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## Rethinking Evaluation Strategies for Student Participation

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*Kevin R. Meyer*  
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Many college instructors encourage and value student participation. The amount and quality of student participation desired, however, varies significantly. Instructors that view student participation as an essential element in classroom learning seek methods of encouraging students to actively participate in their education. One popular strategy that has emerged among faculty is the use of graded participation (Balas, 2000; Bean & Peterson, 1998; Fritschner, 2000; Jacobs & Chase, 1992; Tatar, 2005). Although graded participation strategies take many forms and may vary significantly from instructor to instructor, the aim of enhancing student involvement through the incentive of grades is generally the same (Bean & Peterson, 1998). The basic communication course, in particular, being a performance-oriented class, is a prime example of a curricular area in which oral participation is typically required through a mixture of public speeches, class discussion, and group activities. While previous studies have focused on the desirability of student participation and the variety of methods employed by instructors to encourage student participation, these studies have almost always examined the perspective of instructors. Importantly, research has failed to inquire about or consider student perceptions of graded participation strategies.

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College students typically face a number of classes in their academic careers that include participation in discussion as a component of their grade (Balas, 2000; Bean & Peterson, 1998; Fritschner, 2000; Jacobs & Chase, 1992; Tatar, 2005). Although the portion of the student's grade derived from participation and the method of assigning that grade typically varies from course to course, students inevitably encounter several classes in which participation is graded. The emphasis in the basic communication course on oral participation during presentations and during class discussion positions the course well to address issues concerning graded participation strategies. Unfortunately, students are rarely trained how to participate or given explicit criteria to follow. According to Wood (1996), the best case scenario for basic course students is that "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" (p. 108). Thus, the prospect of having to participate for a portion of their grade can foster a confusing and frustrating experience for students. Although the basic communication course, as compared to courses in other subject areas, typically provides criteria with regard to evaluating oral presentations (Stitt, Simonds, & Hunt, 2003), clear criteria for evaluating classroom discussion is more rare. One notable exception is the use of "participation sheets" that involve basic course students in assessing their own participation in classroom discussions (Rattenborg, Simonds, & Hunt, 2004; Simonds & Carson, 2000). Rattenborg et al. (2004) argued that participation sheets

may increase student motivation and learning. But, do participation sheets improve the quality of students' participation? And, how do basic course students feel about participation sheets being a required part of their grades?

How students respond to graded participation strategies has received scant attention by prior researchers. This oversight is problematic given the number of college courses, including the basic course, that require and assess student participation. In order to address this gap, the present study examines students' perceptions of graded participation and the instructor behaviors in the basic course that students say influence their motivation to participate actively. The present study takes an additional step by examining students' specific suggestions for instructors to improve classroom participation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

An examination of extant literature concerning student participation quickly reveals that scholars have yet to reach a consensus on the value of grading student participation. As a result, it can be difficult for basic course instructors to navigate and make sense of this scholarship as they attempt to refine their own classroom practices. Our review of the literature reveals several, sometimes competing, advantages and disadvantages of graded participation. Initially, graded participation is said to be an advantageous pedagogical strategy to the extent that it improves student leadership and self-esteem, motivation and learning, fulfills students'

ethical obligations to classmates, provides students with a framework for effective interaction, facilitates a positive classroom climate, and results in positive evaluations of instructors.

### ***Advantages of Graded Participation***

First, graded participation helps to enhance student leadership skills and self-esteem. Shindler (2003) argued that assessing participation can help make problem students good students, and help good students become leaders. Similarly, assessing participation may be useful in teaching students to stay on task and to work cooperatively. Several scholars have advanced the claim that implementing self-assessed, graded participation strategies promotes student-owned behaviors, increases students' internal locus of control, and promotes self-esteem (Benham, 1993; Rennie, 1991).

Second, other scholars have found that graded participation strategies increase students' motivation (Covington, 1996; Maehr & Meyer, 1997). In addition, Sadker and Sadker (1994) found students consider participation to be related to effective learning and to result in more positive views of the learning experience. Moreover, Bean and Peterson (1998) argued that graded participation causes students to adjust their study habits in anticipation of class discussions. Furthermore, Davis (1993) contended that active participation contributes to student learning.

