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## Universal Reasons for Low Participation in Chinese and Western Undergraduate Classrooms

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### Abstract

This study regards low classroom participation as a global issue and investigates the universal reasons for this problem shared by the undergraduate students in China and in the west. Participating in class discussions and asking questions are instrumental for effective learning. This study regards low classroom participation as the phenomenal where students do not ask or answer questions during a lesson. The research was conducted by combining profound experiences and insights developed as an undergraduate student in the University of Waterloo and a teaching assistant in Soochow University with the understanding of both Chinese academic articles and western academic articles about this topic. This study reveals the reason why Chinese and western undergraduate classrooms experience low classroom participation is that their stakeholders focus on the competing goals. This study defines the stakeholders as the instructors, students and the post-secondary institutions.

**Key words:** Classroom participation; China; West; Instructor; Students; Post-secondary institutions

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### INTRODUCTION

Curiosity is one of the main forces that drives human development. This natural desire for knowledge has led to many inventions and discoveries that shape people’s lives today. Prior to Nicolaus Copernicus, who challenged the geocentric model with the heliocentric theory, people firmly believed that the earth was the centre of the universe (Rabin, 2019). Fascinated by the birds’ ability to fly, the Wright brothers invented the first airplane in 1903 (The Wright Brothers, n.d.). Yet only 66 years after conquering the sky, humanity took a giant leap and brought their curiosity to the moon (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). Soon after, in less than two decades past this historical success, mankind revealed the sequences in their own DNA (Human Genome Project, n.d.). Although curiosity has served as the fundamental reason for humanity’s development, it is fascinating to see children ask more questions than their much more knowledgeable and skillful adult counterparts. In school, classroom participation is an important reflection of curiosity. While it is natural to expect elementary school students to raise their hands energetically when the teacher asks a question, one generally does not expect a class of undergraduate students to display the same positive behaviour. Such contrast is very intriguing; in fact, low classroom participation is a prolonged global concern that post-secondary institutions in both China and in the west struggle to successfully address. This phenomenon occurs when students do not ask or answer questions and refuse to engage in classroom discussions unless called upon. This extremely relevant issue prompts one to ask the question: what are the universal reasons for low classroom participation shared by undergraduate classrooms in China and in the west? Thus, this research answers this question by explaining that, despite their many differences, Chinese and western undergraduate classrooms experience low classroom participation due to the competing goals that their stakeholders decide to focus on.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

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In recent years, Chinese researchers often took the following two approaches when studying about classroom participation in domestic classrooms. Many investigated the effectiveness of various questioning methods at stimulating student responses. For instance, Ning and Yang proposed that professors can try the zero-degree approach, which encourages them to ask questions that stimulate students' critical thinking (Ning and Yang, 2015). In addition, Chinese researchers also analyzed the various factors that can lead to low classroom participation. For example, Dong and Ping described in their articles respectively that modest culture, sub-optimal multimedia equipment and lack of self-confidence all prevent Chinese students from participating in class (Dong, 2014) (Ping, 2013).

Similar to their Chinese counterparts, researchers in the west also focused on various factors that affect class participation, such as the classroom size, gender, personality and grades (Rocca, 2010). Most recently, some researchers decided to study the cross-culture aspect of this topic by comparing the behavioral differences between East Asian and American Students in American classrooms (Takahashi, 2019). For instance, Takahashi found out that East Asian students are more likely to ask for permissions to speak prior to participating than their American classmates (215-234).

Researchers from China and those from the west have explored their respective findings concerning low class participation. Those researches often focused on a specific geographical area. In other words, Chinese researchers studied the classrooms in China while North American researchers studied the classrooms in North America. Researchers rarely focused on the classrooms in China and in North America in a single study. Thus, there exists a lack of understanding in the commonalities and differences that each culture shares regarding this global issue. Since researchers have not yet attempted to approach this topic with a holistic view and from a global perspective, this is therefore an area that demands further understanding.

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## METHODOLOGY

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This study was conducted using the literature research method. Information for this report were collected through both primary and secondary researches. The researcher has studied and worked at both the University of Waterloo and Soochow University. The information collected from primary research mainly consist of observations the researchers made at the University of Waterloo and Soochow University. Secondary research was conducted through reading and analyzing academic articles published in China and in the west. The researcher first read Chinese academic articles and collected evidences that illuminated

the reasons for Chinese undergraduate students to remain silent in the classroom. The researcher then performed the same activity on articles written in English about students in the west. After separately analyzing and compiling the reasons for low classroom participation in China and in the west, the researcher compared the information together and synthesized the universal reasons for this problem shared by post-secondary institutions in China and in the west.

