

Assessing Student Participation



in the Classroom

by John A. Craven III and Tracy Hogan

We know that students should participate constructively in the classroom. In fact, most of us probably agree that a significant portion of a student's grade should come from his or her participation. However, like many teachers, you may find it difficult to explain to students how you assess their participation. Keep reading to learn the importance of student participation and clear communication of your expectations. In Figure 1, you will find a helpful rubric you can adapt and use in your classroom.

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Why promote student participation?

Meaningful learning takes place when students are engaged—that is, when students demonstrate interest, motivation, and participation in the process of learning (Guthrie and Alvermann 1999). In fact, the *National Science Education Standards* advocate a much more active role of the student in the learning process (NRC 1996), and research suggests that

- successful classroom management depends on the teacher’s ability to maximize the time that students are actively engaged in academic activities (Brophy 1998);
- classroom discourse provides important connections for learning and supplies the foundation for knowledge organization, reflective thought, and extension of knowledge (Bruning, Schraw, and Ronning 1998); and
- active learning is linked to students’ ability to apply knowledge to new contexts (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000).

Despite the widespread call for increased student-to-student interactions, cooperative learning, student questions and questioning, and student conversation in the classroom, the traditional role of the teacher often prevents these changes (Penick and Bonnstetter 1996), perhaps because

- many teachers want their students to participate in cooperative groups, but they do not know how to hold individual students accountable for their actions;
- students themselves may not have received instruction on appropriate roles and behaviors for class participation; or
- teachers may allot a certain percent or portion of a student’s final grade for participation assessment, but they do not conceive of a way to satisfactorily “measure” that participation.

A solution to these issues is to evaluate student participation through a performance assessment.

A method of participation assessment

Performance assessments are becoming useful evaluation tools for teachers (Popham 1999). A rubric, for example, measures a student’s

performance through carefully defined criteria across different achievement levels, which makes it valuable to both you and your students. As research suggests, effective classroom management is established, in part, by clearly communicating expectations to students and defining acceptable levels of performance (Good and Brophy 2000). To create a classroom environment where student participation is high, we suggest that you introduce and thoroughly discuss your rubric before you conduct any assessment.

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Creating and using the rubric

When creating a rubric, one of the first goals is to identify criteria to evaluate student actions. Consider the observable qualities that demonstrate superior motivation, interest, and habits of inquiry. Those qualities should include

- actively participating in all discussions and investigations;
- seeking out relevant resources and sharing them with the class;
- being prepared for classroom activities and discussions, including required readings;
- being responsive to course requirements;
- being receptive to constructive criticism; and
- contributing positively to the classroom environment.

FIGURE 1**An assessment rubric for class participation**

Criteria	Exceeds expectations (5 points)	Meets expectations (3 points)	Fails to meet expectations (1 point)
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raises relevant questions and shares ideas with peers Offers clear and concise oral and written presentation of personal ideas and understanding, indicating that time has been devoted to thinking about the topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occasionally participates in group discussions, but rarely initiates or accepts a leadership role in guiding the group Does not elaborate on his or her understanding Often does not complete expression of his or her thoughts or ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides no oral or written evidence of understanding activity or discussion topics Never or rarely raises relevant questions Never or rarely provides oral or written communication
Sharing sources and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brings sources of information to the class to share with teachers or peers Brings resources, such as activities, materials, or literature, that can be used to extend the learning activities of the class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes reference to outside sources of information and resources, but does not take the initiative to bring them to class to share with others Is unable to provide evidence that he or she has looked for outside sources and resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Never or rarely brings in outside resources that could enhance the learning experiences of others
Openness to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accepts class assignments and requirements with a positive attitude Actively seeks (by asking questions or speculating) connections between course requirements and goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reluctantly accepts class assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rejects or dismisses class assignments as meaningless or boring Cannot make connections between class requirements and goals of the instructor
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listens to others; encourages others to contribute ideas; accepts alternative perspectives; is tolerant of the shortcomings of others; and helps others to succeed in class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is tolerant of others, but often dominates the group activity or discussion Listens to the ideas of others, but generally maintains personal views and ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dismisses the thoughts and ideas of others; possibly uses rude or abusive language to ridicule Offers ideas that are limited to his or her personal opinions

Criteria	Exceeds expectations (5 points)	Meets expectations (3 points)	Fails to meet expectations (1 point)
Accepts and provides constructive criticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positively accepts constructive criticism and incorporates it in his or her approach to learning Offers constructive criticism and critiques, including viable suggestions for improvement, to his or her teacher and peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accepts constructive criticism, but does not incorporate it for improving targeted behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often or always rejects constructive criticism Offers no viable alternatives to other's suggestions
Material preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes class materials readily available and accessible without causing interruption of activities or discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regularly forgets some materials or does not prepare fully; or, prepares for class, but is unable to retrieve his or her materials without disruption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistently is unprepared for class
Academic preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refers to relevant literature or readings to support ideas and arguments during discussions Demonstrates awareness of course and teacher expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refers to concepts or topics related to the activity or discussion topic, but provides incomplete written or oral responses Expresses opinions that may have merit, but is unable to support them with evidence from classroom work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is unable to respond correctly to questions regarding required readings Offers responses that are consistently wrong or meaningless Expresses surprise or confusion when probed for his or her understanding
Class presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequently volunteers to participate in classroom activities Demonstrates his or her focus on classroom activities by appropriate eye contact and alert posture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occasionally participates in group discussions Provides ideas or comments that are largely restricted to reiterations of other's ideas or comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sits passively in class Does not participate in group discussions Does not pay attention to classroom activities
Score: ___/40			

We have found that students respond very well to teacher expectations when they have concrete examples of participation.

After establishing these criteria, define each in terms of high, middle, and low achievement. This step is important for communicating expectations clearly to students.

Finally, to determine a student's participation grade, add the point values that best describe his or her behavior for each criterion. For our rubric, the maximum total point value is 40 points, but you can adjust it to fit any scale.

In general, we have found that students respond very well to teacher expectations when they have concrete examples of participation. Often, we found that we can improve student participation simply by asking students to review the rubric at the beginning of a semester to remind them of the characteristics and qualities of an engaged student.

When to assess your students

You can use the rubric for formative assessment (which is useful for helping students understand what needs improvement) and summative assessment (which is useful for understanding the degree to which a student has mastered participation). However, when and where the evaluation takes place is up to you. You might consider assessing your students

- on a periodic basis throughout the semester;

- during cooperative classroom group work; or
- during individual or group work on extended projects.

Additionally, you can ask students to conduct self- or peer-assessments using the rubric.

In Tracy's Earth science class at Louis Armstrong Middle School, she evaluated her students within the first few weeks of school, at midterm, and in the final two weeks of the semester. Each student's participation grade made up 15 percent of his or her semester grade.

Conclusion

Assessing a student's participation in class must be an integral part of any teacher's approach to instruction. The importance of this assessment grows as your expectations for student engagement increase during the learning process. However, assessing students' participation should not become an all-consuming task. Therefore, it is up to you and your students to tailor the rubric to your classroom's needs.

References

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