Third, scholars have also discussed the ethical implications of active classroom participation. Petress (2001) argued that students who refuse to actively participate in their learning are actually acting unethically.

His argument is that student reticence, withdrawal, or fear of interacting prevents that student from sharing what he or she knows, and it deprives the teacher and classmates from benefiting by what a given student has to offer. Such students negatively influence classroom learning by decreasing teacher effectiveness and prevent classmates from learning from these insights, observations, and experiences (Petress, 2001). Worse still, reticent students are less likely to apply, extend, or transfer learning to other contexts, than students who actively participate (Petress, 2001).

Fourth, graded participation may provide students with a framework for effective interaction. Education scholars like Shindler (2003) have argued that grading participation allows instructors to place significant value on the quality of human interaction in our classes. When used effectively, Shindler (2003) argued, graded participation can teach students a framework for effective interaction. Similarly, Bean and Peterson (1998) contended that graded participation can send positive signals about the kind of learning and thinking that is expected.

Fifth, scholars have also examined the effects of participation strategies on the overall classroom climate. For example, Fassinger (2000) found that students in high-participation classes, as contrasted with students in low-participation classes, perceived their groups' dynamics more positively. Such students were also more likely to describe their peers in the class as cooperative, get to know each other, experience greater levels of comfort, and have higher perceptions of support and respect. Additionally, she explained that in the high-participation classes, students reported less peer pres-

sure to keep comments brief or avoid controversial opinions.

Finally, Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, and Piccininn (2003) found that students who actively participate in class perceive their instructors differently than students who participate less. When students perceive themselves as active participants in the classroom, they perceive their instructors to be more positive and personal, capable of stimulating more discussion, and they have a more positive impression of their professors overall than did students who perceived themselves as less active (Crombie et al., 2003). Thus, the level of the students' participation in class may impact a students' end-of-term evaluation of the instructor. Fassinger (2000) found that instructors with higher participation classes are perceived as more supportive and approachable.

In sum, the basic communication course would seem to benefit from the advantages of student participation in that the course naturally places a great deal of emphasis on oral student participation through speeches and presentations, group work and activities, and class discussions. Indeed, most basic course directors and instructors would likely echo the advantages of participation given their pedagogy and curriculum.

### ***Disadvantages of Graded Participation***

Despite the potential advantages of student participation, however, scholars have also discovered a number of disadvantages associated with graded participation including problems posed for reticent students, favoritism and bias, assessment and measurement issues, and

perceptions of instructors. First, reticent students often remain silent, regardless of whether participation is graded or not. Fritschner (2000) found that in 344 observed class sessions, many of which included graded participation, an average of 28% of those in attendance verbally participated and 18% of those in attendance accounted for 79% of all the students' comments in class. Thus, even in classrooms employing graded participation strategies, the vast majority of students remain silent. In part, these data may be explained by differences in how talkers and quiet students define participation (Fritschner, 2000).

Second, a review of literature reveals a dark side to graded participation strategies. As Shindler (2003) has noted, when used appropriately graded participation can benefit students in a number of ways; however, when used inappropriately graded participation may be viewed by students as an instrument of favoritism and bias. If teachers use this pedagogical tool arbitrarily, it may be viewed by students as a part of their grade over which they have no control—as a mechanism for the instructor to reward students he/she likes and punish those he/she does not like (Shindler, 2003). Thus, graded participation may reflect instructor subjectivity. Jacobs and Chase (1992) explained that the main purpose of grades is to assess the extent to which students have learned; not to assess student behavior. They contended that since the development of participation skills is rarely taught by instructors, graded participation strategies constitute subjective judgment of student behavior on the part of instructors. Furthermore, they noted that, “the extent of class participation often depends on the student’s personality,” and it is, therefore,



unfair to grade students on the basis of their personality traits (p. 196). They elaborated by stating that students who are introverted, shy, or culturally diverse are disadvantaged by such grading methods. Additionally, Bean and Peterson (1998) observed that professors often determine participation grades impressionistically as a “fudge factor” in the final grade.

