

An Operational Definition of Class Participation

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Many courses require active class participation. Part of the total course grade in such courses typically includes participation evaluation. First, let me supply a rationale for including participation in the grading scheme. Research shows learning is an active process, not a passive one. Students learn best when they take an active part in the learning process. Students are more likely to appreciate how learning in one arena is useful in other settings if they personally relate their activities in these plural experiences rather than by trying to see commonality through passive learning; this called transference. Students are better able to generalize from active class activity than from what they listen to, watch, or read. Students have been shown to retain what they do better than retain what they vicariously learn. Students are therefore in need of active classroom involvement. Since increased student classroom activity is argued for, it should be an integral part of the evaluation process. Such grades serve both as motivation and as reward for quality student classroom involvement.

Too frequently, students are unsure about what is expected of them under the rubric: "class participation." Consequently, students try to anticipate what teachers mean and the results of such inferences are too frequently nightmarish. Teachers are not always definitive in their own minds as to what they expect of their students in relation to class participation. Such lack of clarity stems in part from a need for more methodical thought about what is desirable and undesirable student classroom behavior. Inadequate teacher preparation, classroom experience, and/or conscious thought about classroom behavior needs, desires, and clear articulation contribute to inadequate consideration of these matters. For useful classroom participation to be fostered, validly measured, and clearly understood by both teacher and student, it must be operationally defined. This is the purpose of this essay: to make it clear what quality classroom participation means.

Class participation is composed of three evaluative dimensions: quantity, dependability, and quality. Quantitatively, it is not desired that students try to ask or answer every question, give all the examples, provide inordinate support to classmates, nor be a class discussion monopolizer. It is desirable that all students be given the opportunity to participate by asking questions, offering examples when called for, and supply evidence of personal

awareness of concepts germane to class discussion. It is asked that student contributions have a utilitarian motive. While quality class participation requires some interaction frequency, there are numerous well known classroom behaviors that detract from effective classroom management and student learning. Students should be directly and clearly made aware of the behaviors we, as teachers, desire and those behaviors we wish not to occur in the classroom. Some of this awareness can come from group discussions between students and the teacher early on in the school year. Individual follow-up discussions should occur during student/teacher office visits. Another way to make desired classroom department expectations clear is to solicit inter-class agreement on such expectations. When class-to-class demands are similar and have been created with student input, students react more favorably than when classroom expectations vary widely and are totally teacher produced.

Some of the most common detracting classroom behaviors are:

(1) Long winded contributions. Students should keep their answers, questions, and expressions of support for classmates as concise, specific, and relevant as possible. Teacher paraphrases of student comments and praise for quality contributions will help induce better student contributions.

(2) Repetitive responses. Students should be attentive and not unnecessarily ask to go over old ground. Reminders that material was previously covered and select refusals to reward this practice will help reduce this behavior.

(3) Participation monopolizers. Students should not try to carry the entire class load on their shoulders. They should encourage, facilitate, and urge low frequency contributors to join in and share the class participation load. Positive confirmation of such behavior will make this strategy seem useful and rewarding to students.

(4) Responses that discourage others from contributing. These behaviors include: signs of impatience, boredom, or superiority that can be displayed nonverbally or by gestures and facial expressions. Discouraging behaviors also include: cutting someone off when they are trying to make a point, one upsmanship, and unnecessary argument (there is no need to challenge everything that is said). Such behaviors detract from the learning process and contribute to a less than ideal learning environment.

Participation dependability means students can be relied upon by the teacher and by classmates. When

students act in predictable ways, classroom management is made easier and learning goal achievement is enhanced. Dependable students attend class regularly. These students do not read newspapers, letters, or magazines in class. They do not chat privately with others, come to class late or leave class early, come to class unprepared, nor fail to pull their weight in agreed upon out-of-class sessions with classmates. When called upon in class, dependable students are prepared to respond relevantly, clearly, and respectfully.

Students should ask questions of clarification (making things clearer), classification (categorizing what they know), specification (determining precision), degree (knowing the level of importance or priority of ideas and instructions), permission, and direction (knowing rules and expectations). Students should not ask questions for the sake of asking. They should challenge their own beliefs, their classmates' contributions, information offered by teachers, and what they find in textbooks and other readings. When ideas, values, or interpretations are challenged, such probes should be undertaken with respect both to the author of those thoughts and to the ideas themselves. Teachers can teach this kind of respectful challenge by personally taking issue with select readings that students encounter. Students should be encouraged to add personal references only when these help listeners understand, not for the sake of personal plugs. Teachers should reward useful personalization by students and should personally and privately apprise students who inappropriately inject personal comments of a desire that they reduce such behaviors. Students should be taught to be supportive of each other by giving a colleague a pat on the back or a cheer for a noteworthy effort, and by providing an encouraging comment for a valiant failed effort. Teacher role modeling in this respect is the best way to teach these skills.

For student participation to be truly effective as a teaching strategy, it must be evaluated. Evaluation of class participation can take two forms: (1) a frequency count of positive and negative classroom behaviors and (2) a measure of individual student progress vis-à-vis quality participation. Teachers can count and record positive and negative classroom participation behaviors at varying intervals and then inform individual students about these observations through periodical notices. If school resources permit, teachers may also wish to employ parts of select videotaped class sessions to demonstrate both the noted behaviors and their effects. Such behavioral frequency distributions lend themselves to both criterion based and normative based grading schema.

In addition, teachers may wish to calculate and record student improvement in exhibiting positive participation behaviors and decreasing negative involvement behaviors. This process also lends itself to most popular grading methods.

Student participation can help a class progress much more smoothly if it is entered into willingly, enthusiastically, and purposefully. A class can suffer irreparably if student participation occurs reluctantly or without clear purpose. Quality student class participation is enhanced by teacher modeling. Teachers get their points across most effectively by examples and positive reinforcement. Students' positive behaviors should be noted and rewarded. Private teacher reminders to students about their participation performances should act as kindly motivators, not as cutting rebukes when student participation performances are not as they should be. Learning occurs best when it is a cooperative effort between student and teacher. Class participation is one major vehicle towards achieving quality learning.