FACULTY FOCUS

Special Report

Tips for Encouraging Student Participation in Classroom Discussions

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A MAGNA PUBLICATION

Tips for Encouraging Student Participation in Classroom Discussions

Motivating students to participate in classroom discussions is a subject unto itself. The words “excruciating,” “agonizing,” and “mentally draining” may come to mind. There are some students who seem to assume that as long as the assigned work is completed on time, test scores are good, and attendance is satisfactory, they shouldn’t be forced to participate. It’s not that they don’t think participation improves the classroom experience, they just prefer that other students do the participating.

Of course we all have a few over-participators who are eager to volunteer every answer (sometimes to the point of dominating the discussion, which creates its own problems for educators and fellow students alike) but a good number of students prefer to listen, observe, or daydream rather than engage in the class discussion. Whether they’re shy, unprepared, or simply reluctant to share their ideas, getting students to participate is a constant struggle.

This special report features 11 articles from *The Teaching Professor* that highlight effective strategies for establishing the expectation of participation, facilitating meaningful discussion, using questions appropriately, and creating a supportive learning environment.

Articles you will find in this report include:

- Putting the Participation Puzzle Together
- Student Recommendations for Encouraging Participation
- To Call on or Not to Call on: That Continues to Be the Question
- Creating a Class Participation Rubric
- Those Students Who Participate Too Much

There is some debate in the literature as to whether students have the right to remain silent in a class, but if you’re looking for ways to facilitate more effective discussions, *Tips for Encouraging Student Participation in Classroom Discussions* will help.

Maryellen Weimer
Editor
The Teaching Professor

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THE Teaching PROFESSOR

Class Participation Evaluated by Peers

Most instructors opt to include class participation in their courses. Many seek to promote it. Generally, students are encouraged to participate by some sort of grading scheme. But evaluating individual contributions and promoting a substantive, intriguing discussion at the same time is no small task. Consequently, many instructors end up evaluating participation subjectively, relying on an intuitive sense of who spoke, how often, and saying what. Besides worries about the objectivity of such a system, this approach "forces the instructor to adopt two fundamentally incompatible roles simultaneously: the support role of creating learning opportunities in the classroom, and the evaluative role of grading participation every time a student verbalizes his or her thoughts." (p. 24)

Mainkar, the author of the article referenced below, uses this problem and the work of others to identify two more problems that are frequently a part of participation grading schemes. First, students contribute not because they have something to say, but because they want the points. They craft these contributions in their minds as other students are speaking. As a result, what they say rarely follows from what has just been said, thereby making the discussion disjointed rather than a series of exchanges that flow in the direction of some logical conclusion. And finally, not all students are equally ready to contribute. For some (frequently those from other cultures or of ethnic minority backgrounds), having to participate in class may cause much stress and anxiety.

Mainkar has developed (and used successfully for four years now) a system that tackles these problems. "Students are the primary evaluators of discussion participation on a daily basis." (p. 24) Here's how the system works. Every day one or two (usually two) students evaluate the contributions of the rest of class (between 20 and 30 other students). They do so using a sheet (a sample of which is included in the article's appendix) that lists all students by name and differentiates contributions into three categories: attendance (awarded for listening and not engaging in disruptive behaviors), straightforward comments (adequate contributions), and insightful comments (superior thinking). One point is awarded for attending but not participating in class, two points for one or two straightforward comments, and three points for three or more straightforward comments. Insightful comments are worth more, but students cannot earn more than three points per day. Evaluators earn three points on the day they evaluate their classmates. Each student evaluates only once during the course. Mainkar has found that the two evaluators' scores agree to a high degree. (Data documenting the extent of agreement is included in the article.) Daily participation scores are averaged and converted into a number between 0 and 100. If a student never participated but attended class regularly, that student would earn 77 out of the 100 points.

Individual differences are accommodated by letting students decide whether their participation grade counts for 10, 15, or 20 percent of their total course grade. Students make this determination about halfway through the semester after they have received adequate feedback, which is provided every few weeks. The system itself is not launched until the third or fourth week of the semester, giving students a chance to feel comfortable in this particular class setting and with the participation system itself.