Third, participation is difficult to objectively assess (Jacobs & Chase, 1992; Victoria University of Wellington, 2000). Plus, instructors may find it difficult to simultaneously manage group discussion and assess participation (Jacobs & Chase, 1992). If instructors use graded participation, they should specify clear criteria for assessing student participation (Wood, 1996). For basic communication course programs that standardize graded participation strategies, training all instructors to consistently apply the criteria across sections is necessary (Victoria University of Wellington, 2000). Moreover, graded participation strategies have been criticized for being incapable of measuring what they are intended to measure. Wood (1996) noted that participation is a poor measure of students’ abilities or engagement with course material. Even under optimal circumstances, in which instructors provide students with specific grading criteria for participation, it is difficult to measure the cognitive involvement of students. Wood elaborated that students’ vocal contributions are an ineffective measure of their knowledge. She further argued that basic course instructors “must get away from the false assumption that the amount one learns is directly connected to the amount one does (or does not) talk” (p. 111). Thus, graded participation strategies can be safely said to measure the frequency of student communication, but

not the quality of that participation, nor the extent of the student's cognitive learning. Furthermore, since it is likely that graded participation fails to actually measure quality participation, it is doubtful that such strategies truly increase the type of participation for which instructors implement these grading strategies. As Wood argued, "what is abundantly clear is that a class participation requirement neither promotes participation nor does it effectively measure what a student learns in class" (p. 112).

Finally, Fritschner (2000) found that students perceive instructors to have a large influence on student participation. Her study discovered that students perceived the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of instructors to be significant factors that either encouraged or discouraged student participation in class. Although instructors were typically unaware of the effect that their facial expressions, voice, and messages perceived as "talking down" to students had on the classroom environment, the ultimate impact of these behaviors was found to be a general dampening of discussion (Fritschner, 2000). In some instances, she found that a vicious cycle of frustration was created by professors who wanted the class to participate, but made students feel "put down" with negative feedback. On the other hand, she found that instructors who used self-disclosure or were characterized by students as respected, trustworthy, and accessible tended to have a positive impact on facilitating class discussion.

In sum, although basic course instructors may value and encourage student participation, they should be aware of the potential disadvantages of grading participation. Of course, speeches and presentations must be

graded in the basic communication course. However, questions remain regarding the use of participation grades for class discussions.

### ***Research Questions***

Many existing studies fail to consider student perspectives with regard to graded participation. Additionally, few studies examine specific graded participation strategies. And, only a couple of studies have examined the use of participation grades in the basic course classroom (Rattenborg, Simonds, & Hunt, 2004; Simonds & Carson, 2000). Thus, three research questions emerged from our literature review to guide the present study.

- RQ1: How do basic course students perceive graded participation strategies?
- RQ2: What instructor behaviors act to influence student participation?
- RQ3: What strategies do basic course students recommend for encouraging participation?

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

Students were recruited from random sections of the basic communication course at a large Midwestern university to take part in two focus group interviews. A total of twelve students participated in the focus groups. Participants were predominately female ( $n = 9$ ) compared to male ( $n = 3$ ), Caucasian ( $n = 10$ ) compared to African American ( $n = 2$ ), and in their first year of col-

lege ( $n = 10$ ) compared to second year ( $n = 1$ ) or third year ( $n = 1$ ). The average age of focus group participants was 18.75 years of age. Given that the basic course is taken during students first year at our institution and that the campus population is predominately homogeneous, these demographics tend to be representative of our student body.

### ***Procedures***

Focus group participants were queried regarding their perceptions of graded participation strategies. Focus group interviews are an appropriate form of data collection for this type of exploratory research because individuals' experiences tend to induce other group members to express their own perspectives, and this method recognizes the regularly changing nature of perceptions (Lindlof, 1995). Accordingly, group participants are able to elaborate on issues and collaboratively offer insights through the course of interaction rather than just rely on previously formed perceptions or bounded impressions (Myers, 1998). The focus groups probed student perceptions of graded participation generally and on use of participation sheets by their basic course instructors. Simonds and Carson (2000) explained that participation sheets are an instrument used daily to rate students' involvement in the classroom and foster student engagement. This method requires students to self-assess their own preparation for and participation in class based on a set of pre-established criteria. Given that the focus groups were conducted during the eighth week of the semester, all of the students had significant experience with using participation sheets.

