

Clear Criteria: A Good Way to Improve Participation

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I continue to be impressed by the need for teachers to clarify common aspects of instruction instead of assuming that students' understanding of what they entail are the same as ours. Participation is a good example. How often is it defined in the course syllabus? How often is it characterized beyond the basics when it's discussed at the beginning of the course or at different times throughout the semester? We do probably agree on the essentials—questions, answers, and comments—but much more than that is needed if classroom interaction is to realize its potential as a student engagement strategy. Here's an example of the degree of clarification I think we should be after:

"The final criteria for assessment of class participation ...

1. **Preparation:** the extent of your reading, analyzing and understanding of the material, demonstrated by contribution to discussion.
2. **Contribution to discussion:** the extent to which you volunteered answers, asked relevant questions, expressed your own opinions and analyzed the contributions of others.
3. **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.
4. **Communication skills:** the quality of your expression, clarity, conciseness, use of appropriate vocabulary, confidence.
5. **Attendance:** includes punctuality." (Dancer and Kamvounias, p. 448)

Would you be surprised to learn that set of criteria was generated by students? And their input was solicited via an easy, straightforward method. It started with a general discussion of participation. Then students were asked (anonymously) to submit three criteria for assessing participation. From their more than 40 suggestions, these five categories and descriptions were generated.

Should attendance be considered a part of participation? You can't participate if you aren't present. I wonder if including it isn't a kind of tacit recognition of the value of being present, not just physically, but mentally attentive, listening, processing, and responding nonverbally. If that's the case, it's a good example of a criterion that merits clarification. On the other hand, in an early article on assessing participation, Armstrong and Boud offer an interesting comparison. They say that giving points for class attendance is like giving students credit for including their names on their papers.

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Whether attendance counts toward participation or not, the benefit of more clearly delineated participation criteria is that they develop student awareness of participation, especially if the criteria are something they've had a hand in creating. That awareness is further deepened if participation assessment includes a self-evaluation component. The Dancer and Kamvounias article reports on their participation assessment project, during which around week 7

students rated themselves on each of the criteria and added comments justifying their assessments. In the multiple sections of this course, taught by different teachers, those self-assessments were returned with teacher comments, but their ratings were withheld. The authors used this approach based on the belief that comments without ratings encouraged student reflection and a focus on their performance. Although not shared, it's not terribly surprising that the teacher assessments were lower than student self-assessments. But it's the opportunity for student reflection that's important here.

At the end of the course, students once again used the criteria. This time they provided an assessment of their peers and another self-assessment. There were high correlations between those peer ratings and the teacher's final assessment. Even though students overrated their contributions—probably because they were thinking more about the grade they wanted to get rather than the one they deserved—the authors have made this assessment process a permanent part of the course. Clear criteria and the opportunity to use the criteria are actions that communicate the importance of participation. Developing an accurate understanding of one's contributions to the class and in groups is a process and not one that is developed at all when participation criteria are not stated and are only assessed summatively at the end of the course.

References:

Dancer, D. and 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.

Armstrong, M. and Boud, D., (1983). Assessing participation in discussion: An exploration of the issues. *Studies in Higher Education*, 8 (1), 33-44.