

Classroom Participation

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Volumes of literature have been written regarding the value and importance of student participation in classroom discussion. Few, if any, instructors (particularly at the college level) would dispute the position that students who participate in class learn more. This is, after all, how most of us feel we learn the best. However, actual evidence to support this hypothesis seems somewhat lacking. Rather, for most educators, it is almost intuitive that creating an environment where students freely converse and share ideas cannot help but foster a better understanding of course material and an appreciation for what it means to be a mature learner and thinker. But educators must be cautious in their assertions. Today's teachers must be aware of the ever-changing nature of the classroom and the wide diversity of learners. We must continuously re-evaluate what we know to be the "truth" about education.

Before considering the importance of (or ways to illicit more) classroom participation, it is first necessary to define the term. Wade (1994) considered the "ideal class discussion" as one in which all students were participating, learning, and listening to others' ideas, comments, and questions. With this definition, it seems that it would still be possible to be passively engaged in the classroom experience. The intent however is to somehow force or preferably motivate students to become actively engaged in what is occurring in the classroom. Isenberg (1991) proposed small group discussions as one way to force students to become actively and decisively engaged in the classroom discussion. He stated that in these small groups, students "feel like they are becoming members in the discursive community." As Mortimer Ladler once noted, "All genuine learning is active, not passive. It involves the use of the mind, not just the memory. It is the process of discovery in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher." The challenge for teacher becomes, how do you illicit the type of active participation and healthy exchange of ideas that we expect in a college classroom?

Morgan makes the statement that “Critics have asserted that the traditional ‘stand and deliver’ style of teaching no longer does the job, that it fails to develop students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and that it suppresses natural creativity and curiosity (1999). According to Sadker and Sadker, even students recognize the value of classroom participation (1994). The teacher must also be aware of the types of social pressures that often motivate student behavior. For instance, fear of embarrassment or of being labeled a “know-it-all” or “teacher’s pet” may very well prevent the types of interactions that most teachers desire.

Larkin and Pines (2003) argue that the attempt to include students in the classroom discussion can sometimes have undesired effects, leading to what they term avoidance behavior. They do, however, offer several methods to illicit student interaction while countering the fear of being embarrassed, receiving social disapproval, and doing poorly in public that is sometimes prevalent in college-aged students, particularly those of the female persuasion (Larkin and Pines, 2003; Miller, 1995; 1996). Several authors seem to feel that gender and socioeconomic background have a strong correlation with how likely a student is to participate in classroom discussion (Fassinger, 1995; Krupnick, 1985; Crombie, 2003). If this observation is true, it begs the question as to whether or not these students are disadvantaged in terms of grades when classroom participation is included as a part of the overall assessment. Petress states that since there is a strong argument for increased student classroom activity, it should be a component of the student grade. He asserts that “such grades serve both as motivation and as reward for quality student classroom involvement” (2006). If classroom participation grades are to be included as a part of the overall student assessment, how is an instructor to determine what portion of the grade it should comprise?

Melvin and Lord (1995) noted that “class participation ranks among the most complex and subjective academic performances to evaluate.” While assessment of student interaction may be a useful motivator, it could be argued that this is only true in cases where the instructor clearly defines how such grades will be assigned and according to what criteria. Lyons (1989) warned that objective measurement of classroom participation is difficult. Instructors’ own personal biases and opinions may affect how they assess student participation (Armstrong & Boud, 1983). To avoid the effects of such biases, Armstrong and Boud suggested that instructors should distribute clear and explicit criteria which will be used to assess participation to students at the beginning of the semester (1983).

Should classroom participation make up for poor performance on graded events? To what extent should classroom participation be allowed to offset a lack of understanding demonstrated through more traditional assessments? How well does a lack of classroom participation correlate with poor academic performance and vice versa? These are all important questions that are difficult to answer.

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Annotated Readings

Meyers, D.M. (2003). The Impact of Virtual Office Hours on In-class Participation. Paper Presented at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

This paper highlights the need for teachers to continuously adapt to the ever-changing nature of their learner, and therefore the classroom. In an era where students are increasingly deficient in interpersonal skills, it may prove useful to leverage the new technologies that (at least for a percentage of students) have replaced casual conversation. Meyers suggests that teachers might reach out to students via the internet to promote student-teacher interactions outside of the traditional classroom. He poses the idea that students may feel more comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions in a "virtual classroom."

Moguel, D. (2004). What Does it Mean to Participate in Class?: Integrity and Inconsistency in Classroom Interaction. *Journal of Classroom Interaction, 39(1)*, 19-29.

This investigation attempts to answer the question, "How can a teacher education program enable teacher candidates to encourage greater participation and interactions in their classrooms?" This is an insightful article that reveals the perceptions of six candidates about to enter the teaching profession. It begs the question of where do new teachers get their ideas about classroom participation and do these ideas change over time? Moguel points out that teachers don't necessarily learn how to teach during the formal portion of their teaching education. Rather, they tend to imitate the teaching behavior that they have seen modeled since their entrance into the public education system at a very young age, despite what they intend to do or what behavior they might think they're displaying.

Pomerantz, E.D. (1998). What Do Students Learn From Classroom Discussion? Exploring the Effects of Instructional Conversations on College Students' Learning. Paper presented at the 48th Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference. Austin: December 2-5.

This study was intended to “investigate the relationship between classroom discussion and literacy development in a college developmental reading classroom.” It investigated the use of instructional conversation in a classroom full of students with learning disabilities or for whom English was not the primary language. In this study, both the students and teacher perceived many benefits of instructional conversations, including “greater text comprehension, learning about different perspectives, improved social and communication skills, and increased opportunities for students to share experiences and knowledge with each other and the teacher.” The author concludes that classroom participation alone may not be sufficient to improve student academic performance. He cautions that teachers should not allow themselves to trivialize the value of direct instruction, depending upon the needs of the student.

Reynolds, K.C., & Nunn, C.E. (1997). Engaging Classrooms: Student Participation and the Instructional Factors that Shape It. Paper presented at the AHSE Annual Meeting. Albuquerque: November 6-7.

This study investigated the frequency of interaction in undergraduate classrooms. It is particularly interesting in that it examines the differences in levels of participation between freshman and upperclassmen. Using survey data, the study also attempts to dissect the reasons that freshman either participate or remain silent in the classroom and compare this to the motivating factors that influence upperclassmen. Finally, the study attempts to categorize the instructor behaviors that both groups of students feel best encourage and reward their interaction.

Tai-Seale, T. & Thompson, S.B. (2000). Assigned Conversations. *College Teaching*, 48(1), 15-18.

This study draws attention to the widely shared view among teachers that students are increasingly less prepared for class. This lack of preparation undoubtedly has negative impacts on the value of classroom discussion. The authors cite research debunking the myth that

“learning primarily occurs in the classroom.” They take the (perhaps controversial) position that “courses in which the majority of learning occurs in class are courses in which relatively little new content is learned. Tai-Seale and Thompson share the results of their study of the use of “assigned conversations” where one or more students are assigned responsibility to discuss a portion of the out-of-class reading assignment. Their findings are quite intriguing and warrant further investigation by all teachers, especially at the college level.