### ***Interview Protocol***

After operationalizing the concept of graded participation, the researchers developed an interview guide complete with open-ended questions and various probing questions to prompt discussion among the participants. The focus groups were facilitated by skilled moderators in a quiet room and lasted approximately one hour. The sessions ended when the conversations naturally came to an end. Each focus group was audio taped for transcription purposes.

### ***Data Analysis***

Following the design and data collection, the project went through several phases of coding. Researchers collaborated on coding and analysis by proceeding to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of the complete data set from both focus groups, breaking data down into discrete parts. The team approach involving more than one researcher during analysis tends to facilitate a higher degree of reliability in interpretation than relying just on independent steps (Knodel, 1993). Primary analysis involved reviewing the transcripts to identify themes in student responses by organizing the transcripts into “analytically useful subdivisions” or “code maps” (Knodel, 1993, p. 45). Next, both researchers discussed potential interpretations. From this, a basic listing of categories was generated. Coding and recoding stopped at the point of saturation or redundancy.

## RESULTS

### *Research Question One*

The first research question posed in this study concerns basic course students perceptions of graded participation. With regard to RQ1, three themes emerged from the responses of both focus groups, indicating disadvantages of graded participation. First, graded participation strategies were seen as a disadvantage to shy or reticent students. For instance, one female student observed that, “it hurts the people that are more shy, though, and I think sometimes that is not fair because they might really understand what they are doing, but they do not want to raise their hand and say it.” Another female student agreed, “I do not mind talking in class, but I know that a lot of my friends are shy and do not like to talk.” Independently, the focus group members strongly supported the idea that students could cognitively participate in discussions while remaining verbally silent. In other words, students can be both silent and cognitively engaged with the ongoing class discussion. A third female participant explained, “just because somebody does not participate does not mean that they are not listening.” Interestingly, a different female student remarked:

I usually do not even say anything, because I do not actually agree with oral participation grades. Some people are just shy in class and do not want to raise their hand or do not want to be called on in front of a group of people. When I know it is graded, I will not even speak. It does not even matter to me, because usually participation points are really not that many

points anyway. I just do not agree with it, so I do not even raise my hand.

When asked if she could still track the discussion and learning, she continued, “I am still learning, I am still into discussion. I will rarely ever zone out in class.”

Second, the focus group members offered several comments questioning the quality of participation and student learning. For example, a male student commented that participation sheets are “sometimes like busy work.” A female participant expanded on this idea by explaining that, “it is just measuring how many people can raise their hand and say something, or add something; the teacher never said it had to be meaningful.” As another female student noted:

I think somebody could be completely zoning out, listen for two minutes, and then raise their hand and say this or that, while the person that is really paying attention is not raising their hand. I do not think that just because you raise your hand or talk in class that that really says you are getting more out of it than somebody that does not.

Moreover, some focus group members noted that the participation of other students can even threaten the learning of the rest of the class. A third female participant explained, “sometimes you will think, oh, I did not say anything today, I had better add something because I do not want my grade to go down.” For example, if a student asks a question or responds to a question in an effort to get his or her participation points for the day, but is incorrect, then other classmates internalize the inaccurate information. When asked if this would put her at a disadvantage, another student noted that:

Sometimes what they say is not even right anyway, but at least they talk, so I would almost rather have the teacher or professor say what it is, instead of a student that does not really know what they are talking about say what it is.

Third, although students indicated that participation sheets in the basic course are the best strategy they have encountered for assessing participation, they questioned the overall effectiveness of participation sheets. Many remarked that they had classmates who would still refuse to communicate. For instance, one female participant argued that:

Even with the participation sheets, there are still people who seriously have not said or contributed a single time, other than when the instructor went person to person. You generally know who is going to participate in class and who is not, regardless of whether there is a participation sheet or not.

