insight into why there is a disconnect between my perception and theirs. For example, a student may write, "I feel that I have earned a 'B' so far in class participation. I know that I'm quiet, but I haven't missed a class and I always do my reading." Using the "Instructor Response" space, I now have an opportunity to disabuse the student's notion that preparation, attendance, and participation are one and the same. I also offer concrete measures that the student can take to improve his or her participation.

When this exercise is done early in the semester, it can enhance both the amount and quality of participation. It helps to build confidence and reminds students that they have to hold themselves accountable for every part of their course grade, including participation.

To Call On or Not to Call On: That Continues to Be the Question

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Ask a question and no one volunteers: should you call on a student? You have a quiet but capable student who rarely or never participates: should you call on that student?

Views on the value of cold calling, as it's referred to in the literature, are mixed. Faculty who do call on a student whose hand is not raised do so for a variety of reasons. Not knowing when they might be called on keeps students more attentive and better focused on the content. Being called on and successfully responding may help develop students' confidence and motivate them to participate more. The quality of discussion improves when more people participate, and because research has documented what most of us have experienced— that only a few students regularly participate—calling on students adds to the conversation.

Some of those who don't call on students unless they volunteer do so because they want to encourage students to start taking responsibility for the quality of discussions that occur in class. More often, they hesitate because they know the process provokes considerable anxiety. Often the process diminishes confidence and the motivation to talk more in class.

In an interesting study of several aspects of the cold-calling approach, researchers solicited from faculty who do call on students a variety of strategies they use to make cold calling less "icy." Here's a brief summary of what they suggest:

- **Establish the expectation of participation**—Warn students that you will cold call. Discuss the importance of participation in class. Attach a grade to participation.
- **Provide opportunities for reflecting and responding**—Give students time to prepare. Use appropriate amounts of wait time. Maybe let students write some ideas and/or share them with another student first.

• **Skillfully facilitate the discussion**—Set ground rules. Discuss what makes a "good" answer. Don't let a few students monopolize the discussion. Let students look at their notes or the text.

• **Use questions appropriately**—Ask open-ended questions. Call on those students who might have relevant experiences or background knowledge.

• **Create a supportive learning environment**—Let the classroom be a safe place where honest attempts to answer are supported and encouraged.

• **Respond respectfully to students' contributions**—Use wrong answers as teaching moments. Get others involved in understanding misconceptions and errors.

Neither cold calling nor waiting for volunteers is "right" in an absolute, definitive sense. As the research indicates, the success or failure of participation techniques is a function of how they are used.

Reference: Dallimore, E. J., J.H. Hertenstein, and M.B. Platt. 2004. Faculty-generated strategies for "cold calling" use: A comparative analysis with student recommendations. Journal on Excellence in College Teaching. 16(1): 23–62.

What Research Tells Us About Online Discussion

John Orlando, PhD

Student discussion differentiates online education from the old correspondence courses. But there are still many questions to answer in order to facilitate good discussion online. Hong Zhiu, of the University of Texas at San Antonio, did a meta-analysis of studies of online discussion over the past 15 years and has interesting findings about participation.

A few students dominate.

Studies show that a few students tend to dominate discussion, just as a few people tend to dominate face-to-face discussions. Yet, most students still talk more in an online discussion than in a face-to-face environment, lending evidence to the perception that online education tends to draw shy students out of their shells. This is one major advantage of online education, and a reason why discussion should be central to any online course.

The finding also reminds us that even in an online discussion, equal participation is not likely. While it is important to establish minimum requirements for participation, human nature means that some students will still dominate.

While we want students to learn how to express themselves, we might also consider the legitimate role of a "passive participant." Maybe that person is a good listener, while another who contributes a lot is a poor listener. The online instructor should ask whether the purpose of discussion is to get everyone to talk or to generate good ideas. If the latter, then craft discussion requirement to

allow for discussion supporters who encourage others but do not take a larger role.

Participation between students increases over time.

Studies have shown that initial discussion tends to be between faculty and students, but as time goes on, students start talking to one another more and more. This is encouraging, and the goal of an online course is to move the center of gravity of a class from the lecture to the discussion. The design of a traditional classroom with desks facing the instructor embodies the assumption that students are there to listen, and as a result discussion goes through the instructor. But everyone is in an equal position in an online discussion, so students tend to start genuinely speaking to one another.

"An online instructor should foster, but not dominate, discussion. Provide the structure and initial nudge, but hope that it eventually gets taken over by students."

This does not mean that online instructors should remove themselves entirely from discussion. Students want the instructor to be present to demonstrate that students' points are valued. A good guideline is that an online instructor should foster, but not dominate, discussion. Provide the structure and initial nudge, but hope that it eventually gets taken over by students.