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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### Professor's Impact on Classroom Participation

Professors set their objectives to deliver all the knowledge in the allotted time as a result of having become experts of the materials that they teach. In a traditional Chinese classroom, students often regard the professor as the figure of authority who should lecture for the most of part of the lesson (Ping, 2013). Similarly, Jim Scrivener, the author of *Learning Teaching*, also characterized teaching in the west as where "the teacher probably does most of the talking and is by far the most active person" (Scrivener, 2011, p. 15). Moreover, Weaver and Qi also confirmed through their research the existence of an inverse relationship between the desire to participate and the perception of the professor as the authority (Weaver and Qi, 2005). Acknowledging such influence from the professors, Sidelinger further determined more specifically that professors' proactiveness contributes significantly to their students' engagement (Sidelinger, 2011). As a result, one of the largest factors that discourages students from participating is their professor's projection as the authority of knowledge and the lack of proactiveness. This projection is likely due to the fac that professors often teach the same courses for years while students only take it for once. This unfortunately reality is confirmed by Bulei Zuo, an experienced University Professor for 34 years, who comments that post-secondary institutions in China has been using the same assigned course books and unchanged evaluation system for many years even until now. This repetition, combined with their overall knowledge about the field that they work in, naturally projects the professors as the authority of knowledge in front of the students. In fact, professors may become so knowledgeable about the material and teach it for so many times that nothing in the course will remind them the empowerment that they felt in their first couple of years of teaching. The fact that they no longer feel passionate about the course will cause them to lose the ability to inspire their students to love the course. It will then prompt them to find a new purpose. Given the fact that many professors teach using the traditional method according to Scrivener, which is best for delivering large amount of information efficiently as the teacher is the most active person, it is reasonable to assume that they shift their focus to

delivering the material efficiently after losing the passion toward the teaching material. Since one learns more by active learning, the fact that the traditional teaching method allows the instructor to deliver a large amount of content to a large number of audiences in a very short time by forcing the learners to passively receive information demonstrates that it is not the best method that facilitates learning. The high popularity of this method then exposes the fact that professors prioritize covering all the material over facilitating class participation.

Although it is valid to assume that professors often resort to focusing on delivering the material once they lose their passion, people can still expect them to innovate their teaching to satisfy both the need to cover all the contents and increase student participations. Unfortunately, professors are not perfect at distributing their resources such as TTT (Teacher-Talk-Time), STT (Student-Talk-Time) and questioning strategies. This is because they must carry out their primary responsibility to prevent students from becoming unprepared for the final exams. Given the number of exams that a university plans for a term or semester, it is extremely unlikely for the university to reschedule the exams to give their professors' the opportunity to finish any untaught material. In other words, this responsibility cause professors to have very little freedom for experimenting with different teaching techniques and making mistakes. This justifies many professors' decision to spend all the efforts ensuring they cover everything required by the curriculum. The remaining efforts and energy are then insufficient to fully address the issue of low classroom participation.

### **Students' Influences on Classroom Participation**

Even though students regard their professors as the authority in the classroom, they themselves also play an important role in shaping the cultures of their classes. Generally, students feel comfortable when learning in an environment where their professors and their peers accept them. For instance, both students in China and in the west often feel personally challenged and react defensively when asked by their professors to answer a question (Rocca,2010) (Wang and Yang, 2012) (Ping, 2013). Moreover, students in the west can speak while seated; students in Chinese classrooms need to stand up when speaking. As one person speaks, it is natural and often respectful in most cultures for the others to pay attention to the speaker. Furthermore, the researcher has also personally experienced the disapproval from other students when one frequently asks questions in class. Quantitatively, the survey that Weaver and Qi conducted for their research has shown that 70.8% of the sample sometimes or usually participate in class, whereas only 11.4% indicated that they always participate and 17.9% indicated never or seldom (Weaver and Qi, 2005). Clearly, students feel comfortable participating on a moderate level. This sense of comfort stems from the influence of

both their professors and peers. Students' defensiveness towards their professors shows that they really care about their professors' opinions toward their answers. Thus, they participate more to earn the approval from their professors. On the other hand, students also worry about the opinions of their peers. Regardless of whether the culture requires one to stand up while speaking, since people often naturally look at the individual who speaks, merely announcing something in a large group of people attracts a tremendous amount of attention to the speaker. Unlike politicians or celebrities, who are always under the spot light, students do not regularly receive this much attention and the fact that they become vulnerable to other students' judgements and potential disapproval renders participation a risk not worth taking. Thus, pressures from their professors and peers make students want to learn in an environment where they feel approved by both.