While students agreed that participation was important to an extent in basic course discussions, they stopped short of indicating that it should be a large part of their overall grade. Another female student posited, "I think it is important, but it should not be something you are graded on." Ironically, a third female participant noted that some students will participate whether participation is graded or not:

It is not like you should have to be pressured into participating; if you are going to do it then you are going to volunteer. I did not have a class where at least one person did not volunteer to talk to the class about situations or things that are related. I do not think it should have to be a pressured thing, because I think people are more reluctant that way. People do not like



being forced to do things, and I know a lot of my friends who would probably object to it, because why should you have to participate. If it is voluntary participation and something I want to do, then I do it, but I not going to be pressured like that.

Graded participation was even seen as a power issue, whereby basic course instructors used the participation grade as power over students. A different female student speculated that, “it is definitely a control issue.”

### ***Research Question Two***

The second research question addressed instructor behaviors that influence student participation. With regard to RQ2, six significant themes emerged from the focus group discussions. First, the focus groups indicated that instructor immediacy overwhelms all other instructor behaviors. As opposed to “intimidating” instructors, the focus group participants repeatedly characterized immediate instructors as being more likely to facilitate student participation and classroom discussion. A female student commented that:

If the person is easy to talk to and makes you feel comfortable, you are more prone to answer a question versus someone who is monotone. Even though the question is open ended, you feel kind of intimidated so I think the instructor is a big part of it.

Instructor immediacy overwhelmed the type of questioning employed, as another female explained, “the instructor is more important.” More significantly, students indicated a greater willingness to participate for an immediate instructor than a nonimmediate instruc-

tor, regardless of whether the instructors used graded participation or not. Second, the type of feedback to student responses by instructors plays a key role in the motivation of students to participate. Instructors who offer positive feedback are more likely to foster participation than those instructors who offer negative feedback or “put-downs.” A female student noted that, “the personality of the teacher is really important; I hate some subjects because of one or two teachers I have had in the past.” Third, an instructor’s nonverbal cues were noted as a key factor in students’ willingness to participate. Fourth, the atmosphere of the classroom is critical. Focus group participants indicated that instructors hoping to encourage student participation should create a friendly environment in the classroom. Students indicated that the climate must be one in which students are not afraid to take risks with their responses. Fifth, the type of questions employed by instructors has a direct effect on the likelihood of students to respond. The focus group participants also favored open-ended questions that required a variety of potential correct responses, as well as questions soliciting student opinions. The focus groups clearly did not favor questions that sought definitions, a single correct response, or simple recall information from assigned readings. For instance, discussions debating the definition of communication were perceived as more valuable than questions asking students to recall the four methods of delivery. Sixth, the focus groups indicated that graduate teaching assistants in the basic course demonstrated a greater care for students and their success, while many tenure track faculty in their other classes seemed to care more for the content and material.

### ***Research Question Three***

The third research question concerned strategies that basic course students recommend for encouraging participation. With regard to RQ3, three general themes emerged from the focus group discussions. Specifically, the responses of focus group members fell into general categories of environmental structure, classroom climate, and grading format. First, in terms of environmental structure, the focus group members identified small discussion groups, circular seating arrangements, and small class sizes in the basic course—as opposed to large lecture hall formats in many of their other classes—as being particularly effective at stimulating participation. Second, in terms of the classroom climate, the focus group members indicated a preference for a less formal environment created by ice-breaker discussions and random methods of cold calling used by their basic course instructors. Although students reacted negatively to the idea of cold calling, they did indicate that such behavior was permissible from instructors if the instructor used a random method, such as drawing cards marked with student names at random from a deck. Third, in terms of grading format, many focus group members recommended alternative participation assignments for shy students, giving points for attendance, allowing students to evaluate their own participation (which the participation sheets our basic course instructors use permit, to a degree), and clearly defined criteria for assessing participation (like the one used on the participation sheets). For example, a female observed that:

They control your grade-you are not the only person. I could write down a five everyday and the teacher could say “nope, you got a two” everyday just because she does not like you...she could change the number and you do not really know why.