Constructive interactions.

A third theme is that the majority of discussion is collaborative and constructive. Researchers found that responses generally contained supportive messages about others' postings. This is important, as people who do not teach online often assume that students will start flaming on online discussion boards. Flaming is context-dependent. Unlike in other forums, online students are not truly anonymous, and because the instructor holds the grades there is a built-in deterrent to flaming. Studies also show that responses to others were far more common in discussions than original postings. This again makes sense, as any discussion generally starts with an initial topic and then builds on that.

But the finding draws into question the common requirement in online courses that all students make an original posting. This can create multiple discussion threads that are hard to follow. Students will also run out of original ideas after a few postings are made.

Consider the purpose of the original posting requirement. Is it to generate creativity? If so, then a response to someone else's point might contain more insight and creativity than an original posting. Maybe instead of requiring an original posting and two replies, just require one or two original thoughts.

The fact that most responses were supportive also raises the question of whether students are too nice in discussion. Some studies suggest that students are unwilling to challenge one another in discussion.The purpose of academic discussion is to model civil and constructive disagreement as a means of intellectual progress, and so an online instructor might deliberately "stir the pot" with postings that invite disagreement as a way to facilitate robust interaction and engagement.

Reference

Zhou, H. (2015). A Systematic Review of Empirical Studies on Participants' Interactions in Internet- Mediated Discussion Boards as a Course Component in Formal Higher Education Settings, Online Learning Journal, v. 19, n. 3.

Creating a Class Participation Rubric

Adam Chapnick

After years of stating my expectations for tutorial participation orally, I have developed a rubric that I think both improves my accountability as an assessor and provides my students with a clear sense of my expectations for class discussions. It also makes clear my focus in the small group setting: creating a "learners-centered," as opposed to a "learner-centered," environment.

The rubric was first used in a third-year Canadian external relations course. (I have since incorporated it into a number of undergraduate and graduate courses at three different universities). Tutorials were held biweekly and were made up of 12 to 15 students plus an instructor-facilitator. The students were assigned approximately four readings (60 to 80 pages) per session. The readings usually contained two opposing arguments on a Canadian foreign policy issue (for example, arguments for and against free trade) and approximately two pieces of primary evidence (House of Commons speeches, government documents, etc.).

The rubric is accompanied by a preface explaining my philosophy of the roles and values of class participation as well as a post-script (which I call 'Beyond the rubric') that provides students with additional information that does not quite fit within the rubric format. Both of these sections are included below.

On class participation

Unlike some of the other forms of learning that take place in this class, participation in the small-group environment is not an individual activity. How and what you learn from listening to a lecture, reading a textbook, doing research, or studying for an exam is quite different from what you can gain when you have immediate access to approximately 15 different, informed points of view on a single issue. In tutorials, if you do not prepare effectively and contribute positively, other students miss out on one of those points of view, and their learning experience suffers. For this reason, my evaluation of your performance in tutorials will be based in large part on how you have improved the learning experience of your peers. Supporting, engaging, and listening to your peers does not mean that you must always agree with them.

Supporting, engaging, and listening to your peers does not mean that you must always agree with them.

Rather, you should make a sincere effort to respond to their comments.

Playing an active role in discussions involves volunteering your opinion, asking questions, and listening carefully. The best discussions are the ones that move beyond the simple questions and answers. You will be rewarded for bringing up more challenging ideas and for trying to deal with them collaboratively with your classmates. To do this effectively, you must have read all of the assigned material carefully.

Beyond the rubric

Additional factors that may affect your grade positively:

• If you show measurable improvement as the year goes on, you will be rewarded significantly. Becoming more active and/or making more effective comments not only raises the overall level of discussion in the room, it also sets an example for the rest of the class. By trying, you encourage others to do the same.

• If you are naturally shy, or have a day when you are not yourself, you may e-mail me relevant comments, thoughts, and questions after the discussion. While this method of participation is not ideal (it does not engage the rest of the group), it does demonstrate that you have been preparing for the class, listening carefully, and responding to your peers.

• If you miss a session completely, you can submit a one-page (single-spaced) typed argumentative summary of the assigned material (this means you must analyze and critique the readings, not summarize them). Again, while not ideal, this will confirm that you have engaged and responded to the material.

Additional Factors that May Affect Your Grade Negatively:

• Not attending tutorials will have a significant impact on your final grade (regardless of the quality of your contributions during weeks when you are there). Obviously, you cannot contribute if you are absent. Finally, a cohesive and supportive class dynamic is most easily developed and maintained in a relatively predictable and consistent environment. Your peers must know you and trust you to feel comfortable; it is much more difficult to build this trust if you do not attend tutorial regularly.