Mainkar admits that the system does involve more administrative work for the instructor. Students' participation is scored daily, and those scores must be recorded, averaged, and shared with the students; but given the system's effectiveness at overcoming some fundamental problems associated with the grading of participation, the extra effort seems justified. The article also contains some useful suggestions on how the system can be streamlined and used in smaller classes. It is an interesting approach with many potential adaptations.

Reference: Mainkar, A.V. (2008). A student-empowered system for measuring and weighing participation in class discussion. *Journal of Management Education*, 32 (1), 23-37.

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A MAGNA PUBLICATION

Assessing Class Participation: One Useful Strategy

By 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 of closing down participation. In one online site that offers assessment guidelines, for example, 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. (E)"

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 meeting.

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.

Denise D. Knight is a Distinguished Teaching Professor of English at SUNY Cortland.

Participation Blues from the Student Perspective

By 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.

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.

Roll the Dice and Students Participate

By 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.

Kurtis J. Swope PhD is an associate professor in the department of economics at the U.S. Naval Academy.

Those Students Who Participate Too Much

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

What would we do without those few students who are always ready to speak—who make a stab at an answer when no one else will, who ask for clarification when they are confused, who even respond to things other students say in class? Most of those students we would like to clone. But then there are those who communicate to excess. They would answer every question if we let them. They would happily dominate every classroom discussion if allowed. We call these students the over-participators; in the research literature they are known as compulsive communicators, and researchers estimate that a bit more than 5 percent of students fall into this category.

The rest of the class loves and hates these classmates. They are loved because they take the pressure off everyone else. They are hated because they speak so much. Their endless contributions soon bore others. And they are hated because they make those who struggle to contribute feel woefully incompetent.

Their behavior also presents all sorts of problems for the teacher, who would love to call on somebody else, but often that familiar hand is the only one in the air. Generally over-participators are bright students. They care about the content and have the level of motivation a teacher would like to see in all students. But their determination to keep themselves always at the center of discussion tests in most of us the patience and commitment to participate.

Generally teachers do not rebuke the over-participator in public. Researchers in the study mentioned below asked students what they expected teachers to do about fellow classmates who over-participated.

Perhaps the student could be encouraged to move his or her participation to the next level by not just answering questions, but asking them; by not just making comments, but specifically responding to things other students say in class.

They found that students expect teachers to manage compulsive communicators through management strategies that are not rude or demeaning. Students "do not want to witness a fellow student subjected to negative sanctions when it comes to this particular transgression." (p. 28)

When teachers do not address the problem, according to this research, students rate them lower on measures of credibility and affect or liking. In fact, doing nothing about compulsive communicators results in even more negative student perceptions than does addressing the problem punitively.

What's the best advice, based on this research? Address the problem using positive and constructive communication strategies. It helps to have a discussion early in the course about the characteristics of effective discussion and teacher-student exchanges. If students are asked to describe those conversations that hold their attention and help them learn, they are usually quick to name the over-participation problem and state preferences for dialogue in which many people participate. Teachers should design participation activities that require the contributions of many: small groups presenting brief reports, sharing examples, or offering summaries.

It may be useful to talk privately with the student who is participating too much. It may help to make clear how and why too much communication from one student inhibits the learning of others. Perhaps the student could be encouraged to move his or her participation to the next level by not just answering questions, but asking them; by not just making comments, but specifically responding to things other students say in class.

Participation norms are established early in the course. If a teacher holds fast to hearing from lots of students right from the start, that norm will be established and can be maintained throughout the course.

Reference: McPherson, M. B., and Liang, Y. (2007). Students' reactions to teachers' management of compulsive communicators. *Communication Education*, 56 (1), 18-33.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD, professor emerita of teaching and learning at Penn State - Berks, is the editor of The Teaching Professor.

Teaching How to Question: Participation Rubrics

By Anna H. Lathrop, EdD

At the heart of the Socratic method—the icon of the inquiry-based learning approach—is the art of asking the "right" question. Indeed, when we engage in casual conversation with friends, our dialogue is often animated and enjoyable—interspersed with questions that force us to engage in a spontaneous and free-flowing exchange of knowledge, ideas and reflection. In an educational context, however, without the markers of personal familiarity and natural interest, the institutional forum of the "seminar" often feels foreign, stilted and intimidating.