Although the need for the authority's approval compel students to participate, the fear of being alienated by their peers limits the students from fully unleashing their curiosity in the classroom. In order to create the ideal environment, students must spend some of their efforts working against fully increasing their participations. As a result, it is natural to see that only 17% of the students in the survey done by Weaver and Qi indicated that they always participate in class. In other words, students regard the learning environment as more important than increasing their classroom participation. They will not address the issue and continue to work against it as long as solving the issue means losing the ideal learning environment.

### **The Institutional Impact on Classroom Participation**

The research done by Weaver and Qi shows that students believe increasing interactions with their professors will make them feel more comfortable participating in front of their peers and upon being challenged by their professors (Weaver and Qi, 2005). Although this is a great way to stimulate classroom participation while maintaining the ideal learning environment for the students, the university environment is sub-optimal for the facilitation of such interactions. For example, Soochow University, a provincial key comprehensive university in the Chinese 211 university group has five campuses located at least an hour apart from each other even though the class size is about 50 – 70 students. On the contrary but yielding a similar effect, one can see many lecture halls that would fit 100 to 300 students at the University of Waterloo, which only has 2 campuses. Moreover, Xiang illustrated in her research that 93% of the Chinese undergraduate students in her sample state that they rarely interact with their Professor (Xiang 37-42). Similarly, the University of Waterloo's first year and fourth year students only scored 15.9 and 17.0 respectively for Student-Faculty Interaction in the 2017 National Survey of Student Engagement and

these are the lowest scores among all (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2017). Clearly, students in the west and in China do not interact with their professors as much as they participate in other learning activities such as discussing with their peers or completing group projects. Looking at factors such as class sizes and amount of campuses, one can attribute this phenomenon to the fact that multiple campuses and large class sizes physically isolate professors from their students. In China, the high number of campuses forces professors to teach on multiple ones despite the fact that his or her office may only be located on one of the campuses that he teaches. It is too time consuming for the students or their professor to travel from one campus to another for a meeting. Students who feel frustrated with the course and need in-face conversations are unable to receive help from their professors until the next class. Moreover, Canadians also face a similar situation where a faculty member teaches so many students at once that he or she only have the time and effort to offer personal interactions with a few of the students. If a professor offers five hours of office hours a week for a class of 100 students and both parties try to create meaningful interactions, each person will only get 3 minutes, which is not enough. Thus, the university environment strongly hinders student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom.

If post-secondary institutions regard increasing classroom participation as a priority among its many initiatives, then one should expect the universities such as Soochow University and the University of Waterloo to shape their learning environments in a way that at the very least do not hinder student-faculty interaction. Currently, students in China struggle to meet with their professors due to the unendurable travelling time while the little time that Canadian professors have for each of his or her students leaves the Canadian students nothing but frustration. Such hinderance on student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom demonstrates that the institutions did not plan to focus on the issue of low classroom participation. In fact, since increasing the number of campuses allows universities to admit more students and increasing class size decreases the number of lecturers the universities need to hire, it is not difficult for one to deduce that post-secondary institutions value saving cost over stimulating classroom participation.

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## CONCESSION

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Some may propose that teachers, students and universities are correct to focus on their current priorities and they are part of the process to fully increase classroom participation. Faculty members must teach all the materials required for the reason that the students need the knowledge to participate in the discussions of in-depth topics. For instance, western blotting is a technique taught commonly in a senior level molecular

biology course. This is an advanced topic that requires one to thoroughly understand the property of amino acids, antibodies and the agarose gel in order to discuss this technique's experimental controls (Yang et al., 2014). Thus, instructors must lecture about these topics extensively to help students become capable of discussing about western blotting. Moreover, the 2017 National Survey of Student Engagement recognizes the supportive interaction with other students as one of the indicators for student engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2017). In other words, the survey approves the students' effort to gain the acceptance of their peers as a necessary mean to learn effectively. Furthermore, online communication technology such as the electronic mailing device have achieved universality. The University of Waterloo even assigns an email address to each student and staff to encourage online communication. Similarly, Soochow University also encourages its faculty members and students to use Cloud-Class APP software. Both universities use online software to facilitate mass marking and grading. The fact that students can communicate with their professors using technology appears to solve the problem where faculty members are physically inaccessible.

Although it may seem reasonable to accept the belief that faculty members, students and post-secondary institutions are working toward ultimately increasing classroom participation by focusing on their current initiatives, this belief is in fact an excuse and a sign of procrastination from all three parties.

Faculty members who let students learn the fundamental topics passively are unreasonable to expect the students to actively learn the advanced material. Not only will passive learning prevent students from fully mastering the material, it also deprives students of the opportunity to practice participating when the materials are easier to learn. Since students who never developed the skill to participate in class will experience the same difficulty when required to participate in the future, faculty members who focus mainly on delivering all the material delay the problem.

Moreover, students who rely on the environment to induce their participation never gain the confidence and skills to participate. