

Assessing In-class Participation in Common Core Courses

Sonia Cheung, Dai Hounsell, and Tracy Zou

Introduction

In universities and colleges, the practice of assessing students' participation in timetabled classes is widespread and well-established. Participation in tutorials or seminars is the most common focus of this type of assessment, but it can also be applied to workshops, practicals, fieldwork and lectures.

This Briefing explores how students' in-class participation is assessed in Common Core courses at HKU. As figures 1 and 2 show, it is commonplace across all four Areas of Inquiry, and relatively low-stakes, with weightings typically between 10% and 30%.

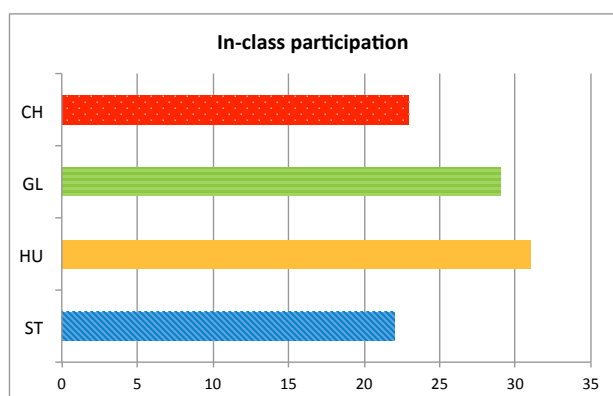


Figure 1: Number of assessment tasks by types of assessment methods

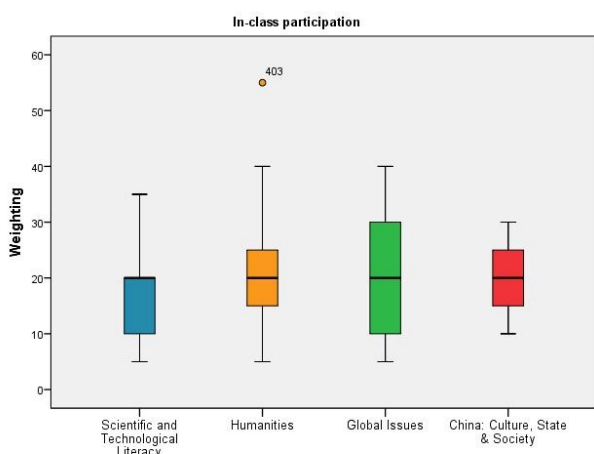


Figure 2: Weightings of in-class participation by Areas of Inquiry

Note: In-class participation was an assessment practice in 104 Common Core courses 2014-2015: 22 ST (Scientific and Technological Literacy), 30 HU (Humanities), 29 GL (Global Issues) and 23 CH (China: Culture, State and Society)

The Briefing is based mainly on the views of a sample of Common Core course coordinators at HKU, each of whom has been assessing class participation in one form or another as a part of their overall assessment strategy. The Briefing summarises how they seek to assess in-class participation wisely, in ways that work well for their students and themselves. Links to further resource materials can be found at <http://www.cetl.hku.hk/wise-assessment-forum/>

Why is participation assessed?

Four broad rationales for assessing in-class participation can be identified. The first, ostensibly, is to optimise attendance in a particular kind of class session, whether that takes the form of large-group lectures or small-group work, on- or off-campus. However, this rationale does not stand alone, but is invariably found in combination with one or more of the three others.

The second of these springs from the need for careful groundwork to be undertaken by students prior to the class if it is to work well as a learning experience. The goal is therefore to encourage effective preparation.

A third rationale is to encourage and facilitate activity and interaction within class sessions. Activities in Common Core courses in which participation is assessed vary widely, and typically involve students interacting in small groups as well as working on their own on set tasks:

- **open or structured discussions**, centred around weekly reading assignments, pre-circulated case studies, a video-recording, or perhaps an artifact, specimen or sample
- **problem-solving**, where students work initially in small groups as a preliminary to whole-class sharing and review of solutions, strategies or interpretations
- **debates** in which students argue for or against an issue, sometimes as individuals and sometimes formed into teams, prior to 'open-floor' discussion
- **tutorial leadership**, where students are expected to facilitate a discussion by their peers, whether for instance of case materials (written or multimodal), a real-world problem or scenario, or following introductory remarks by themselves or a peer
- **reflective writing**, to record observations on a field trip, for example, comments on a student presentation, or perspectives on an issue
- **online quizzes**, following a lecture, for instance, to demonstrate students' grasp of a concept or ability to apply it

The fourth rationale for this type of assessment overlaps with the third, and is concerned with the quality of engagement by students, whether working collaboratively or individually. Simply encouraging first-year students to contribute to a discussion or share their initial drafts may suffice where these activities are unfamiliar and anxiety-provoking, for instance; but with more experienced students, such

assessments will give greater emphasis to how accurately they communicate a concept, how well they support an interpretation with sound evidence.

How is the assessing done?

In most courses, the grading of in-class participation was undertaken by teachers and tutors, but there were some instances where students also played a role, with the aim of promoting their engagement and interaction. A shared understanding of assessment criteria, together with consistency of marking, was generally sought with the aid of clear statements of expectations, backed up by discussions in lectures and tutorials, as well as through the use of grade descriptors or rubrics.

Figure 3, taken from an Australian case example¹, illustrates the typical range of criteria deployed to assess in-class participation, whether in Common Core courses at HKU or in universities elsewhere.