Thus, some focus group members found the use of participation sheets to be a less than ideal strategy for measuring the engagement of silent classmates. Of note, though, many of the focus group members agreed that the participation sheets their basic course instructors used were a more effective means of grading student participation than the graded participation strategies used by instructors in their other courses.

## DISCUSSION

Generally, student participation in the basic course classroom is valued by both instructors and students. What constitutes participation, however, is often a matter of confusion and disagreement for instructors and students alike. Faculty and student definitions of and preferences for participation are not always aligned (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004; Fritschner, 2000). However, previous studies have exclusively represented the viewpoint of instructors. Thus, the present study examined basic course students' perceptions of graded participation strategies. The comments by focus group members provide several reasons to rethink evaluation strategies for student participation both in the basic course as well as in other curricular areas. For example, for highly apprehensive students, the pressure to participate, whether real or perceived, may interfere

with learning. If students are worried about what to say or nervous about trying to participate a certain number of times each class period, it is likely that they may focus more on the comment or question they intend to contribute than they do the discussion at hand. As a result, these students may not listen carefully to or may not carefully track the material and content being discussed. In the end, the responses of focus group members in this study raise questions for pedagogy and training programs that basic course directors and instructors should carefully consider.

### ***Pedagogical Implications***

*Pseudo critical thinking.* Graded participation strategies may foster pseudo critical thinking by failing to check low-quality participation or erroneous responses. Paul (1995) argued that education runs the risk, if not designed carefully, of doing more harm than good by fostering pseudo critical thinking. He explained that “when questions that require better or worse answers are treated as matters of opinion, pseudo critical thinking occurs. Students come to uncritically assume that everyone’s ‘opinion’ is of equal value” (p. 56). Under such conditions, graded participation may actually stifle rather than stimulate learning. Several focus group members agreed that graded participation changes the frequency, but not the quality of participation. Increased participation, however, may simply constitute a compliance response on the part of students (Balas, 2000). In order to receive their participation points for the day, students will raise their hands more frequently. Thus, Paul claimed that “the failure to teach students to

recognize, value, and respect good reasoning is one of the most significant failings of education today” (p. 56). Unfortunately, it appears that there are circumstances in which graded participation strategies might contribute to such shortcomings. One must wonder whether the students actually experience meaningful behavioral learning or simply engage in a compliance response. In other words, are students engaging in these behaviors simply because they know they have to in order to earn a good grade? The results of the present study provide little support for the claim that basic course students actually transfer these behaviors into other contexts.

*Silence and power.* Psychological reactance theory posits that when one’s autonomy is threatened, one will act out against it (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). The focus group data indicate that some students may chose not to participate simply because the instructor is grading participation. In fact, some focus group students provided excellent examples of psychological reactance theory at work, noting that they may refuse to participate just to spite the instructor’s use of graded participation. In other words, students react against the instructor’s imposed limitation on silence by remaining silent. As a result, silence may provide students a means of expressing power over a situation in the classroom that otherwise is beyond their control. But, silence does not mean that students are not knowledgeable (Balas, 2000). Therefore, it seems reasonable for basic course instructors to avoid grading strategies that may cause students to use silence as a means of reactance. Rather than avoiding participation altogether, basic course instructors could design alternative assignments that allow students to demonstrate their understanding

of assigned readings (e.g., written participation logs) without directly limiting their autonomy in the classroom.

The focus group data make it clear that graded participation strategies have implications for basic course students' perceptions of instructor power. Students may perceive that graded participation strategies provide the instructor with a tool to coax students into participating. To be sure, graded participation represents a power that the instructor holds over the students. To this end, graded participation may work to disempower students. In short, graded participation becomes a tool the instructor wields against the students. Freire (1985) cautioned that education is a vehicle, manipulated by political motives, that oppresses those students who hold particular worldviews. From this pedagogical perspective, a critical teacher should seek student participation and empowerment through discussion rather than "teacher-talk" (Shor, 1993). However, there is no clear support for doing more than encouraging student participation. Freire's critical pedagogy does not license the grading of participation. Open critical thought of students is necessary (hooks, 1993), but cannot be fostered through oppressive means.

