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Should Class Participation be Required in the Basic Communication Course?

Jennifer Wood

Class participation, that ubiquitous course requirement appearing on syllabi throughout the university, ironically may be one of the least discussed and explained requirements in a class. Instructors usually take great care in preparing students to complete other course requirements. They hand out and discuss ideas for class projects, spell out how long (or short) papers should be, and cover material in class that will enable students to complete an assignment or study for an exam. When it comes to class participation, however, students often find themselves on their own. At best, they have an instructor's brief definition of class participation which appears on the course syllabus. At worst, students not only have no idea what the instructor means by class participation, they also receive no instruction in how to participate.

Although her focus is on quiet students in the basic college speech course, Kougl (1980) illustrates the problems many students face when they are required to speak in class without being taught how to speak.

Students often report that they received no training in oral communication skills, although they were frequently graded on how well they spoke. Even when they received a high grade, confidence did not result. Since they were unsure of what they had done to deserve the grade, they feared that they would not be able to repeat. They were left with the impression that good oral communicating is a matter of luck and best avoided when possible. (p. 235)

Lack of instruction about class participation poses several significant problems for students and instructors alike. Students who do not participate in class automatically find themselves at a disadvantage, whether they learn the course material or not. Students may not participate in class for any number of reasons, including not understanding what participation means.¹

Instructors also must deal with problems about how to evaluate a particular student's participation. Does one count the number of times a student contributes to class discussions? Does one consider the quality of a student's contribution? Does one simply note the students who do and do not speak up in class? Is class participation a way to get students to attend?

Most significantly, these problems raise the question about the purpose of requiring class participation in the first place. If students are not taught how to participate, then what is the purpose of making it a requirement?

This article first explores the purpose of requiring students to participate in class. Here I argue that class participation is an ineffective measurement of a student's abilities or a student's engagement with the course material and should not be used as such. Indeed, the only valid purpose for making participation a requirement in class is to teach students how to participate. Second, for instructors interested in teaching students the skills of class participation, I suggest three general guidelines for developing teaching strategies designed to encourage students comments and questions during class. This section does not present *the* way to teach class participation to students. Rather, I offer goals for instructors to consider when they require students to partici-

¹See McCroskey (1980) for a thorough discussion of possible reasons that some students remain quiet in a classroom. He notes, "All quiet children have only one thing in common -- they are quiet. Beyond that, they are as different from one another as any other group of human beings." (p. 240)

pate in class. Finally, I argue that the basic communication course provides an excellent framework for teaching participation skills to students.

REQUIRING CLASS PARTICIPATION: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE?

In general, instructors require students to participate in class because they hope the requirement will promote lively discussions. In other words, instructors use class participation as a way to encourage or reward students' contributions in class. Unfortunately, the requirement tends to reward only those students who would be likely to participate anyway. At the same time, it unfairly and automatically places quieter students at a disadvantage to their more talkative classmates. Indeed, rewards might actually discourage some students from making contributions in class. As Tiberius and Billson (1991) explain, reticent students may hesitate to participate precisely because they believe their comments will be evaluated (pp. 70-71).

The class participation requirement might also be used as a measurement of a student's comprehension of or involvement with the course material. The thinking here may be that students who make frequent contributions are more engaged in the learning process and therefore learning more than quieter students. A student's contributions, however, are an ineffective measurement of what a student knows. "By using oral activities to assess students, teachers may actually be missing their intended goal," cautions Daly (1986). He adds,

There are countless stories of high apprehensive students who fare poorly in classes as diverse as English literature, mathematics, and art history simply because their participation is not up to par. They may know as much as or more than their peers who are low apprehensive, but their

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presentation of that knowledge is confounded by their apprehension. (p. 28)

The amount students participate in class actually gives instructors few clues about students' understanding of the course material. While Kough (1980) states, "A student who is listening is more likely to be learning than a student who is talking" (p. 234), I am more inclined to argue that a student who listening is *just as* likely to be learning as a student who is talking. In other words, we must get away from the false assumption that the amount one learns is directly connected to the amount one does (or does not) talk.

Many instructors, no doubt, have had experiences with students who talk a great deal in class, but do not know much about the course material or even indicate that they have been listening to what others in the class have said. Likewise, most instructors have probably known at least a few quiet students who, when the time came, handed in exceptional work or stood up to deliver excellent speeches. My point is that what class participation measures is students' class participation skills.

Although class participation is an ineffective measurement of what a student knows, it is nonetheless a very useful skill for students to learn. Adler (1980), for example, cites both social and economic costs related to "the fear of expressing one's thoughts" (p. 215). He explains,

Apprehensive communicators interact less in small groups and are perceived by other group members to be less extroverted, composed, competent and socially attractive than their more outgoing counterparts.

