



Assessment Toolkit

Grading Class Participation

Never stand still

Teaching @UNSW

Overview

Teachers often include the assessment of classroom participation—or classroom contribution, as it is sometimes called—in an assessment strategy to encourage students to participate in class discussion, and to motivate students to do the background reading and preparation for a class session. When you assess participation in classroom discussion, you also encourage and reward development of oral skills, and group skills such as interacting and cooperating with peers and a tutor. Classroom participation can encompass active learning in a lab, studio, tutorial, team or group, online (e.g. in eportfolios and Learning Management Systems) or in role-plays and simulations.



'Grading class participation signals to students the kind of learning and thinking an instructor values' (Bean & Peterson)

When to use

It is possible to assess classroom participation in a wide variety of learning contexts:

- undergraduate and postgraduate coursework where students need to develop practical and generic skills as well as to assimilate a body of theoretical knowledge
- postgraduate clinical programs (such as in medicine, psychology, social work and so on) where personal qualities and interpersonal and communication skills are crucial learning outcomes
- humanities based courses in which written and spoken discourse and discussion is an integral part of the learning process
- courses which traditionally privilege the delivery of a large body of content can benefit from a more student-centred approach based on assessing classroom participation
- online learning where students are expected to take part in activities such as blogs, wikis, discussion board and chat rooms.

With appropriate consideration of curriculum design and learning outcomes, the assessment of classroom participation can be used in any course.

Benefits

When students see that their participation is being graded regularly and consistently, they adjust their study habits so as to be well prepared for active class participation. This can be a benefit for students and staff.

Benefits of classroom participation for student learning:

- Increases motivation, as students need to take responsibility for their own learning
- Encourages students to prepare for class and to do the weekly readings, lab notes and studio preparation
- Encourages students to be active participants in classroom activities
- Encourages students to think and reflect on issues and problems that relate to the class, including lab and studio preparation

- Encourages students to develop oral, aural and language communication skills and to demonstrate them in their interactions and co-operation with peers and educators.
- Fosters the development of a student's communication and presentation skills in individual and group presentations
- Encourages participation and social interaction in the sharing of ideas and concepts
- Develops respect for others' points of view in cooperative and collaborative learning environments
- Develops group and team skills
- Develops students' capacity to critique peers' responses in a supportive and collegial environment
- Through fostering students' active involvement in their own learning, increases what is remembered, how well it is assimilated, and how the learning is used in new situations.

Benefits of classroom participation for enhancing teaching:

- Creates a fair and equitable environment that gives all students an opportunity to participate.
- Aids in creating a valid and reliable assessment that clearly details what is expected of students in the course outline
- Requires both explicit marking criteria and holistic rubrics, which provide a foundation for students to achieve and get feedback that is timely and specific to the task
- Assists in developing a reliable assessment task because it requires consistency, a standards-based approach and a clear articulation of the teacher's expectations

Challenges

Assessment of classroom participation can be a highly subjective form of assessment, where there may be little evidence outside the classroom to support the judgments made on individuals' performance. The role of teachers can be problematic, as they are required to both facilitate and mark the learning. The assessment of the class participation may be hampered by a teacher's lack of skills and experience in facilitating active learning in classrooms.

A range of issues may also affect the fairness of the assessment strategy. When students do not participate, it may not be because they are not prepared; they may be shy, or classroom dynamics may be problematic, allowing, for example, other students to dominate. There may be cultural or language problems, and/or gender issues. Students may be anxious about classroom participation being assessed, and this may well change the nature of the classroom interactions. These challenges can be difficult for the students and the staff.

Challenges for students include:

- Assessment of participation can create tension, thus inhibiting active participation and contribution to discussion or other activities.
- Student contributions may also be affected by class size, group dynamics and other factors external to the purpose of the assessment.
- Some international students find it difficult to participate in active classrooms due to cultural inhibitions and face-saving concerns; students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESBs), for instance, may not be confident in their spoken language ability and may feel shy about actively participating in a lab, preparing a presentation in a class or speaking in public, especially in front of many native speakers. (See [Responding to Cross-cultural Diversity](#).)