### ***Implications for Basic Course Training Programs***

*Criteria for grading participation.* A variety of suggestions emerged from the present study that should be carefully considered by basic course directors and instructors. It is, at least initially, the instructor's responsibility to engage basic course students in participation. An instructor's communicative style and chosen meth-

ods of instruction should be tailored such that basic course students are inspired to participate in discussions and learning. Additionally, instructors should provide clear criteria for grading participation. In order to reap the full benefits of graded participation, instructors must make clear to students what is expected of them. According to Shindler (2003), the more visible the criteria are to the students, the more graded participation works to reinforce the concept of quality participation. Similarly, Craven and Hogan (2001) argued that clearly communicating expectations for participation is critical for effective classroom management. Moreover, the implementation of scoring rubrics for student participation can alleviate the problem of impressionistic grading (Bean & Peterson, 1998). Ironically, though, the participation sheets used by focus group members' basic communication course instructors would seem to meet these standards. Yet, the focus group participants found participation sheets to be ineffective in some regards and counterproductive in others. The root of the problem may well be that students felt compelled to contribute something orally every day in class. That compulsion led some students to offer relatively unimportant and uninspired comments in class. It led other students to withdraw from oral participation entirely. These findings suggest that basic course instructors should carefully consider alternative means of measuring student participation. For example, instructors might consider assigning participation credit if students attend public speeches and other events outside of class that are relevant to course material. Asking students to carefully reflect on those experiences in a participation log could help students forge important linkages between the



outside world and course concepts, while simultaneously developing their critical thinking skills.

*Instructor training.* Basic course instructors should provide training and instruction in participation to students if graded participation strategies are used. Jacobs and Chase (1992) concurred that training for students must accompany graded participation strategies. Basic course instructors already train students how to speak in public, so training students how to participate in class discussion seems to be a logical extension of the course. As Wood (1996) noted, “if instructors require students to participate in class, then instructors are required to teach students how to participate” (p. 122). Importantly, though, training students to participate involves much more than simply saying participation is required as part of a student’s grade. Even Petress (2001) specified that students should be taught to use communication skills that provide positive and constructive feedback to other classmates during discussions, while being discouraged from using negative feedback. Again, instructors may want to consider offering students a wide range of behaviors (e.g., offering oral comments in class, actively participating in classroom activities, participating in relevant out of classroom activities, providing written rather than spoken comments, etc.) as options for participating.

*Monitoring discussion.* Importantly, several focus group members agreed that graded participation gives over-talkers license to dominate conversations. Bean and Peterson (1998) supported this sentiment when they posited that graded participation strategies inherently give rise to the problem of how to deal with over-talkers dominating class discussions at the expense of

more quiet classmates. Recall that Fritschner's (2000) research demonstrates that 18% of students account for nearly 79% of all comments offered in class. Students in the focus groups further indicated a strong dislike of this kind of behavior on the part of basic course classmates. These student opinions should highlight the necessity for instructors to balance class discussions so that all members of the class have a chance to participate and so that over-talkers do not dominate the discussion. Finally, basic course instructors should be careful to delineate arguments from assumptions. Since the distinction between an argument and an assumption is a delicate balance, basic course training programs for instructors must address this difference in order to promote properly guided discussions.

*Cold calling.* Another method of engaging shy or reticent students in discussion is cold calling. Cold calling is the practice of addressing a question to a particular student. In studies involving graduate students, Dallimore et al. (2004, 2006, 2008) strongly recommended the practice of cold calling. As opposed to an open-discussion format, Bean and Peterson (1998) posited that cold calling offers instructors a method of assessing the quality of a student's response during Socratic examination. However, Fritschner (2000) found a general reluctance on the part of professors to directly question students, which she explained as a factor reinforcing the expectation of reticent students that the "talkers" could be relied on to answer questions or make comments. Basic course instructors, in particular, should be concerned about methods of getting each student to speak during class discussions. Cold calling achieves this objective without resorting to graded par-

ticipation, but can intimidate students if not done in a random manner or with sensitivity.

