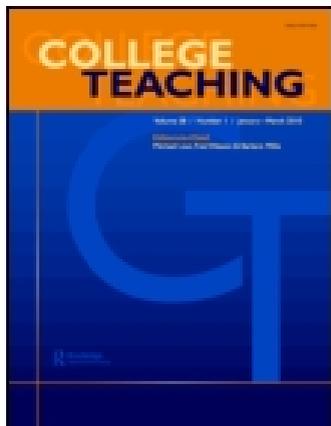


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### The "Why" of Class Participation: A Question Worth Asking

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# THE “WHY” OF CLASS PARTICIPATION

## A QUESTION WORTH ASKING

Raymond C. Jones

**Abstract.** It is not unusual to find elaborate schemes for compelling and assessing class participation. Although participation can take many forms, in practice it is most synonymous with discussion, which, at its core, is about student engagement. But with what should the students be engaged? When we make class participation a requirement and assess it, students must then produce evidence. But of what? The author examines the intentions behind class participation, considers the means and associated meanings of its implementation, and suggests new ways for professors to think about and justify it, with our productive learning outcomes in mind.

**Keywords:** *assessment, class participation, course requirements, student engagement*

Given its prevalence in course syllabi (Bean and Peterson 1998; Chu and Kim 1999; Gopinath 1999), class participation clearly registers as important to faculty. We codify our values for a course in the grading scheme and, if appropriate, a corresponding descriptive rubric for performance. When something

is required, graded, or rewarded, students know that the professor thinks it matters. We signal to our students the relative importance of various components by the weight we attach to them, which is not lost on students. Class participation is so often included as a course expectation that faculty must value it, and it is therefore worth considering further.

In developing one of my first graduate courses several years ago, I received a great deal of advice from those who had taught similar courses for similar students. Their warnings convinced me that I

had better explicitly describe for students how I expected them to perform in my class, and in developing a rubric to do so, I discovered what I truly valued: (1) quality of tasks, (2) completeness of tasks, (3) timeliness of tasks, (4) attendance, and (5) class participation.

In an ideal world, all the components of a course will add up to a larger change in students we wish to see happen: the ways of knowing and doing with which our class will equip them. The issue at stake for us here is whether we are, in fact, valuing what we think we are and getting what we hoped we would through class participation. For some, the goal of participation requirements is to cause students to engage in the course ideas as they encounter them. For others, its purpose is accountability for having engaged with previously encountered ideas (e.g., assigned readings, preceding lectures). I argue that we need to explore the intent and types of class participation as a means of arriving at what should be the heart of the matter: the thoughtful engagement by students with the core concepts of the course.

### The Intent behind Class Participation

#### *Accountability*

If we fear that students are not doing the assigned readings and that they are therefore “unprepared” for class, we might impose a class participation requirement to hold them accountable.

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This may involve some sort of data collection (i.e., a roster where we check off whether students can answer questions when we call on them), or it may remain impressionistic (Bean and Peterson 1998). For students, however, it may be unclear what they should be prepared to do. In other words, does the assigned reading enable or empower them to accomplish something meaningful in class, or is it the backdrop for or preview of what the professor will be talking about?

#### *Involve More Learners*

Whether it is to shift from the domination of teacher talk to more student talk or to broaden participation beyond the four or five eager learners who always do the talking, instructors may say their class participation expectations are meant to involve more learners. When the intent is to get more students to speak up, it is important to examine the means by which this happens. We can ask more questions of more students in a shorter period of time if the questions themselves are simple and straightforward. But if students come to understand that with experience they need to display simple, rather than complex, understandings, it will cause them to read subsequent readings more simply. Therefore, it behooves us to consider whether there is a trade-off between getting more students talking and the importance of what we have them talking about.

#### *Stimulate Thinking: Recall of Information*

To get a lecture started, or in an effort to move the lecture along, an instructor might pose questions to the class in general, either about a previous lecture or about a reading. These questions tend to invite recall of information, but usually do not elevate the discourse to a complex level. Although it may accomplish the goal of having previous ideas mentioned before moving on to the new content, these start-of-class questions seldom get most students thinking or focused. How many students will actually speak? And how many ideas will these individual students show you they have thought about? In practice, this type of discussion involves one student with one idea at the time. What are the majority of students doing and thinking about?

#### *Stimulate Thinking: Grapple with Ideas*

From time to time, a professor may put forward a challenging question or prompt and invite students to weigh in on it after a few moments' thought. The intent is to stimulate thinking and to move the consideration of the day's concepts into the realm of conceptual development or generalization; answering the question may require students to connect ideas or consider their application in new or different contexts. Those teaching days when we feel the most satisfaction, and the most energized, often involve these kinds of discussions in class. But which students actually participated in this heady conversation? Was it the same ones who would catch you in the hall or come by the office to have the same kind of discussion? What evidence do you have about what most students were doing, or how most students were thinking, during the otherwise delightful give-and-take?

### **Types of Class Participation**

#### *Initiate-Respond-Evaluate*

As described by Cazden (1988), Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (also known as I-R-E) is the pattern for most classroom discussions. The instructor initiates discussion by posing a question or dilemma; a student responds; the instructor evaluates or comments to indicate whether the answer is in the right direction or not (e.g., "Good, Shauna," or "Can anyone help Jon out?"). The discussion remains teacher centered and teacher controlled.

#### *Cold-Calling*

As described by Bean and Peterson (1998), cold-calling involves calling on students at random to answer a question posed by the instructor. (They note that this method may be most recognizable from the film and television series *The Paper Chase*; it was the preferred tactic of the illustrious Professor Kingsfield.) Some faculty like to think that cold-calling is Socratic in nature; however, is it in practice? When it is more Socratic, it is also limited to one student at a time; what are all the other students doing at this time? If the primary motivation for using cold-calling is to hold students accountable for reading, then the cold-calling questions will require the conjuring up of recall-oriented information. If

the primary motivation is to hold students accountable for their thinking, then the questions should not really be "cold." A serious limitation of cold-calling is that we have to balance the number of students we can target against how much time is spent listening to their answers (and sometimes provoking them further). If we are not able to call on all students, then they are encouraged to gamble about the likelihood of being cold-called; also, once they have been called on, they know that there will be a respite from accountability before they will be targeted again. Although it has been suggested that professors can evaluate students' responses based on the complexity of the question (using, for instance, Bloom's taxonomy [1956], essentially to Jeopardy-ize the process and award more points for harder questions), it raises serious issues of record keeping.

#### *Open and Unstructured Talking*

With open and unstructured talking, the instructor tosses out a deeper or more probing question and waits for a student to respond thoughtfully and fully. Class sessions that most energize us are often characterized by this kind of thoughtful interplay between professor and students; we see the discussion progress to higher levels, and we know that ideas are being considered and critically examined. The problem then arises of who is actually participating. Although we may call this whole-class discussion (Bean and Peterson 1998), a simple collection of data will probably prove otherwise. If we track who, exactly, participates, and how much, we will likely find that it is the same consistent few. As noted earlier, for some of those students, all we have done is give an in-class forum to discussions that these select students would want to have after class. When it is whole-class discussion, is it the whole class?

#### *Stimulated Discussion*

Although we may sometimes feel our students are not doing any thinking in our classes or about our readings, they are doing all kinds of thinking—just not about what we want them to be thinking about, or not in the direction we were hoping. There are simple ways to stimulate the thinking that informs and fills classroom discourse, and fortunately these means

can serve the dual purpose of provoking and capturing the thinking on which discussion can be based. Stimulated discussion usually involves a prompt or task, completed by all students, in advance of the conversation in class. Examples include the following:

*Note Cards.* The students write a question about or a reaction to what they are reading in the assigned passages.

*Sticky Notes.* Students can note questions, compose summaries of key ideas, tease out the meaning of significant vocabulary, agree or disagree with the author's thesis, and note connections to concepts or experiences outside the text.

*Three-Column Notes.* Based on an idea from Santa, Havens, and Maycumber (1996), students might expand their Cornell/two-column notes (Pauk 1974) to three columns: the left column would be for main ideas or the key questions; the middle column is for notes from the reading; the right column is reserved for what can be added during class discussion. We are not always sure how to connect readings beforehand to the class conversation or lecture; three-column notes make that connection more likely and clearer.