• Dominating class discussions is not helpful. It denies other students the opportunity to contribute and therefore restricts the number of ideas that might be considered. Dominating also prevents you from listening, and from building effectively on the comments of your peers.

• Speaking directly to the teaching assistant/ tutorial leader is also highly discouraged. Tutorials are supposed to be a dialogue among peers, not a series of individual one-on-one conversations. Ignoring your peers — and/ or not referring to them by name — risks alienating them, and creates a much less supportive group dynamic.

• Negative, offensive, and disrespectful comments and actions can do serious damage to the learning atmosphere. Such behavior will necessarily result in a substantially lower grade.

Editor's note: When we publish materials that instructors use in classes, we ask them to grant other instructors permission to use these materials in their courses. Professor Chapnick has given this permission. Please note this is permission for classroom use only.

Turning Participation Grades Into Self-Directed Learning Opportunities

Bridget Arend, PhD

We all want students to come to class prepared, having done the readings, and ready to actively participate in discussions and activities. Although the practice is debated, many of us use participation grades to encourage the types of behavior we want to see in class. Typically, it works, but it's a very extrinsically focused form of motivation.

At the same time, most college teachers want to help students learn how to learn and become self-directed learners. Yet extrinsically motivated grading practices make it difficult to accomplish these goals. Are there ways to not only ensure that students actively participate in class but also help them take ownership of their participation and develop the desire to become more intentional learners?

I've been exploring a few ways to do this. Over the years, I've learned from other instructors' practices, helpful online posts, and great resources like Nilson's (2013) collection of self-regulated learning strategies. I am currently using a few methods that attempt to support Schraw's (1998) three-stage model for self-regulated learning: planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Through the development of class norms and periodic reflection assignments, I work with students to collectively set the tone for class participation and encourage them to reflect on their engagement continually throughout the course.

During the first class

It is common to create guidelines, norms, or "rules of engagement" for class discussion, especially in courses in which sensitive and contentious discussions occur or reactions to the content can become emotional. During the first class, I make time to collectively create these norms, asking students, "What does it mean to participate?"

I ask the students to think about particularly good discussions and classroom climates they have encountered and to describe them to each other in pairs. Next, two pairs join and begin talking about the essential elements that support productive classroom communication.

Typically, students themselves suggest norms such as the following: ask questions, be an active listener, respect different opinions, be open-minded, and come to class prepared to engage. Here are some of my additional favorites:

- Demonstrate curiosity.
- Embrace the silence.
- Share the air—make sure everyone has a chance to share their perspectives.
- Accept that there can be many truths.

• Give everyone feedback to encourage their learning and growth.

• Do your best to be present in mind, body, and soul.

Students write down suggested attitudes and behaviors they would like the class to follow. I bring up anything I feel is missing, such as whether they believe participation means that everyone should speak in class (usually they do not). Then I type up our collectively developed norms, making sure to use the students' language as much as possible.

I post the norms online and in the classroom, and I refer to them at the beginning of the first few classes as well as before any potentially contentious course activities or discussions. By creating this list of norms using students' language and their understandings of productive class engagement, I hope they can better see the connections between their individual behavior and our collective learning.

Midway through the course

It is an important first step take the time to create class norms, and it is wonderful to see the energy and ease with which students engage in the process. But it's another thing to make sure the class stays true to the intent of these norms without frequent reminders from me.

Like many instructors, I always offer some form of midcourse feedback mechanism students can use to share feedback about the course and instruction. At the same time, I ask students to reflect on their learning. I give them each a sheet of paper that lists the class norms and ask them to assess their participation and contributions in light of these norms. I have them respond to these questions:

• Which one or two aspects of the class norms do you feel are strengths for you?

• Which one or two aspects of the class norms could you focus on improving? How?

• How are things going for you in this class overall? Is there anything you'd like me to know about your class participation and engagement?

• Any other comments (additions or suggested changes) about our class norms?

While the students' feedback to me about the course and my instruction is anonymous, their feedback about their own learning is not. I ask them to put their names on their self-assessment reflections. I find that students are usually pretty accurate in assessing their strengths and areas for change. More often than not, my feedback is to simply agree with them, encourage them, or make specific suggestions.

At the end of the course

To help students continue to develop and reflect on their engagement in future classes, I have a final participation reflection assignment. In the syllabus, I lay out some general expectations for class participation and engagement. For example:

Each week you will be expected to come to class prepared, having done the readings, and ready to participate and engage in class activities. In addition, you will occasionally be asked to complete short activities prior to and

during some of the class sessions. As a class, we should all try our best to live up to our collectively created class norms.