Challenges for staff include:

- Participation may be hard to assess objectively unless you are very clear as to what skills you are assessing and what criteria you are using.
- Staff must understand, and be able to develop, holistic and criterion-referenced rubrics, so that assessment is not affected by the teacher's ability to manage group dynamics or practical lab/studio sessions. (See [Using Assessment Rubrics](#).)
- Students may not come to class prepared with the necessary information, instruments or tools for active learning.
- Students' attendance may be poor or erratic in labs, making assessment of participation less meaningful or useful.
- Staff must be skilled in setting up a classroom environment in which participation is important, in classroom management and in developing authentic tasks. (See [Assessing Authentically](#).)
- Staff need to develop explicit standards-based assessment as part of criterion-marking schemes; this should be workshopped and shared with colleagues and students if possible.

Strategies

Assessing classroom participation is more valid when you align it with the course's intended learning outcomes and those tasks that measure a student's achievement. Biggs's (1999) constructive alignment approach supports the assessment of classroom participation, as meaning in learning does not come from the mere transmission of knowledge but is created and developed through the learning activities. This explicit alignment of the intended learning outcomes, the teaching and learning, and the task can allow students to have a clear idea about what they are expected to do in the classroom.

To develop strategies that align with their learning outcomes and expectations of students in their course, consider these questions:

1. Why do you want to assess classroom participation?
2. How can you assess these skills, attributes or behaviours?

Good practice includes:

- clear criteria by which participation will be marked
- differentiation between *attendance* at labs, studio and tutorials, and *participation* in them
- keeping the criteria simple (see Maznevski, 1996, and Tyler, 2004, for examples)
- considering the reliability of the task
- telling students how to prepare to actively learn and participate effectively in class
- training tutors to facilitate an equitable and fair classroom
- providing clear, timely and usable feedback on the nature and quality of participation
- maintaining records of marks achieved by each student.

Note that rewarding students with marks merely for talking, or only to encourage them to participate further, will not adequately reflect their achievement in a higher education setting, especially in later years of study.

Design an assessment for classroom participation

The principles underlying the assessment of performance in class are much the same as those for judging any form of assessment. The learning environment must also be able to cater for the active learning to take place. Initially the educator needs to foster an ethos of active learning, classroom discussion and participation in the lab or studio environment. Be an active grade keeper and clear marker who uses explicit marking guidelines and ensure that students themselves play an active role in developing these rubrics.

- Identify the qualities that you want students to demonstrate in their participation
- Identify the criteria that you will use to assess whether students have displayed these qualities
- Develop an assessment rubric and marking criteria that explicitly demonstrates to students the expectations of the assessment
- Let students aid in developing the assessment criteria
- Get students to self- and peer- assess at mid point of a course
- Give formative feedback at the mid point of a course
- Use online collaboration tools which capture all student participation and tutor feedback automatically, making the grading process more transparent and evidence-based
- Use holistic vs. analytical participation rubrics

Interpret and grade classroom participation

- Assess performance on clearly defined tasks and not on vague impressions of the quantity or quality of a student's contribution to the active learning – there are too many uncontrolled variables.
- Specify clearly the criteria for assessing the in-class performance of students; make sure they are in a form that students can translate into action or behaviour.
- Provide students with the opportunity to learn the skills which are being assessed.
- Ensure that all tutors are skilled in small group teaching; the assessment should not reflect the competence of the person facilitating the class.
- Make sure that the assessment is fair to everyone; it should not discriminate against those with a disability, women,

different cultural groups, etc.

- Involve students in the development of the rubrics.
- Explicitly demonstrate the learning outcomes and their alignment to the assessment rubric
- Distribute the rubric to students at the beginning of the semester so they know which contributions, discussions and participation will be rewarded with high participation grades.
- Provide ongoing and timely feedback; this is important to students, and can be provided in various forms.
- Many of the class participation approaches above can be applied in online environments (See [Assessing Discussion Boards](#)). Online discussions have the benefit of allowing close analysis of written contributions. These contributions may be assessed according to a) frequency; b) depth and quality; or c) the extent to which they provoke further discussion and debate on relevant topics.