*Writing Prompt.* Given a question or provocation, students are asked to write for three to five minutes. This brings their thoughts to their brain's front burner and records them on paper for reference in the discussion that follows.

*Brainstorming.* Using a simple prompt ("What do you know about \_\_\_\_?" "What are some possible results of \_\_\_\_?"), students list associated ideas that are grounded in the reading or based on their hunches about larger meanings. The brainstorming can be loosely structured, or the instructor may use a brainstorming strategy such as ABC Brainstorm,<sup>1</sup> where students list words or phrases associated with the topic, each starting with a different letter of the alphabet.

#### *Structured Discussion*

When the topic is engaging and the students are eager and motivated, less structure

may be needed. To support students in participating in class discussions, however, professors might draw on some easy techniques for providing a framework to increase the chance of productive conversation. Structured discussion simply means that a process is employed to help people perform as intended. For instance, Frank Lyman's Think-Pair-Share strategy is easy, quick, and effective. First, the professor poses a question and students are given a minute just to think about it (they can also jot down their ideas). Then, they pair up to compare notes and share answers. Finally, the professor can call on different pairs to share their combined or best ideas (ctd. in Kagan 1994).

Note cards or sticky notes about the reading might serve as the starting points of small-group or class discussion. An excellent former professor of mine, Robert McNergney, would collect our note cards and then use them to lead our seminar discussion.<sup>2</sup> We were more interested in participating because the questions were ours, so it felt like the discussion belonged to us. An alternative is to have students, in groups of three to five, use the question or reaction they wrote as the starting point of conversation; the goal is to work toward answers or resolution. In my classes, we usually devote ten to fifteen minutes to these discussions. To move back into whole-class activity, I ask each group to pick out the note card about which they spent the most time talking, which is then posed to the full class. I have found over the years that the questions brought by the students tend to focus on the key concepts I wanted us to talk

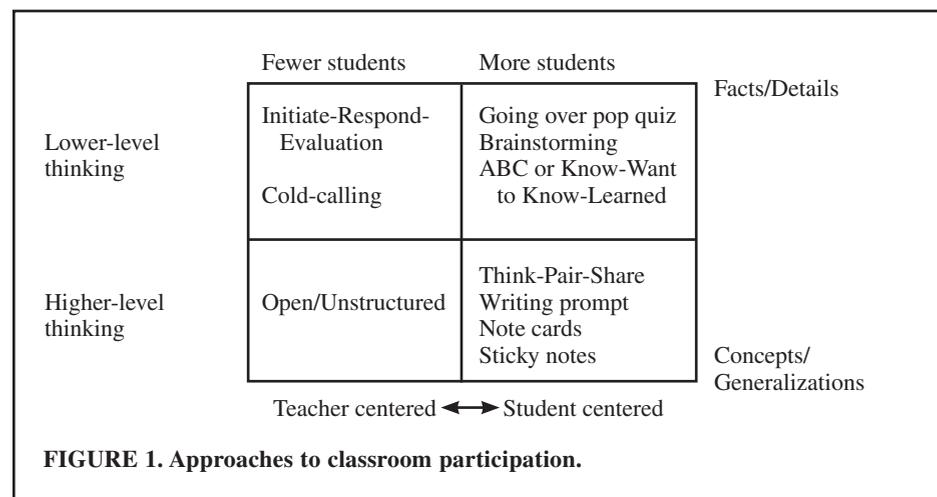
about anyway; the learners were engaged and enthusiastic because their questions initiated the conversation.

### Implications for Practice

It would seem that I-R-E and cold-calling involve fewer students overall and focus more on lower-level thinking. Open or unstructured talking may push the conversation to higher levels, but in most classes, relatively few students will be involved. Stimulated and structured discussions, however, invite fuller participation and higher-level thinking. A matrix illustrating this cross-comparison of the intent and nature of participation is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1 also illustrates the shift from teacher-centered activity to student-centered activity, and it aligns the relative level of thinking with the structure of the content knowledge. To some, these labels would constitute a redundancy; for others, however, it is a restatement that helps us uncover the class participation contradictions between our intentions, our means, and our results. We might say we want greater involvement by students, but if it is serial and singular in nature, rather than concurrent and integrated, we are limiting, rather than expanding, involvement and reasoning. We may say we want students to really think about what they are reading, but our next-day questioning could stymie this if it rewards recall instead of analysis.