After years of teaching large first-year classes with multiple seminar sections and a cohort of new TA seminar leaders each year, I have developed two evaluation rubrics. One is designed to assess student participation, and the other aims to assess student facilitation. Both follow this article. In each case, principles that relate to the skills of asking good questions are embedded within evaluation rubrics. Their presence helps to both frame and assess the teaching and learning environment of the seminar.

Students are assessed on a weekly basis with the participation rubric and are assigned a value out of 20 marks for each seminar. These values are averaged over the 12-week term to yield an average seminar performance rating. This rating is converted to a value of 20 percent of their final grade. During the course of the term, each student is also asked to facilitate a seminar on a given topic (with a partner, if desired). The facilitation evaluation also consists of five levels of assessment with qualitative ratings and corresponding numeric values. This assessment is marked out of 20 and converted to a value of 5 percent of the final grade in the course. Seminars range in number from 15 to 20 students.

These evaluation rubrics grew out of my belief that the seminar is a critical component of inquiry-based learning. As a forum for immediate interpersonal interaction, students benefit from the opportunity to ask questions, observe the enabling effect of these questions on others and assess the overall impact of this exchange of ideas in the teaching and learning context. Students must have the opportunity to both participate and facilitate in this academic exchange with clear and explicit criteria for excellence. In an age when "PowerPoint" presentations prevail in classrooms, the art of spontaneous, interactive, face-to-face dialogue that teaches students how to question and respond in the seminar environment is imperative.

Editor's note: The author has graciously granted permission for faculty to reproduce these rubrics for use in class without requesting permission.

SEMINAR PARTICIPATION EVALUATION

Rating: Poor (1) Satisfactory (2) Very Good (3) Superior (4)

Student Name ______________________________

_____ **Preparation -** Evidence shows preparation for the seminar (has prepared notes and/or recalls the readings without the use of the open text).

_____ **Engagement -** Quality of engagement is active, respectful & inclusive.

_____ **Initiative -** Questions asked focus, clarify & summarize discussion.

_____ **Response -** Quality of response reflects knowledge, comprehension & application of the readings.

_____ **Discussion -** Quality of response extends the discussion with peers and reflects analysis, synthesis & evaluation.

_____ Total/20

Anecdotal Comments:_________________________

SEMINAR FACILITATION EVALUATION

Student Facilitators: 1. __________ 2. __________

Date: __________

Rating: Poor (1) Satisfactory (2) Very Good (3) Superior (4)

1. Facilitation Skills: (1) (2) (3) (4)

- Facilitators ask questions and use strategies that draw out knowledge of theory/experience; facilitators are knowledgeable and offer correction & guidance when necessary.

2. Organization: (1) (2) (3) (4)

- Seminar is structured in a clear & logical sequence.

3. Originality: (1) (2) (3) (4)

- Visual and written aids are interesting, innovative/creative & helpful.

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4. Engagement: (1) (2) (3) (4)

- Facilitators generate a high degree of student interest; respectful & inclusive; all students encouraged to participate.

5. Discussion: (1) (2) (3) (4)

- Discussion is focused, relevant & engaging; theory (readings) related to experience; applications & implications clear and accurate.

TOTAL : 20 marks ______________________________

NOTE: Student cofacilitators may receive similar or different grades, depending upon their level of preparation and contribution.

Anna H. Lathrop, EdD, is Interim Dean, Faculty of Applied Health Sciences, at Brock University.

Student Recommendations for Encouraging Participation

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

We regularly revisit topics in the newsletter, especially those that represent perplexing instructional problems, and getting students participating in class is certainly one of those. Across the years we highlighted work of various kinds that analyze the issues and propose solutions, all of it pertaining to the undergraduate classroom. Are there significant differences in the graduate classroom?