Ensuring fairness in assessing participation

For the assessment of classroom participation to be fair and equitable, utilise criteria and standards. These make the task more transparent for students. A well-designed and fair marking scheme will minimise students' questions about their grade and act as an informative tool for feedback.

Assessing classroom participation can be more fairly utilised where the students themselves play an active role in evaluating their participation or contribution.

Example rubrics

Table 1: Expectations for class participation

"Participation is graded on a scale from 0 (lowest) through 4 (highest), using the criteria. The criteria focus on what you demonstrate, and do not presume to guess at what you know but do not demonstrate. This is because what you offer to the class is what you and others learn from. I expect the average level of participation to satisfy the criteria for a '3.'" (Maznevski, 1996)

Grade	Criteria
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absent.
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present, not disruptive. • Tries to respond when called on but does not offer much. • Demonstrates very infrequent involvement in discussion.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates adequate preparation: knows basic case or reading facts, but does not show evidence of trying to interpret or analyse them. • Offers straightforward information (e.g. straight from the case or reading), without elaboration, or does so very infrequently (perhaps once a class). • Does not offer to contribute to discussion, but contributes to a moderate degree when called on. • Demonstrates sporadic involvement.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates good preparation: knows case or reading facts well, has thought through implications of them. • Offers interpretations and analysis of case material (more than just facts) to class. • Contributes well to discussion in an ongoing way: responds to other students' points, thinks through own points, questions others in a constructive way, offers and supports suggestions that may be counter to the majority opinion. • Demonstrates consistent ongoing involvement.

4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates excellent preparation: has analysed case exceptionally well, relating it to readings and other material (e.g. readings, course material, discussions, experiences etc.). • Offers analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of case material; for example, puts together pieces of the discussion to develop new approaches that take the class further. • Contributes in a very significant way to ongoing discussion: keeps analysis focused, responds very thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to the cooperative argument-building, suggests alternative ways of approaching material and helps class analyse which approaches are appropriate etc. • Demonstrates ongoing very active involvement.
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Table 2: Group Participation Rubric

This peer assessment rubric is to help students in groups/teams evaluate the participation of individual members in the group/team presentation (Source: Making the Grade: The Role of Assessment in Authentic Learning-PDF).

Criteria	Distinguished	Proficient	Basic	Unacceptable
Workload	Did a full share of the work—or more; knows what needs to be done and does it; volunteers to help others	Did an equal share of the work; does work when asked; works hard most of the time	Did almost as much work as others; seldom asks for help	Did less work than others; doesn't get caught up after absence; doesn't ask for help
Organisation	Took the initiative proposing meeting times and getting group organised	Worked agreeably with partner(s) concerning times and places to meet	Could be coaxed into meeting with other partner(s)	Did not meet partner(s) at agreed times and places
Participation in discussions	Provided many good ideas for the unit development; inspired others; clearly communicated desires, ideas, personal needs, and feelings	Participated in discussions; shared feelings and thoughts	Listened mainly; on some occasions, made suggestions	Seemed bored with conversations about the unit; rarely spoke up, and ideas were off the mark
Meeting deadlines	Completed assigned work ahead of time	Completed assigned work on time	Needed some reminding; work was late but it didn't affect grade	Needed much reminding; work was late and it did affect the quality of work or grade
Showing up for meetings	Showed up for meetings punctually, sometimes ahead of time	Showed up for meetings on time	Showed up late, but it wasn't a big problem for completing work	No show or extremely late; feeble or no excuse offered

Providing feedback	Habitually provides dignified, clear, and respectful feedback	Gave feedback that did not offend	Provided some feedback; sometimes hurt feelings of others with feedback or made irrelevant comments	Was openly rude when giving feedback
Receiving feedback	Graciously accepted feedback	Accepted feedback	Reluctantly accepted feedback	Refused to listen

Use technology

When you use a learning management system such as [Moodle](#), some class participation becomes very easy to measure. You can produce several different kinds of reports on the activity of students within your course. You can also obtain a quick scan of [students' discussion forum posting activity](#) for the purpose of awarding a participation mark.