In the area of employment...highly apprehensive communicators are less likely to receive job interviews, and less likely to receive jobs....Communication apprehensives are also less likely to seek career advancement when that step would require them to communicate more. (pp. 215-216)

Therefore, while the amount a student participates in class provides no effective measure of the amount a student learns, the ability to express one's thoughts orally carries with it some cultural value. The ability to participate effectively can have an impact on an individual's success academically, socially, and economically.

We reach then an important intersection in our understanding of the purpose of requiring students to participate in class. What is abundantly clear is that a class participation requirement neither promotes participation nor does it effectively measure what a student learns in class. Therefore, the only valid purpose of requiring class participation in any course is to teach students how to express their ideas. Class participation, if required, must be treated like any other course requirement. If instructors require class participation from students, this obligates instructors to teach students how to participate.

CLASS PARTICIPATION: TEACHING A SKILL

In their study of question-asking comfort among eighth graders in the classroom, Daly, Kreiser, and Roghaar (1994) note that "question-asking comfort is significantly associated with gender, ethnicity, geographic region, home language background, and perceptions of teachers' responsiveness to students" (p. 27). While Daly and his colleagues caution that "many of the relationships described in this article may be explained by other variables..." (p. 38), they stress that, "(t)he sense that one *lacks the skill* of competently communicating a question in the classroom, or a feeling of insecurity about one's ability to communicate — or a distressing combination of both, affect classroom questioning" (p. 39, emphasis added).

The value of switching from a measurement or reward-based view of participation to a skill-based one is that skills

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can be taught and learned. In their discussion of the impact of gender on student questions in the class room, Pearson and West (1991) conclude that what students need is "*instruction and modeling in effective and appropriate question asking*" (p. 29, emphasis added). Indeed, providing opportunities to learn new communication skills is precisely what the basic communication course is all about.

Fortunately, a rich body of research provides interested instructors with a variety of strategies for teaching students the skill of participation (see Adams, 1992; Adler, 1980; Andersen, 1986; Cashin & McKnight, 1986; Collett & Serrano, 1992; Daly, 1986; hooks, 1994; Kougl, 1980; McCroskey, 1980; Phoenix, 1987; Sadker & Sadker, 1992; Schaffer, 1987; Tiberius & Billson, 1991; and Wolf, 1987). Whatever the strategies used, however, instructors should consider three general guidelines when teaching participation in their classes: (1) establish a concrete but flexible definition of participation, (2) provide clear feedback (early and often) to students about their work as classroom participants, and (3) convey a genuine interest in what students have to say.

As mentioned above, I do not intend these guidelines as an exact prescription for teaching class participation skills. This would defeat the purpose of my suggestions. As bell hooks (1994) points out when introducing her concept of "engaged pedagogy," every classroom presents instructors with new teaching experiences that require teachers to develop new strategies and adapt their old ones. Every classroom will have different patterns of participation and students will come to class with a wide range of skills and needs. The following guidelines are designed to provide instructors with a way to begin thinking about how to teach class participation skills in their own classes.

1. A Clear, Flexible Definition

To begin with, when teaching students how to participate, instructors should develop a clear but flexible definition of participation. "It is important," Weinstein, Meyer, and Stone (1994) write, "that we clearly define and explain how each task is expected to contribute to learning so that students can approach the tasks strategically" (p. 361). A clear definition is not sufficient, however, if the definition is so rigid that some students may feel restricted from speaking. "The goal of complete equal opportunity in class may not be attainable," explains Deborah Tannen (1994),

but realizing that one monolithic classroom-participation structure is not equal opportunity is itself a powerful motivation to find more diverse methods to serve diverse students — and every classroom is diverse. (p. 203)

In defining class participation, instructors should identify a variety of behaviors that qualify as participation and students should be offered a range of different options for participating.

Below is the definition of class participation I developed for the public speaking courses I teach. It is by no means the best or only suitable definition an instructor could use. However, it does represent my attempts to be as specific as possible about class participation goals for students. The definition appears as follows on my course syllabus:

Class participation includes coming to class prepared with one question or comment from the reading assignment, completing homework assignments, providing verbal and written comments to classmates on speeches delivered during this course, conveying full attention to others in the class while they are speaking, and expressing your ideas verbally with your classmates during small group activities. Class participation is not credit for attendance.

In developing this definition, I try to provide students with clear guidelines for behavior. I also strive to provide them with a variety of options for displaying participation (both oral and written). In addition, this definition enables me to consider a number of different behaviors that count as participation when evaluating students' work. I use these behaviors to provide specific suggestions to students to improve their skills as participants.

As some may note, my definition on the syllabus focuses on specific behaviors rather than the quality of students' contributions in class. This is because I do not want to discourage quieter students from making a comment or asking a question because they worry about the quality of what they have to say. I do, however, use written feedback (discussed below) to encourage students to improve the quality of their contributions.

2. Effective Feedback

Second, in teaching students how to participate, instructors must provide both oral and written feedback to students about their progress as participants. This is much easier said than done. An instructor's responses to students' comments and questions not only model the standards for participation in class, responses can also encourage or discourage student talk.

Instructors teaching class participation must attend to and constantly work against any barriers that might prevent students from expressing their thoughts. As unfair as it is to evaluate students on a skill that the instructor does not define, it is unscrupulous to require students to accomplish something that instructors actually prevent students from achieving. Daly (1986) warns that,

Teachers need to exert a good deal of caution when dealing with students' communication activities. There are far too many cases of teachers ridiculing students' attempts at communication, demanding absolute quiet in their classrooms, or indiscriminately punishing talk. Students are close observers of teachers' reactions. When they see a teacher reacting negatively or apathetically to something, they tend to adapt to that teacher. (pp. 28-29)

In their article entitled "Ensuring Equitable Participation in College Classes," Sadker and Sadker (1992) caution that "(f)or all of its benefits, interactive teaching has potential for interjecting subtle bias into the college classroom. Studies analyzing classroom dynamics from grade school through graduate school show that teachers are more likely to interact with white male students" (p. 49). To counter these tendencies they suggest instructors ask a colleague to observe their interactions with students, noting in particular who the instructor interacts with during class and the typical length of "wait time" between the instructor's question and students' responses. "This collection of data," they assert,

can open up a number of provocative teaching issues. Instructors should consider the following questions: How many interactions are there in the classroom? How many students do not participate in any interactions? Do any students dominate discussions? Does the instructor rely on volunteers or independently decide who will speak? Are there geographical areas of the class that receive considerable instructor attention? Are there other areas that are blind spots, where students receive little or no attention? (p. 53)

Likewise, Condon (1986) offers a series of questions that instructors can use to uncover what he calls "subtle forms of bias in the classroom" (p. 14).

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Who is encouraged to speak, and how is this encouragement shown? Which interruptions are appropriate, and which are not? How much self-disclosure is appropriate in the public setting of a classroom? What conflict and confrontation styles are encouraged, and what styles create discomfort? If a student is corrected or criticized, is this done in front of others or individually? (p. 14)

While seeking answers to these questions may seem like a daunting task, this is precisely my point. By requiring students to participate in class, instructors obligate themselves to attend to these issues and answer these questions.

In addition to verbal responses to students contributions, I provide them with a brief written assessment of their work as participants at three points during the term: just after the first major speech, following the mid-term examination, and the class session prior to the start of the final speech rounds. This provides students with a sense of progress regarding their efforts to participate and encourages them to make adjustments during the course to enhance their participation evaluation.

Additionally, written feedback enables me to work with each individual student on particular goals for participation. I often encourage students who regularly make oral contributions to class discussions to work on the quality of their comments. I might, for example, suggest to a talkative student who usually provides positive comments to classmates' speeches that she or he try offering and supporting constructive criticism instead.

Most students are reluctant to express negative comments about their classmates' speeches. Written feedback can provide students with specific guidance for how to critique constructively, and at the same time model constructive criticism skills for them. For example, one of Grice and Skinner's (1995) nine "key points" for critiquing speeches is "problem solve the negative" (418). They suggest that critics

"first, point out a specific problem, and, second, suggest ways to correct it" (418).

Written feedback on class participation can both explain and demonstrate problem solving to students. To illustrate, an instructor might point out that a student has done an excellent job of providing positive comments on classmates' speeches, and that working on providing constructive criticism will expand the student's class participation skills. Then the instructor can "problem solve" by encouraging the student to specify one problem with a classmate's speech and provide one suggestion for improving the problem. The instructor can also point that this is precisely the format used to critique the student's work on class participation.

For quieter students, written feedback gives me an opportunity to acknowledge their written contributions to our work in class (the quality of their written critiques of classmates' speeches, for example). I also often encourage less talkative students to meet with me to discuss goals for oral class participation. Together we may decide that the student will try to ask one question during a round of speeches or offer one comment from a reading assignment during our class discussions. My experience is that serves as a great motivator for students; most not only meet but exceed their goals.

Written feedback is also an important teaching tool for me when I am in the classroom. I can respond individually to students without taking time during class to redirect more talkative students or unfairly put quieter students on the spot. Moreover, written feedback reminds students that, like their speeches, class participation is an assignment. It is a skill that they are learning, not something that they are expected to know or do automatically.