- *Preparation*: the extent of your reading, analyzing and understanding of the material, demonstrated by contribution to discussion.
- *Contribution to discussion*: the extent to which you volunteered answers, asked relevant questions, expressed your own opinion and analyzed contributions of others.
- *Group skills*: the extent to which you allowed others to contribute, avoided class domination, shared ideas with others, assisted others, provided positive feedback to others and exhibited tolerance and respect for others.
- *Communication skills*: the quality of your expression, clarity, conciseness, use of appropriate vocabulary, confidence.
- *Attendance*: includes punctuality.

Figure 3: Criteria for assessment of participation

Addressing challenges in assessing participation

Three challenges often arise in the assessment of class participation, whether in the Common Core Curriculum or in other courses at HKU, and these stem from students' transition from school to university, their unfamiliarity with the 'habits of mind' new subjects call for, and how student silence and talkativeness may be valued. How do these challenges come about, and how can teachers best respond?

¹ From Dancer & Kamvounias (2005). p. 448. see Perspectives from Elsewhere.

Students' transition from school to university

In first-year classes in particular, students may feel uncomfortable and uncertain about participating actively in a class, because they are still finding their feet in a learning and teaching environment which differs considerably from what they were accustomed to at school. Those who are non-native speakers of English may struggle to cope with a language of instruction they had not before experienced. Those who found it possible to thrive in classrooms where relatively passive learning was the norm may not readily come to terms with a university setting which requires them to take greater responsibility and initiative. And those from cultural backgrounds where teachers were treated with great reverence may be reluctant to put forward contradictory views in a discussion or debate.

One strategy to address this challenge is through structured group activities, where roles and expectations are more formalised, and where students are not individually exposed but can contribute as part of a small working group or team. Another is to strive to create a climate for participation where students are constructively and sensitively encouraged and supported in their efforts to 'learn the ropes', and where there are opportunities to gain practice in new skills before undergoing formal assessments.

Unfamiliarity with a subject area and its conventions

There is a growing recognition that academic disciplines and subject areas are distinctive not simply in terms of the bodies of knowledge with which they are concerned as well as the methods of research and scholarship through which understanding is advanced. They are also typified by what Lee Shulman has famously called their 'subject pedagogies' (the characteristic methods by which the discipline is taught)² and by the particularised 'ways of thinking and practising' that are associated with 'doing the subject' and which students need gradually to master in their learning at university³.

Students encountering a subject for the first time – a common experience for most university students, not just those taking Common Core courses – are therefore quite likely to find themselves having to contend with new modes of understanding along with new bodies of knowledge. Not surprisingly, most will initially feel disoriented, and many will need time to adjust.

Here too, teachers can respond to the challenge through setting tasks which follow a clear structure, and by giving students space and time to acclimatise. The Common Core teachers we surveyed also placed a premium on overtly modelling the 'habits of mind' of their discipline, whether through exemplars of past students' work, directing students to an illustrative video, or in one case, role-playing a debate 'live' in front of their students.

Student silence and talkativeness

It has been contended that the grading students' contributions in class is to the detriment of the more introverted and shy student, falling prey to the assumption that "unless students are talking they are not learning"⁴. Two counter-arguments can be put forward. The first is that this is to underrate the expertise of tutors, who are valued by students for their skills in creating a safe, informal group atmosphere that encourages engaged participation and attentive listening, as Charles Anderson has shown⁵. The second, also evident in Anderson's study, is that accomplished tutors use students' tutorial contributions 'to draw in their more commonsense understandings towards expert positions within the discipline'. So long as a student remains silent, a tutor cannot help him or her to gain much-needed practice in communicating understanding and ideas at university level.

2 Shulman, L. S. (2005). Signature pedagogies in the professions. *Daedalus* 134.3: 52-59.

3 See for example: Hounsell, D. & Anderson, C. (2008). Ways of thinking and practicing in biology and history. Disciplinary aspects of teaching and learning environments. In C. Kreber (Ed.) *The university and its disciplines: Teaching and learning within and beyond disciplinary boundaries* (pp. 71-83). New York & London: Routledge.

4 See for example 'No place for introverts in the academy?' by Bruce Macfarlane, in the 25 September 2014 issue of Times Higher Education <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/no-place-for-introverts-in-the-academy/2015836.fullarticle>

5 For a summary and bibliographical details of the paper by Anderson, see the 'Perspectives from elsewhere' pages in this Briefing.

Taking stock

This Briefing concludes with nine summary questions designed to be helpful in assessing in-class participation wisely. They are not a blueprint, but prompts to reflection, whether you are considering introducing this form of assessment into a new or existing course you teach, or if it is a well-established part of your approach and you would like to take stock and think afresh about how you might go about it.

Acknowledgements

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Assessing in-class participation: Key questions

1. What are your main rationales for assessing in-class participation?
2. What learning outcomes would you see as associated with these rationales?
3. In assessing participation, how will you strike a balance between evaluating students' grasp of subject-matter and evaluating their mastery of the skills of effective class participation?
4. How could you best go about structuring task and activities to facilitate high-quality student engagement and interaction?
5. Given the backgrounds and prior experiences of the students, how could groups most appropriately be formed?
6. What kinds of involvement could not only help to foster engagement by students but also encourage them to take greater responsibility for their own learning?
7. When, where and how could students be given guidance, support and feedback that would enable them to fulfil their potential?
8. What criteria would be most appropriate in evaluating what the students will have learned?
9. What weighting in the overall grade for the course would be optimal, given the importance of encouraging constructive engagement while minimising any student anxieties about contributing?