

## **An Operational Definition of Class Participation**

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Many courses require active class participation. Part of a student's total course grade is typically composed of a participation evaluation. First, let me provide you a rationale for a grade-driven participation unit. Many psychological and educational researchers agree that learning is an active process, not a passive one.<sup>1</sup> Internalization, transferability, generalizability, and retention are closely linked to student classroom activity. Therefore, it seems prudent to include vehicles and incentives that stimulate active participation. Grades, in this context, serve both as motivator and as a reward for quality student classroom involvement.

Participation consists of three broad dimensions: quantity, dependability, and quality; these dimensions are listed in ascending order of importance.<sup>2</sup> Quantitatively, it is not asked that students answer every question, give all the examples, ask all the questions, provide an inordinate amount of support, or be a class discussion monopolizer. While quality participation does require a certain minimal frequency of interaction, be advised that there are numerous classroom interaction behaviors that will detract from your overall participation evaluation.

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<sup>1</sup> See the works of Piaget, Bloom, and Erickson in this regard.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Professor Emeritus Philip A. Gray formerly of Northern Illinois University for these insights in 1976.

Some of the most common detracting classroom behaviors are: (1) long winded contributions -- keep your answers, questions, and support, concise, specific, and relevant; (2) repetitive responses -- be attentive, don't ask us to go over old ground again; (3) participation monopolizers -- don't try to carry the class load on your shoulders, try not only to allow others to share the load, but encourage, facilitate, and even urge low-frequency contributors to join in (that behavior is high quality stuff!); and (4) responses that discourage others from contributing; these include rejecting facial expressions and gestures; verbal signs of boredom, impatience, or superiority; cutting someone off; one upmanship; unnecessary argument (there is no need to challenge everything that is said); and disconfirming behavior. Such behaviors detract from the learning process and contribute to a less than ideal learning environment.

Participation dependability means that as a class member, you can be relied upon by the teacher and your classmates. When students act in predictable learning-centered ways, classroom management and reaching learning goals are enhanced. Dependable, focused students do not: read letters, newspapers, magazines, or other materials in class; privately chat with classmates; come to class late, leave early, or fail to attend class sessions; come to class unprepared; fail to attend out-of-class sessions that were agreed to with classmates; or fail to do tasks for class groups to which they belong. When called upon in class, dependable students are prepared to respond relevantly, clearly, and

respectfully.

Well, now you know some of the behaviors not to exhibit; how about the positive side: OK; do ask questions of clarification, classification, degree, or direction; but, don't ask for the sake of asking. Do challenge ideas -- those of your own, your classmates, your instructor's, and the text's. When you challenge another's ideas, values, or interpretations, do so with respect to the owner of what is being challenged and to the ideas themselves. Add personal references when they help listeners understand, not for the sake of a personal plug. Be supportive of each other -- be encouraging, give a colleague a pat on the back or a cheer for a noteworthy effort and a supportive word for a valiant failed effort.

Class participation can make a class go much more smoothly if it is entered into willingly, enthusiastically, and purposefully; and a class can suffer irreparably if it is done poorly, reluctantly, or without good purpose. Quality student class participation is enhanced by teacher modeling, positive reinforcement for quality participation behaviors, and discrete student-teacher reminders when student performance is out of line with these expectations.