A recent qualitative study generated and analyzed responses from students in two graduate management accounting courses. Class context here was an important part of the study. In both courses the development of critical-thinking skills that apply to management situations were emphasized. Class discussion occurred mostly around case studies. "Students in these classes were told orally and in the syllabus to expect to be called on when their hands were not raised." (p. 106) And, participation was graded in these courses. On the last day of the class students completed a questionnaire that asked what professors do or say that increases student participation and what professor do or say that increases or decreases the effectiveness of discussion. (p. 106) The questions used to solicit responses on these topics included both closed and open questions.

Responses clustered in six areas and identified a variety of faculty behaviors or characteristics that students said influenced participation and discussion.

- **Required/graded participation —** Students suggested that both participation and discussion were positively impacted when participation was required, when it counted for a significant part of the grade and when instructors used "cold-calling," as in calling on students regardless of whether or not they volunteered. [This finding is different than other research highlighted in the newsletter where undergraduate students reported that being allowed to volunteer motivated them to participate more. See reference below]
- **Incorporating ideas and experience into discussion —** Students value instructor responses that elaborate on their ideas, taking them further and applying them to course content. They also believe participation and discussion benefit when they include real-life examples and experience.
- **Active facilitation —** A variety of strategies were grouped in this category, including challenging students to answer more in depth, not letting people dominate the discussion, and stopping folks who are just participating for the sake of participating.

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- **Asking effective questions —** This is related to the old adage about the quality of the questions being predictive of the quality of the answers. But there was also this student observation about a response that decreases discussion: "when a facilitator is looking for specific answers and does not consider alternative concepts." (p. 109)
- **Supportive classroom environment —** The word "encourage" appears in many student comments as well as admonitions to be patient with students, giving them time to find their way to a right or better answer.
- **Affirm contributions and provide constructive feedback —** Recommendations here ranged from stressing how the class benefits from wrong answers to making reference subsequently to student answers or writing good student responses on the board.

The authors raise a number of interesting questions about the "cold-calling" strategy: Is it inherently undemocratic because it takes away a student's right to choose whether or not they should participate? Or is it democratic because it equalizes the amount of participation across students? How should an instructor use the strategy? Does the approach influence students' comfort levels, perhaps even their learning? Do different student populations respond differently to being called on?

Reference: Dallimore, E. J., Hertenstein, J. H., and Platt, M. B. (2004). Classroom participation and discussion effectiveness: Student-generated strategies. Communication Education, 53 (1), 103-115.

Reference on volunteering from an earlier issue: Auster, C. J., and MacRone, M. (1994). The classroom as a negotiated social setting: An empirical study of the effects of faculty member's behaviors on students' participation. Teaching Sociology, 22 (4), 289-300.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD, professor emerita of teaching and learning at Penn State - Berks, is the editor of The Teaching Professor.

Is There a Place for Games in the College Classroom?

By Stacey Beth-Mackowiak Ayotte

It is not always easy to get each student to participate on a daily basis, but I've found that when I incorporate games into the classroom, new attitudes emerge and new personalities blossom. Those once inhibited learners open their mouths and contribute to the class. Because I teach a foreign language, participation and involvement may be more important for my students, but I still think there's a place for games in many disciplines.

I use games as warm-ups at the beginning of class and as ways for students to get to know each other. They are an effective review session tool as well. When my students are out of their seats gathering information, they are more motivated and willing to present their findings. If there is a prize at stake or simply the designation "winner," the competition becomes cutthroat. Let me illustrate with some examples.

Frequently I use the game of Jeopardy to help students review for an upcoming exam. I select different categories with material appropriate for review (vocabulary, verb conjugations, culture, idiomatic expressions, numbers, etc). In other courses the categories might include important figures, key terms, important events or discoveries, theories or principles, processes or functions, etc. I divide students into teams so that they compete as groups rather than as individuals.

My goal is to create a cooperative learning environment where individuals easily overwhelmed in front of their peers will feel less pressure and are more likely to contribute. When students work together as a team, a sense of solidarity results. By the time final Jeopardy begins and the wagers have been written down, students have reviewed material from a given chapter or several chapters. They are ready to be crowned winners and prepared for the kind of individual review they need to complete on their own.

