

Assessing In-class Participation in Common Core Courses

PERSPECTIVES FROM ELSEWHERE



The dynamics of in-class participation

Quiet or questioning students across cultures (HK, the Middle East, and the Netherlands)

As problem-based learning is most widely used in medical education, this comparative case study investigated how students' cultural backgrounds are expressed in discussions and how they shape students' discussion behaviour and skills. Four cultural factors were found potentially to cause students to refrain from speaking up, asking questions, and challenging others in discussions: uncertainty and tradition, group relations and face, hierarchical relations, as well as achievement and competition. Six other contextual factors were found to either enhance or inhibit discussion behaviours: students' prior school education, scope of PBL implementation, students' personal characteristics, language of instruction, tutor behaviour, and assessment system. Because their participation in discussion was graded, the first year Hong Kong students overcame anxiety and became motivated to contribute to the discussion. On the other hand, the third year Hong Kong students were observed to be less active than the first-years. They tended not to try hard in participation after discovering that it was virtually impossible to fail the PBL assessment.

Frambach, J.M. et al. (2014). Quiet or questioning? Students' discussion behaviors in student-centered education across cultures. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39.6, 1001-1021.

Why students do or do not participate in the college classroom (USA)

This study reviewed previous research conducted on student participation in the college classroom. Relying almost exclusively on US research and with a particular focus on studies in communication journals, this review highlights the benefits of participation, classroom logistics, student confidence and personality traits, instructor's influence on classroom climate, sex difference, and participation in web-based courses. Interestingly, in contrast to the study by Dallimore et al. (see below), it concluded that cold-calling on students is not recommended.

Rocca, K.A. (2010). Student participation in the college classroom: An extended multidisciplinary literature review. *Communication Education*, 59.2, 185-213.

Structuring tutorial discussion, shaping students' understanding (UK)

This study of students' experiences of discussion-focused tutorials in the social sciences is based on observations and audio-recordings of fourteen tutorial groups, together with

interviews with over 50 of the students and ten of their tutors. The chapter discusses features of tutorials that, from the students' perspectives, promoted active participation and listening, ways in which tutors structured debate and shaped students' understanding, and notable differences between first- and final-year tutorials, the former calling for more tutor direction, whereas a more 'hands-off' approach could be taken to the latter.

Anderson, C. (2005). Enabling and shaping understanding through tutorials.' In F. Marton, D. Hounsell & N. Entwistle (Eds.) *The Experience of Learning: Implications for teaching and studying in higher education*, 3rd (Internet) ed., (pp. 184-197). Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment.

Placing a significant weight on graded participation and cold calling (USA)

This study of graduate business students' opinions of class participation was collected using end-of-course questionnaires in which students self-reported their participation in class discussions related to factors such as their expectations, satisfaction and communication skills. Participation weighted a significant one third of the grade. An interesting feature of this study is its discussion of the tutor's strategy of "cold calling" where the teacher would invite individual students at random to answer a question or respond to comment. In their responses, the students tended to see cold calling a helpful incentive to preparation and participation.

Dallimore, E.J. et al. (2004). Classroom participation and discussion effectiveness: student-generated strategies. *Communication Education*, 53.1, 103-115.

Participation in online learning

Peer facilitation of online discussions (HK)

A searching and thought-provoking analysis of three cases of the role of teacher and peer facilitation of asynchronous online discussions revealed that the students preferred tutor facilitation for keeping the discussion on track, resolving conflicts in the discussions, providing information particularly when the topic of discussion is new or complex, as well as motivating the discussion when students' participation wanes. On the other hand, the students preferred peer facilitation for greater freedom in voicing their own views, greater ownership in determining the direction of the discussion, and hands-on experience in facilitation. Practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Hew, K.F. (2015). Student perceptions of peer versus instructor facilitation of asynchronous online discussions: further findings from three cases. *Instructional Science* 43.1, 19-38.

Optimising participative learning online (HK)

In a Webinar, Brant Knutzen discusses how to build on a foundation for effective collaboration and communicative learning using Moodle, engaging students in blended formative learning. Links to the recording and slides are provided.

Knutzen, B. (2014, November 5). Designing effective assessment for participative learning online. *Transforming Assessment Webinar*. http://transformingassessment.com/events_5_november_2014.php

Fostering student engagement through peer assessment of online asynchronous group discussions (Australia)

In a small-scale study at Charles Darwin University nursing students in distance education were randomly assigned to groups of about 8 students, to use the discussion forum of Blackboard Learn. They posted a discussion in 250 words around a scenario; and in the following week they reviewed two or more postings from other students in their group, and then summarized the ideas of their discussion group. In the third week, students rated each posting against grade descriptors of a rubric, including originality and argument as criteria, using the star-rating tool in Blackboard. It was found that the students allocated lower marks than the teacher would have.

Bouchoucha, S. & Wozniak, H. (2010). Is peer assessment of asynchronous group discussions fostering skills relevant to our future graduates? In C.H. Steel et al. (Eds.), *Curriculum, technology & transformation for an unknown future* (pp. 113-118). *Proceedings ascilite Sydney 2010*.

Addressing challenges in assessing in-class participation

Participation and the perils of performativity (HK)

Deliberating at greater depth and more searching scholarship on questions he had earlier raised in his *Times Higher Education* article, Bruce Macfarlane focuses his critical lens on what he sees as three worrying trends in mass higher education: 'presenteeism' – rules on class attendance and assessment; 'learnerism' – an increasing emphasis on participation in class and in groups as part of learning and assessment regimes; and 'soulcraft' – the surveillance of students' emotional development and values. He argues that this unholy trinity has a negative impact on student rights to autonomy in learning. His list of 'assessment-related proxies for attendance' includes not only the grading of class contributions but also 'in-class tests, examinations and oral presentations'.

Macfarlane, B. (2015). Student performativity in higher education: converting learning as a private space into a public performance, *Higher Education Research & Development*, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2014.956697

Guidance on grading (Australia)

A practical guide which aims to help university teachers at UNSW to assess participation in ways that are equitable and robust. It outlines when to use this form of assessment, its benefits, the challenges raised, well-aligned strategies, and sources of further reading.

University of New South Wales (2014). *Assessment toolkit: Grading class participation*. Kensington: UNSW. <https://teaching.unsw.edu.au/assessing-classroom-participation>

Assessing participation fairly & reliably (Australia)

A project at Sydney University was undertaken to ensure that class participation in a large introductory commercial law course would be assessed fairly and reliably. Subjectivity was minimized by involving students in the specification of assessment criteria and they were asked to assess themselves and their peers. Formative feedback was given in mid-semester so that teachers could highlight strengths and students would have the opportunity, if needed, to take remedial action. There were some indications, however, that female students were graded less highly than males.

Dancer, D. & Kamvounias, P. (2005). Student involvement in assessment: a project designed to assess class participation fairly and reliably. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30.4, 445-454.

Blazing a trail, mapping the issues (Australia)

A trailblazing effort to identify and examine issues raised by the assessment of class participation, at a time when it was beginning to be widely adopted yet also when concerns had been surfacing about potential downsides as well as benefits. In addition to exploring the salient issues, the article also considers the reasons for using this form of assessment, its limitations, and how it can be used more effectively.

Armstrong, M. & Boud, D. (1983) Assessing participation in discussion: An exploration of the issues. *Studies in Higher Education* 8.1, 33-44.