

The Participation Log: Assessing Students' Classroom Participation

Tony Docan-Morgan

Assessment
UPdate



Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education

LIKE MANY INSTRUCTORS IN HIGHER education, I expect my students to participate actively in the classroom—namely, to contribute meaningfully to discussion questions posed to the entire class and to work through applied problems and activities in small groups. The benefits of classroom participation are clear: “students who actively participate in the learning process learn more than those who do not” (Weaver and Qi 2005, 570). Further, many college instructors perceive student classroom participation as a factor in learning (Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006) and assign students participation grades (Bean and Peterson 1998; Rogers 2013). However, classroom participation is difficult to assess, in part because it is difficult to track in a reliable manner (Armstrong and Boud 1983; Rogers 2013). My own experiences confirm many of these findings.

During my first ten years of college teaching, I advocated that my students participate regularly in class, delineated specific expectations for classroom participation in course syllabi, and recorded the quality and quantity of students' participation after each class session. However, I came to realize the difficulty of assessing students' participation while they worked in small groups. Although I could listen in on groups' conversations, it was simply impossible to observe and assess the quality of each student's contribution to the group. Further, I began teaching larger classes, sometimes

totaling 125 students or more, making it unmanageable for me to assess each student's classroom participation. In response, I developed a “participation log,” which students use to record their participation, reflect on improving their participation, and demonstrate to me that they are participating meaningfully in class. In short, the log allows students to record, self-assess, and work toward improving their participation in class, and aids me in assessing student participation, how students are processing course material, and how I can improve my teaching.

group-mates questions, and brainstorm additional ideas. Do not shortchange discussions or activities by finishing early.

I also inform students that they will keep a log of their participation. We discuss the log's purpose for the student—to demonstrate an accurate record of the quality and quantity of participation, and to assess and work toward improving one's classroom participation. I also highlight the utility of the log from my perspective—it allows me to assess student participation and understanding of course material, as well as how I can

Reading and reflecting on students' self-assessments has also improved my skill as a facilitator of classroom discussions and activities.



On the first day of class, we discuss participation expectations outlined in the syllabus. Some of these expectations include:

- Making a substantive oral contribution during class lecture or large-class discussion at least once a week (e.g., answering questions posed by the instructor, bringing up related and relevant information, linking classroom discussions to assigned readings).
- Staying on task in dyads, small groups, and activities. When given a task or question to discuss, work to make meaningful and course content-driven contributions, ask

improve instruction. I provide students with a template of the log as a Word document and recommend that students update their logs once or twice a week (see Table 1).

I require students to submit their logs at mid-semester and at the end of the semester. Both submissions are graded. The logs are useful for gauging the quality and quantity of each student's participation and their perception of how their participation aids classroom discussions. I find that many students' self-assessments at mid-semester focus on how they need to improve (i.e., I need to participate more frequently and consistently; I should link discussion

Table 1. Log Template	
1. <i>Participation during lecture or large class discussion.</i> Note that this type of participation refers to making comments heard by the entire class. Students should log approximately 10 specific examples and ensure that they are spread out over the course of the semester.	
Date	What did you contribute to lecture or large class discussion? Report what you shared specifically and your perception of how, if at all, your contribution aided the flow of the lecture or discussion, as well as the comment's relevance to the lecture or large class discussion.
2. <i>Participation in dyads, small groups, and activities.</i> Log at least 10 specific examples and ensure that they are spread out over the course of the semester.	
Date	What did you contribute to the dyad, small group, and/or activity? Summarize how you participated, and your perception of how, if at all, your participation aided the interaction.
3. <i>Self-assessment, reflection, and improvement.</i> Log two self-assessments of your performance as a participant in the class, focusing on your strengths and how you can improve. Reflect on participation expectations outlined in the syllabus, as well as the quality and quantity of your participation in class. The first self-assessment should be completed between weeks 3 and 7, and the second should be completed between weeks 8 and 12. Each self-assessment should be at least five sentences in length.	
Date	Reflection

responses directly to class readings), and often need little elaboration from me. I provide individual, written feedback to students, which frequently corroborates their self-assessment and/or offers additional recommendations for successful participation (i.e., since your group sometimes finishes the activity and discussion early, work to ask group members to elaborate on their points; push the discussion by considering so-

lutions that have not been considered). I rarely am confronted with a “fudged” participation log, in part because I remind students that I also monitor and record their contributions.

Having reviewed hundreds of students’ participation logs for the past two years, I am more aware of their experiences as active (and sometimes inactive) classroom participants, and as a result have improved my teach-

ing practice. The mid-semester and end-of-semester logs provide useful, albeit indirect, assessment data regarding student learning. Some students, for example, articulate confusion about course concepts in their logs. I am able to revisit and clarify course material at mid-semester and revise classroom discussion questions and activities for the future. Reading and reflecting on students’ self-assessments has also improved my skill as a facilitator of classroom discussions and activities. I am more sensitive to and aware of students’ voices in my classes, and better equipped to respond to and synthesize student contributions. ■

References

- Armstrong, M., and Boud, D. 1983. “Assessing Participation in Discussion: An Assessment of the Issues.” *Studies in Higher Education* 8 (1): 33–44.
- Bean, J. C., and Peterson, D. 1998. “Grading Classroom Participation.” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 74 (Summer): 33–40.
- Carini, R. M., Kuh, G. D., and Klein, S. P. 2006. “Student Engagement and Student Learning: Testing the Linkages.” *Research in Higher Education* 47 (1): 1–32.
- Rogers, S. L. 2013. “Calling the Question: Do College Instructors Actually Grade Participation?” *College Teaching* 61: 11–22.
- Weaver, R. R., & Qi, J. 2005. “Classroom Organization and Participation: College Students’ Perceptions.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 76 (5): 570–601.

Tony Docan-Morgan is an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.