3. Valuing Students' Ideas

Finally, as important as a flexible definition and effective feedback are to teaching students participation skills, a sincere interest in what students have to say may be the most important method an instructor can use in teaching students how to express their thoughts. Tiberius and Billson (1991) explain that "students respond much more enthusiastically to teachers whom they regard as genuinely interested in them and committed to teaching them" (p. 67). When instructors require class participation, they are obliged to value the contributions students make in their classes. They are obliged to listen, closely and actively, to what students have to say.

According to Wolf (1987), "one important occasion on which students see teachers ask genuine questions is when a teacher tries seriously and persistently to get to the bottom of what a student is after but cannot express or attain" (p. 4). This serious, persistent questioning can demonstrate to students that even when they have trouble expressing their ideas, the instructor values what they have to say.

For quieter students, this strategy could, of course, backfire. Persistent questioning for one student may feel like badgering to another. This is why using a variety of techniques to encourage students' contributions and recognizing multiple forms (written and oral) of participation are so important.

In an interview about teaching students how to ask questions, Schaffer (1987) explains that she asks students to construct a question from their reading assignments. "There are only two rules to observe," she states.

The first is that the question must *not* be one that can be answered only by looking up a fact from the story...; and second, each person must really care about his or her ques-

tion — must, I mean, really be curious to have an answer.
(p. 9, emphasis in original)

In adapting this strategy to a particular classroom, instructors might consider asking students to write down and hand in their questions at the beginning of class or alternating between questions expressed orally and in writing. What ever technique is used, what is important is that the instructor model the behaviors being taught. By conveying sincere interest — bringing authentic and genuine curiosity to the classroom regarding what students think and feel — instructors show students how to learn.

Moreover, Kougl (1980) suggests that what instructors do during the first day of class sets the standards for participation for the rest of the term. "The teacher's first task," she states, "is to begin building a supportive, yet interactive environment" (p. 235). Thus, she suggests asking students to talk about themselves during the first class session. "Use the necessity to check the roster as an opportunity to begin a dialogue with students" (p. 236). Again, this demonstrates to students that the instructor values the contributions students make in class.

THE BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE: A GOOD PLACE TO START

As Adler (1980) and Cohen (1980) emphasize, the content and organization of the basic communication course provide an excellent framework for teaching students participation skills. Learning how to participate effectively is also a fundamental oral communication skill. Therefore, the basic communication course offers a "natural" fit for learning class participation skills.

In the basic communication course, students learn how to: choose and limit a speech topic; organize their ideas; support

their ideas with evidence; adapt their ideas to a particular audience; construct sound, reasonable arguments; listen critically; and deliver their speeches smoothly and confidently.

Class participation requires these same skills. Students must be taught to listen critically to other students' comments in class, taught to organize their comments effectively, taught to support their comments with examples and evidence, and taught to offer reasoned opinions.

Notice how well Grice and Skinner's (1995) guidelines for critiquing classroom speeches translate into advice for helping students improve their class participation skills. They suggest,

To be helpful, criticism must be balanced between positive and negative aspects of the speech, but should begin and end with positive comments. Critics should reinforce positive aspects of the speech and problem solve the negative. In addition, criticism should be specific, honest but tactful, personalized, organized, and should provide the speaker with a plan of action for future speeches. (p. 419)

In the process of learning how to construct and deliver an effective speech, students can also learn how to construct and deliver constructive criticism and effective comments in class.

It is not enough, however, to assume that students will recognize the similarities between delivering a speech and making a comment. The instructor must make the effort to point this out and teach this to students. As Grice and Skinner (1995) explain, "A critique, just like a speech, is easier to follow if it is well organized" (p. 418). To illustrate, they suggest that students' responses to their classmates' speeches can be organized topically ("content, organization, and delivery"); chronologically ("introduction, body, and conclusion"); divided into "strengths and weaknesses"; or by a combination of these options (p. 418). When students apply what they are learning as public speakers to their efforts as

classroom participants, they are more likely to strengthen both their speaking and participation skills.

CONCLUSION

The arguments presented here should not be read as a call to make class participation a requirement in every course offered at a college or university. If anything, this is a call to stop requiring participation from students in courses where participation is not taught. Instructors should by no means feel obligated to teach participation skills to students if participation is not considered when evaluating their work. Rather, this is a call for instructors to take very seriously the obligations inherent in the requirements they establish in their courses.

Class participation is a valuable skill that, once learned, will serve students well not only during their undergraduate years but also throughout their lives. Because it is such an important skill to learn, it is well worth the time and effort instructors must necessarily devote to teaching it. The bottom line remains, however: if instructors require students to participate in class, then instructors are required to teach students how to participate.

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