I use group games to accomplish other learning goals as well. Take, for example, a game I've dubbed "Verb Battleship" and a version of traditional bingo. For Verb Battleship, students

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are given a game board on which the infinitives of several verbs are provided down the left-hand column of the page. Across the top in the first row are the different subject pronouns. Depending on the recently taught verb form (present, subjunctive, pluperfect), the students are asked to select a verb and its correct form and then to properly conjugate it as a means of finding and destroying their opponents ships. The first student who seeks out and destroys his opponent's ships by correctly conjugating verbs is named the champion. I hear students calling out with enthusiasm, "Tu as coulé mon bateau!" (You sank my ship).

With bingo, students use a game board containing rows and columns of boxes, each filled with different criteria or situations. For example, they may need to find someone in the class who can define a particular concept or term, or use a certain part of speech correctly. They circulate around the classroom looking for students who fit the particular information in each box. The first student to find a vertical, horizontal, or diagonal line yells "bingo" and is named the winner. To verify whether a "true" bingo has been achieved, I ask the "winner" to explain his or her bingo line. I then follow up with each of the students named on the bingo line so that they can share with the class the correct answer or the desired term, date, concept, etc.

Learning a new language (whether it's a foreign one or the complicated language of many disciplines) is hard work and much of it isn't fun. Games like these offer a welcome respite. Often my students don't even realize they are learning the language because they are having so much fun. Games also shift the focus offered by the traditional textbook exercises and get students working and communicating with others in the classroom. When working on one of these games, my students eagerly use the new language, enjoy participating, and beam with pride upon being named the "winner."

Games are not just fun for the sake of fun. They should be designed to reinforce or review topics covered in class, they should be organized, and they should be used to add variety to our college classrooms. As for the answer to the question in the title—I say yes, resoundingly, and gently remind that even faculty who've been around a while aren't too old to have some fun with games.

Stacey Beth-Mackowiak Ayotte is an assistant professor of French in the department of English and Foreign Languages at the University of Montevallo.

Discouraging Over Participators

By Nicholas F. Skinner, PhD

Over the years I have had considerable success in encouraging student participation in my senior seminars. As advised in The Teaching Professor, I have a discussion early in the course about those characteristics that make discussion effective.

Last semester, however, I was blessed by the presence of identical twins—I'll call them Harv and Marv—who were embroiled in the most intense case of sibling rivalry I have encountered in three-and-a-half decades of university teaching. Each had a seemingly compulsive need to make a comment; offer an opinion; or, most often, contradict whatever it was his brother had just said. These unnervingly frequent interruptions were disruptive and annoying for everyone, and it was not long before my students—first individually and eventually en masse—complained to me. I responded, again trying several of the nonverbal and verbal suggestions that have appeared in this publication. My attempts to quell the verbal tide fell on deaf ears.

I was at a loss as to what to try next, until one day the students took matters into their own hands. As soon as Harv or Marv opened his mouth, one of his classmates tossed two pennies directly at him (a different student each time). Finally, after several repetitions of being so targeted, Marv asked, "What are you guys doing?" The response, in chorus: "You both have so much to say, we figured this was the only way we could get our two cents in!"

Happily, the twins took this admonition graciously, and the class proceeded smoothly thereafter, leaving me thoroughly grateful for this clever demonstration of student ingenuity.

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Putting the Participation Puzzle Together

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Participation continues to be the most common method faculty use to get students involved and active in their learning. As previous research has documented, faculty use participation strategies with limited success. On average only 25 percent of students in a course participate, and half of the group who make contributions in class do so to the extent that they dominate the discussion.

A host of studies across the past 30 years have isolated factors and conditions that affect participation: things like the size of the class (obviously, the bigger the class the less opportunity for individual participation); faculty authority (that makes students fear faculty criticism); age (older students tend to participate more); gender (some early work describing a "chilly" climate for women in classrooms); student preparedness; and student confidence.