Because my field is teacher education, I have particular overall goals in mind for promoting and provoking student involvement in each class meeting; as I reconsider



these, it seems they are not limited only to preparing future teachers. The following ideas about students' participation might resonate across disciplines.

Students should share, rather than withhold, their insights. Both the professor and the other class members should be able to profit and move forward thanks to the contributions of individual students. The obligation is to give as well as to take.

Students should give evidence of their active and contextual thinking. In a teaching methods course, I need to know how my students think about teaching, what they believe about teaching, and how they will likely act on what they are learning. I have found that this is especially important when it is time to match student teachers with cooperating teachers.

Students should examine their beliefs and expose them to critical review by others. A major goal of my course is for students to examine their beliefs about teaching and to subject them to the thoughtful and evaluative consideration by others. Students will begin to take responsibility for teaching students as part of their internship within two months of completing the methods course; this is a serious and important enterprise. The student teachers will act on the beliefs they possess, so the class participation expectation

requires them to take stands and be challenged by their colleagues.

Students must find and use their voice as emerging professionals. In so doing, students reveal their core philosophy, decision-making process, and thought processes. They begin to establish a presence as a teacher, an important transition away from being simply a student.

These core notions about the purpose behind participation can serve more than just teacher education. All courses can benefit from students sharing their insights. Students will advance their thinking if they are given opportunities to produce evidence of it in the context of central course concepts. Their thoughts and conclusions deserve "publication" and critical review, to stand or fall on their merits. The discipline of study has ways of thinking and talking into which students should be socialized (i.e., to think and speak not just professionally, but like the professionals in that field).

We elevate "knowing," a common goal for college classes, to a higher and more meaningful level when it both serves and is the product of thinking and contemplation. Class participation can be a way both to increase knowledge and to apply it contextually; we must know what our intentions really are and choose carefully the means for achieving them.

## NOTES

1. More about ABC Brainstorm can be found at <http://www.readingquest.org>.
2. See also Frederick 1989.

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# WRITE ME A LETTER

## CHALLENGING ANONYMITY IN LARGE-ENROLLMENT CLASSES

Jan Armstrong

Although I have taught large enrollment, introductory college classes in human development and education for more than twenty years, I am still anxious on the first day. Who are they—these new faces looking at me with varying degrees of interest and enthusiasm? How to begin? How to set a tone of mutual respect and collegiality so that we will be able to learn the subject matter with each other, from each other? After reviewing the course syllabus, answering questions, and giving students time to meet a few classmates in small groups on the first day of class, I hand out sheets of lined paper and ask them to write an informal introduction letter: “Tell me a little bit about yourself and why you are taking this course. Tell me whatever you think I should know about you.” These brief introduction letters help me begin to get to know something about the lives behind the sea of faces.

I read the letters carefully after class, jotting down names and keywords to capture each student's unique and often remarkable story. Drawing on this rich collection of narratives, I spend a few minutes at the beginning of subsequent class sessions introducing individual students to the class. Taking care not to cause anyone embarrassment, I incorporate noteworthy, humorous, surprising, and uncontroversial information into

these introductions (pets, jobs, volunteer work, long commutes, recent and impending weddings, parenthood, hobbies, athletics, and other activities). Judging by the smiles, students enjoy watching me play the talk show host, introducing some of my lecture hall “guests” to each other. The letters remain with me, kept in a file with other important class records. They provide a helpful resource when students ask for letters of reference—sometimes months or years later.

Like all occupations, teaching has its hazards. Teaching large lecture classes is one of them; yellowed lecture notes is another; forgetting about the lives behind the faces is yet another. Having students write an informal, “friendly letter” (Parkinson 2005) on the first day of class gives me an opportunity to get to know them while gently redirecting their attention from “What do I have to do?” to “Why am I here?” and “What should this professor know about me?” What may matter most is the gesture itself—the effort to get to know students, to let them present themselves to me, be heard, taken seriously, appreciated, encouraged to get to know one another. Does it matter what they say? Yes and no. After reading all the letters collected on the first day of class, I have started to get to know my students, but only just begun.

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