Comments from UNSW academics:

From a teacher in a class of 25 students:

"I had used ACP before, in other classes, but was always struck by the fact that students could challenge the mark I gave them and I would have no way of defending the decision I had made. I wanted a more transparent and fairer system to allocate marks.

"I developed a rubric, or marking template, where the 5 criteria for classroom participation were described at each of the levels of pass, credit, distinction and high distinction. This formed my marking template. In each class, apart from the first one, I selected 5 students that I was going to assess that week. The students did not know in which week they were being assessed. At the end of the class I would record on the marking template, one for each student who was being assessed that week, their scores across each of the 5 criteria (recorded by ticking the box) and a brief comment I could generate using the criteria. I would record the student's name and the date on each of the marking templates. At the end of the first six weeks, by which time I had assessed all of the 25 students, I handed back the marking templates to the whole class. I would then repeat the exercise for the second part of the semester; again, students did not know in which week they were being assessed, but received the feedback in class at the end of the 6-week period.

"I felt that this strategy was fair, and transparent. I did not need to remember at the end of the session what everyone had done, but recorded it week by week, a process that did not take very long. No students challenged the marking, and I saw better and more constructive classroom participation as a result."

From a teacher in Law:

"The other tip I liked was giving students 5 tokens to 'spend' on classroom participation; thus they had to talk, and they had to choose when to talk, and they couldn't talk too much. I adapted this in one of my classes by banning anyone who had spoken from speaking again until everyone had a turn. I was nervous about it being confrontational for the shy ones, but in fact the quiet ones told me they really liked it! I intend to do it again."

Case studies

Assessing Classroom Participation in Practice

Assessing Laboratory Participation - Dr Iain Skinner

(See [Transcripts](#) for audio)

In this video, Dr Iain Skinner presents his rationale and approach to assessing student participation in laboratory work. We also get to see how the strategy works in a real classroom situation.

Associate Professor Karyn Lai in the School of Humanities presents her Course Assessment for ARTS1362

Thinking About Reasoning

This is a first year course offered within the Philosophy curriculum. However, enrolment is open to students from all undergraduate programs within UNSW. Objectives of the course focus on developing students' capacity to think clearly, reason productively, argue well and to develop analytical, critical and interpretive skills which are important to life as a whole, beyond the knowledge and skills required for any particular profession or vocation. The course uses a combination of classroom and online teaching resources to give students the benefits of classroom teaching and more opportunities for practising critical thinking skills.

Why Participation?

As this is a skills-based course, it is particularly important for students to take an active role in their learning. Hence, students' participation is critical if they are to do well in their course. There are two primary reasons that undergird the focus on participation skills in this course. First, participation increases the opportunity for students to engage in active learning, as contrasted with them passively absorbing content. Secondly, participation provides opportunities for students to learn from peers. Exposure to different views places the onus on students to compare and evaluate the views. In addition, students may be asked by their peers to provide justification for their view, compare it with competing ones, convince others, assess new ideas and revise existing beliefs. Feedback from peers may help in the development of knowledge and skills.

This raises the issue of how students' participation skills are developed in the course, and assessed appropriately.

Developing Participation Skills

The course uses a participation rubric to (a) draw students' attention to salient aspects of participation and (b) allow them to identify and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in participation. The rubric is as follows:

Participation Rubric (for in-class participation and critical analysis assignment)

		Levels of Attainment			
Criteria	Description of criteria	Developing	Competent	Advanced	Exemplary
Made relevant comments	Relevant comments are those that focus on significant issues that bear on the topic in question. Relevant comments may include elaboration on a topic, explaining its assumptions, using an example or analogy to shed some light on it, etc. A student whose comments <i>for the most part</i> tend to focus on issues that are tangential to the topic in question and sidetrack from the debates is not likely to do well.				