During the last week of class, I ask students to submit a short reflection describing their participation and engagement in the course. I ask them to review the class norms and participation expectations and to share how they would grade themselves and why. Essentially, this is a chance for each student to weigh in on their final "participation" grade, which ends up as a combination of their reflection, my observations, and their attendance and completion of the weekly assignments.

I encourage them to be creative in the format, and I've found that at the end of the term, students are often eager to do something other than write a paper. I have had students submit videos, poems, concept maps, and drawings of their personal journeys through the course. These reflections provide me with additional insight into what they feel they've gotten out of the course and, often, what else is going on in their lives. They also encourage students to reflect on how much effort they devoted to the course and how that relates to what they learned, as well as how to build upon their strengths and areas of development in subsequent courses.

These activities take some thought and planning but in the end require only minimal class time. Ideally, students are more motivated to participate in constructive ways if they see the connections between their engagement and learning themselves. My hope is that by committing even just a little time to this type of reflection, I can support students in planning, monitoring, and evaluating the impact of their participation and active engagement in class.

References

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Participation Blues from the Student Perspective

Jon Cieniewicz

Editor's note: The following article is written by a beginning college student—I know his writing is not typical of most first-year students. But his description of a course with "lackluster" participation is so compelling. Classes with forced and superficial exchanges are torturous for everybody.

Participation is an extremely crucial element for learning. It is a proven fact that students learn better and retain more when they are active participants. Learning is an active process and should involve talking.

I do recognize that motivating college students can prove to be a daunting task. Motivating students to actively participate is a subject unto itself; the words "excruciating," "agonizing," and "mentally draining" come

to mind. Most students seem to operate assuming that as long as the assigned work is completed on time, test scores are deemed acceptable, and attendance is satisfactory, participation is just not that important.

But when participation does not occur in a class, its absence has a chilling effect on efforts to learn, motivation, and one's general attitude toward that course. Take one of my classes, for example. During each class, the professor briefly outlines the next assignment's criteria and then explains it in depth throughout the period. If there was an assignment due from the previous class, the teacher asks everyone to take it out. A typical assignment might have been to read a selection in the book and decide on the author's main points. After reading this material, the instructor might have us select the main points from a list of points and then defend that choice.

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Here's how participation happens in this class. After completing an exercise like the one I've just described, the professor asks for a volunteer to start us off and usually the request is followed by dead silence. After about five seconds, one hand goes up and the professor says, "Yes, you." (This professor does not use student names, and I think this in part accounts for the limited participation. I do not know any of my classmates' names. We don't communicate very much with each other). The student provides a very brief response—sometimes not even a complete sentence. With additional prodding from the professor, the reluctant student adds more to the answer. Then the professor asks for someone else to volunteer for the next question and no one responds. Finally, the same student volunteers again. Eventually maybe four different students answer questions during a given class period. The proverbial saying "It's like pulling teeth" to get someone to speak certainly applies to this class. The majority of individuals in this class have never answered or asked a question, offered their thoughts or opinions on class assignments, or spoken up about classroom activities.

At the end of this particular class, we got together in small groups to evaluate an essay assignment that we are working on. We exchanged papers, read them, and suggested corrections we thought the paper needed. We were supposed to explain these proposed corrections and why we felt they were necessary. In our group, talking was very limited. At first we all just looked at each other, not saying anything. It was very awkward. Finally someone spoke up and we each took turns, quietly reading our essays to each other and explaining the reasons. You could tell from the silence throughout the room that our group was typical and that there was very little exchange of information going on.

When we finished this group activity, our professor asked if there were any questions. There were none. Class concluded with the instructor remarking that there seemed to have been very little dialogue going on within the groups. We needed to improve that in future classes.

Although students in lower grades can generally be encouraged to participate by

simple reward systems like stickers, more recess or homework passes, college students are a much tougher audience. Incentives have to be extremely tantalizing to make them sit up and notice. To help invigorate the lackluster participation of students in my class, I think the instructor needs to offer a grade-related incentive. Students do care about their grades and will do things to improve them.

Those students who do already contribute would more than likely pick up their pace, and those students looking for ways to improve their grades would be more inclined to participate. I think the participation problem in this class is so severe that the instructor needs to think outside the box—maybe certificates redeemable for a cup of coffee or some other goody given to those students who participate four times a period. At this point in the semester it may be too late for incentives, but I know for sure that I really hope I don't have other classes where student participation is this absent and awkward.

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