### ***Implications for Future Research and Limitations***

Several important areas for future research emerged from the present study. Initially, quantitative data should be collected to determine the impact of graded participation on student motivation and learning, since it is difficult to assess these variables within the context of a focus group. While our exploratory study provides some guidance in terms of programmatic assessment at our institution, the qualitative nature of our data and the use of a research design employing focus group interviews preclude us from generalizing our findings to other institutions. Second, a number of important variables influence whether graded participation strategies will be perceived positively by students. Researchers would do well to consider how students influence each other in the classroom. For example, a student's willingness to participate may be dampened by the negative comments of another student in the class.

Third, more culturally diverse samples of students should be used in the future to discover how students from other cultures feel about graded participation. Graded participation strategies should be fair to all groups of students, and must not discriminate against or disadvantage particular segments of students. Instructors clearly need to be able to make accommodations and modifications to their instructional strategies based upon the learning characteristics of their students. Since literature demonstrates that students of different cultures may approach the educational envi-

ronment with different notions of the extent to which they should participate, instructors should consider the effects of graded participation strategies on students from other cultures. Graded participation may disadvantage students from certain cultural backgrounds. Many international students, Balas (2000) explained, come from cultures where it would be considered impolite to interrupt a professor with questions. Additionally, he observed that many international students view actively participating in group discussions as showing off. Students' willingness to participate may be affected by both gender and culture, but assessment should be fair to all groups and not discriminate (Victoria University of Wellington, 2000). For instance, graded participation is unlikely to fairly and accurately measure the knowledge of culturally diverse classrooms (Balas, 2000).

Fourth, beyond cultural diversity, researchers should consider how instructors might modify participation strategies for students with disabilities. For example, Davis (1993) argues that alternative participation assignments should be arranged for some students with disabilities. She stresses that the range of alternatives must vary with the individual needs of students with disabilities.

Importantly, there were three key limitations to the present study. Initially, the focus group sample in question failed to include a culturally diverse population, thereby excluding the perspectives of students from cultures that tend to view participation as impolite. While the homogenous demographics of our student body prevent us from examining a more culturally diverse sample, future research at other institutions could address

this question. Second, as with any qualitative study employing the use of a focus group design, the results of the present study cannot be generalized to other populations. However, it is important to note that focus groups do offer a valuable means of examining specific graded participation strategies by offering rich data regarding student voices and perceptions. Furthermore, the current study meets established guidelines for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by clearly connecting the findings to extant literature and theory, addressing a topic of importance to all basic course instructors, and proposing appropriate implications (see Weimer, 2006 for a full discussion of these standards). Future studies could develop survey instruments around the themes discovered in our focus groups to examine student perceptions with a larger, random sample. Finally, the focus group participants in the present study were self-selected volunteers who had admittedly low levels of communication apprehension. Although the focus groups expressed concern for high communication apprehensive classmates and speculated about the point of view of these students, it is possible that reticent students would offer a different perspective. Again, future survey research would offer a means of soliciting feedback from students with communication apprehension.

## CONCLUSION

The task of eliciting greater participation from students will remain a concern for instructors generally, but will always be of special concern for basic course in-

structors who wish to stimulate student participation during class discussions. In addition to required public speaking performances, the basic course typically aims to generate student participation on a daily basis. But, are graded participation strategies such as the use of participation sheets the proper way to achieve this objective? The results of this study indicate that focus group participants find several drawbacks to using graded participation. Specifically, the focus group members suggested that basic course instructors would be better served to find other means of involving students in class discussions. Furthermore, some students indicated that the use of graded participation functions as a means of eliciting pseudo critical thinking and may even provoke psychological reactance in the form of student silence. Consequently, basic course instructors should carefully reevaluate the strategies they use to encourage student participation during class discussions. For example, Davis (1993) offers several strategies to improve the frequency and quality of student participation, without having to resort to assigning grades. She recommends rewarding student participation, but not grading student participation. While good participation can be used to enhance student grades, scant participation should not be used to lower grades (Balas, 2000). Moreover, future research should seek to determine if the perceptions of students in our focus groups are representative of basic course students at other institutions.

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