<p>Articulated (your) ideas clearly</p>	<p>Use of clear, simple sentences to explain one's ideas. This may involve taking some time to clarify your position where necessary. Statements such as "... this topic is just too complex, and I can't say what I mean but I take it that you all know what I'm talking about," are unhelpful.</p>				
<p>Presented well-structured arguments</p>	<p>Comments are coherent. This does not mean that you must express your ideas in formal sentences. However, your ideas are set out in a systematic manner such that people can follow what you are saying. People sometimes confuse their audience when they fail to present their ideas systematically.</p>				
<p>Posed questions to the group</p>	<p>Raising questions that are central to the topic. This involves not simply surveying others' opinions but rather inviting them to investigate particular issues further, or to query assumptions made in a particular argument. You may also point out that a particular point made by someone else is not as cut-and-dried as it is presented to be.</p>				
<p>Sparked discussion and comments from others</p>	<p>Related to the previous criterion. Instigating debate rather than foreclosing on an issue. Rhetorical questions such as "I simply cannot agree with his conclusions, can you?" without further elaboration do not invite comments.</p>				

Responded to criticisms as well as compliments	Replying to others who seek clarification or who have rebutted one of your claims. If someone suggests that your view is implausible, respond to it. If they have misunderstood you or overlooked a particular issue, point it out politely, explaining how or why they have not grasped your point.				
Demonstrated consideration and respect of others	Consideration is the key here. If there are differences of opinion, try to explore why this might be so rather than put someone down.				
Built on the ideas and contributions of others	Drawing on the comments and suggestions of others, exchanging ideas and working together to arrive at a more plausible/defensible view.				

This rubric is made available to students in the course outline and students will be familiarised with the marking criteria used in the rubric.

Assessing Participation Skills: Critical Analysis Assignment

The rubric is used in an online critical analysis assignment, whereby students are required to engage in small-group online discussions on a set topic for a fortnight. At the end of the fortnight, each student submits an individually-written essay on the topic.

The assignment seeks to assess students' capacities for participating with peers in an online critical thinking exercise. From the point of view of developing students' critical thinking skills, participation in online discussions that allow students to explore debates and issues in an in-depth way may allow them to improve their communicative and interpretive skills as well as higher-order thinking skills.

The instructions for the assignment are as follows:

Critical Analysis

Students will be given a set topic or article to review. There are two parts to this assignment. The first involves small group online discussions on the topic. The point of this is to allow students to participate in these discussions in order to learn from a range of different perspectives on the topic. The second is an individually-written reflective essay that encourages students to draw from the discussions to present a well-reasoned piece on the topic

Details of the two parts of this assignment are as follows:

1. Participation in small group online discussions in Blackboard [*Blackboard was the LMS used at UNSW previous to Moodle*] (Friday 17th August–Wednesday 29th August), to discuss a set topic—**15%**

A rubric setting out the participation criteria will be available on Blackboard and also included in this course outline.

Rationale: The purpose of the online discussions is to give you an opportunity to test your views and then to refine them before handing your written piece in. So take every opportunity to try out your ideas with others—especially if they don't agree with your analysis, as this will force you to reconsider your view. Your provision of a modified view, or a good justification for your initial view, is the primary objective of this exercise.

2. 300-word individually-written essay on the same topic (Friday 31st August)—15%

Marking criteria

Students should focus on:

- identification of the issues at stake in the debate
- clear expression of ideas
- coherent structure of essay
- ability to take a detached position with respect to the article/theme, and to state why you agree or disagree with particular points of view
- ability to raise questions or issues that warrant further debate or thought.

Additional information

External resources

- Knight, Denise D. (2008), [A Useful Strategy for Assessing Class Participation](#), Faculty Focus (contains a useful example of a self-assessment strategy for participation)
- University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, [Student participation and active learning in the Sciences](#)
- University of Waterloo, Centre for Teaching Excellence, [Promoting Effective Classroom Participation](#)
- Victoria University of Wellington, University Teaching Development Centre, [Assessing Student Participation in Class: Improving Teaching and Learning](#)

Some sample rubrics

Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo, [Sample Holistic Rubric](#)

John Tyler, Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, [Class Participation Assessment Guidelines](#)

Learning & Teaching, University of Wollongong, [Class Participation](#) (contains some useful assessment tools including 2 holistic rubrics and an analytical rubric)

Further readings

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Acknowledgments

The contributions of UNSW staff who engaged with the preparation of this topic are gratefully acknowledged, including Professor Prue Vines and Dr Iain Skinner.