Up to this point, no research has attempted to put these various pieces together, to make individual findings an integrated and coherent whole. Fortunately, the study referenced below begins this needed work. It begins with this premise: "the college classroom, like any other workplace, is a social organization where power is asserted, tasks are assigned and negotiated, and work is accomplished through the interplay of formal and informal social structures. The present study … relates a variety of otherwise unconnected variables and concepts to the broader theoretical framework of social organizations." (p. 579). Using survey data collected from 1,550 undergraduate and graduate students at a medium-sized, urban university, researchers used a path model to assess direct and indirect influences on class participation.

Based on previous research, they used the path model to test 10 hypotheses about participation. Each hypothesis and a brief summary of the findings from this research are listed below. This is a large, complex analysis—more findings and information about them are contained in the article.

- Students' perception of large class size and lack of opportunity negatively affect self-reported participation both directly and indirectly by increasing fear of peer disapproval and of professor's criticisms. Contrary to other findings, the path coefficients reported in this study fail to support the hypothesis. Not only was the coefficient insignificant, it pointed in the wrong direction.
- Students' perception of faculty authority negatively affects self-reported participation both directly and indirectly by increasing fear of peer disapproval and of professors' criticisms and by decreasing level of confidence. Results showed that perceptions of the professor as an authority of knowledge had "a moderate negative direct effect." (p. 586). Said another way, "the more students perceive the professor as the authority of knowledge, the less likely it is that they will participate in class." (p. 586)
- Students' self-reported rates of interaction with faculty positively affected reported participation both directly and indirectly by decreasing fear of peer disapproval and of professor's criticisms and by increasing level of confidence. Faculty-student interaction has the largest direct, indirect, and total effects on self-reported participation. "We suggest … that faculty members not only indirectly shape classroom dynamics … but also directly influence students' behaviors in class through the relationship they develop with their students during out-of-class activities." (p. 591)
- Students' self-reported fear of peer disapproval negatively affects reported participation both directly and indirectly by decreasing level of confidence. Fear of peer disapproval was the third largest factor affecting participation. And this fear of peer response also had the largest negative effect on student confidence.
- Students' self-reported fear of professors' criticisms negatively affects reported participation directly and indirectly by decreasing level of confidence. This fear did not exert important effects on students' reports of their participation.
- Student's self-reported rates of para-participation (including nonverbal feedback and informal discussions with the instructor before or after class) have a positive, direct effect on reported class participation. This hypothesis was confirmed: "Para-participation increases the likelihood of more conventional participation in the classroom." (p. 588)

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- Students' age positively affects self-reported class participation, both directly and indirectly via confidence and diminished fear of peer disapproval and of professor's criticisms. These results confirmed earlier findings: "As age increases, so does students' self-reported participation." (p. 588). To illustrate, traditional age students, those 18 to 24 were 2.5 times more likely to report that they never or seldom participated in class. Non-traditional students were three times more likely to report that they always participated.
- Male students will report greater levels of class participation, will report higher levels of confidence, and are less likely to develop feelings of fear of peer disapproval and professor's criticism than female students are. "Our results indicate that gender has little or no effect on self-reported participation rates." (p. 590)
- Students' reported lack of preparation has negative, indirect effects on participation by increasing the fear of peer disapproval and of professors' criticisms and by decreasing confidence. The results partially supported this hypothesis. The direct effect is weak and unexpectedly in the negative direction, meaning being prepared decreases participation. But the indirect effects were positive. Lack of preparation did influence participation by effecting confidence and fears. (p.590)
- Students' confidence positively affects self-reported participation rate. This hypothesis was confirmed.

This research article is long and the methodology sophisticated, but the generation of the hypotheses and discussion of results are clear and accessible. In addition to being an impressive example of the scholarship that integrates, the article is exceptionally well referenced. It contains an amazingly more complete list of research and theory on and related to participation.

Reference: Weaver, R. R., and Qi, Jiang (2005). Classroom organization and participation: College students' perceptions. *Journal of Higher Education*, 76 (5), 570-601.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD, professor emerita of teaching and learning at Penn State - Berks, is the editor of The Teaching Professor.

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

By 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

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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.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD, professor emerita of teaching and learning at Penn State - Berks, is the editor of The Teaching Professor.

Creating a Class Participation Rubric

By 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 bi-weekly 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 tutorial, 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 tutorial 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. 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 chal-

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lenging 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. If you haven't, it will become clear quite quickly.

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 tutorial 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. More importantly, not attending sets a poor example for your peers and encourages them to do the same. 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. Tutorial is 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.

Adam Chapnick is the deputy director of education at the Canadian Forces College and an assistant professor at the Royal Military College of Canada.

The following rubric sets out the criteria upon which you will be evaluated: A guide to grading your class participation

A+	A	B	C	D	F
• Actively supports, engages and listens to peers (ongoing) • arrives fully prepared at every session • plays an active role in discussions (ongoing) • comments advance the level and depth of the dialogue (consistently) • group dynamic and level of discussion are consistently better because of the student's presence	• actively supports, engages and listens to peers (ongoing) • arrives fully prepared at almost every session • plays an active role in discussions (ongoing) • comments occasionally advance the level and depth of the dialogue • group dynamic and level of discussion are often better because of the student's presence	• makes a sincere effort to interact with peers (ongoing) • arrives mostly, if not fully, prepared (ongoing) • participates constructively in discussions (ongoing) • makes relevant comments based on the assigned material (ongoing) • group dynamic and level of discussion are occasionally better (never worse) because of the student's presence	• limited interaction with peers • preparation, and therefore level of participation, are both inconsistent • when prepared, participates constructively in discussions and makes relevant comments based on the assigned material • group dynamic and level of discussion are not affected by the student's presence	• virtually no interaction with peers • rarely prepared • rarely participates • comments are generally vague or drawn from outside of the assigned material • demonstrates a noticeable lack of interest (on occasion) • group dynamic and level of discussion are harmed by the student's presence	• no interaction with peers • never prepared • never participates • demonstrates a noticeable lack of interest in the material (ongoing) • group dynamic and level of discussion are significantly harmed by the student's presence

It Costs to Cut Class

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

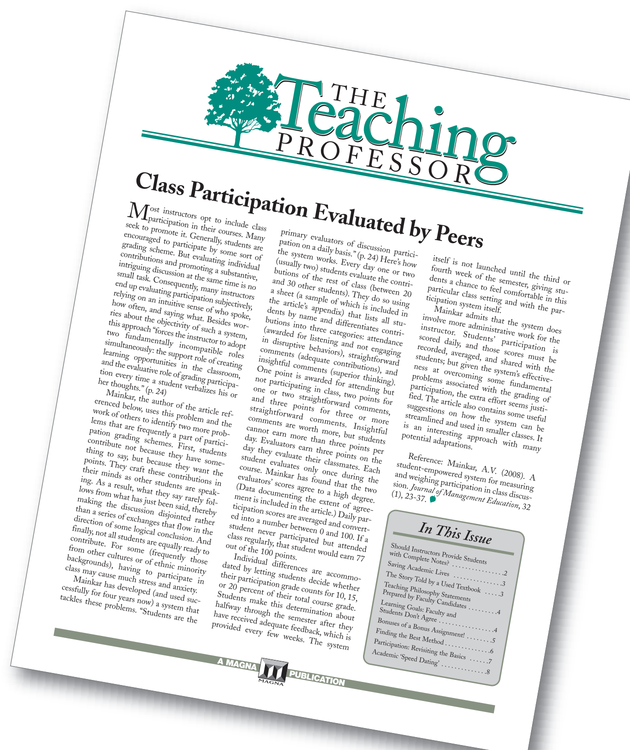
Many studies confirm the relationship between attendance and grades and the one referenced below is no exception. The course where the data reported in this study were collected was multiple discussion sections of a larger course. In these discussion sections attendance and participation counted for 10 percent of the total grade, 5 percent for each. Another 10 percent of the grade was determined by regular quizzes also given during the discussion sections. Findings were consistent across all sections: as absences increased, grades decreased.

In this study, unlike some other reported findings, the number of absences did not correlate significantly with the day of the week. But this study confirmed what has been reported elsewhere: classes before 10 a.m. and after 3 p.m. did not have more absences than classes scheduled during those hours. The number of absences did vary by class level, with seniors recording the most and sophomores the least. Sophomores had the highest average grades, but seniors did not have the lowest grades. First-year students did. Researcher Gump thinks this might be a “testament” to “experiential survival instincts—not as well understood by the first-year students.” (p. 24)

This study involved a variation in the quizzing schedule. Twice that schedule included six unannounced quizzes with the top five scores each counting 2 percent. In one section the instructor gave 12 quizzes, one per week but for the first and last weeks, with the top ten each counting for 1 percent. This change in quiz frequency affected attendance—it was the highest for any semester in the study. However, the frequency change did not have a positive effect on students’ course grades. Apparently knowing that a quiz would be given each week was enough to bring students to class even though the quizzes counted the same as when there were five. These results illustrate how attendance is part of what determines the grade, but it is not the entire story.

Reference: Gump, S. E. (2005). The cost of cutting class: Attendance as a predictor of student success. College Teaching, 53 (1), 21-25.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD, professor emerita of teaching and learning at Penn State - Berks, is the editor of The Teaching Professor.



THE Teaching PROFESSOR

Class Participation Evaluated by Peers

Most instructors opt to include class participation in their courses. Many seek to promote it. Generally, students are encouraged to participate by some sort of grading scheme. But evaluating individual contributions and promoting a substantive, intriguing discussion at the same time is no small task. Consequently, many instructors end up evaluating participation subjectively, relying on an intuitive sense of who spoke, how often, and saying what. Besides worries about the objectivity of such a system, this approach “forces the instructor to adopt two fundamentally incompatible roles simultaneously: the support role of creating learning opportunities in the classroom, and the evaluative role of grading participation every time a student verbalizes his or her thoughts.” (p. 24)

Mainkar, the author of the article referenced below, uses this problem and the work of others to identify two more problems that are frequently a part of participation grading schemes. First, students contribute not because they have something to say, but because they want the points. They craft these contributions in their minds as other students are speaking. As a result, what they say rarely follows from what has just been said, thereby making the discussion disjointed rather than a series of exchanges that flow in the direction of some logical conclusion. And finally, not all students are equally ready to contribute. For some (frequently those from other cultures or of ethnic minority backgrounds), having to participate in class may cause much stress and anxiety.

Mainkar has developed (and used successfully for four years now) a system that tackles these problems. “Students are the primary evaluators of discussion participation on a daily basis.” (p. 24) Here’s how the system works. Every day one or two (usually two) students evaluate the contributions of the rest of class (between 20 and 30 other students). They do so using a sheet (a sample of which is included in the article’s appendix) that lists all students by name and differentiates contributions into three categories: attendance (awarded for listening and not engaging in disruptive behaviors), straightforward comments (adequate contributions), and insightful comments (superior thinking). One point is awarded for attending but not participating in class, two points for one or two straightforward comments, and three points for three or more straightforward comments. Insightful comments are worth more, but students cannot earn more than three points per day. Evaluators earn three points on the day they evaluate their classmates. Each student evaluates only once during the course. Mainkar has found that the two evaluators’ scores agree to a high degree. (Data documenting the extent of agreement is included in the article.) Daily participation scores are averaged and converted into a number between 0 and 100. If a student never participated but attended class regularly, that student would earn 77 out of the 100 points.

Individual differences are accommodated by letting students decide whether their participation grade counts for 10, 15, or 20 percent of their total course grade. Students make this determination about halfway through the semester after they have received adequate feedback, which is provided every few weeks. The system itself is not launched until the third or fourth week of the semester, giving students a chance to feel comfortable in this particular class setting and with the participation system itself.

Mainkar admits that the system does involve more administrative work for the instructor. Students’ participation is scored daily, and those scores must be recorded, averaged, and shared with the students; but given the system’s effectiveness at overcoming some fundamental problems associated with the grading of participation, the extra effort seems justified. The article also contains some useful suggestions on how the system can be streamlined and used in smaller classes. It is an interesting approach with many potential adaptations.

Reference: Mainkar, A.V. (2008). A student-empowered system for measuring and weighing participation in class discussion. *Journal of Management Education*, 32 (1), 23-37.

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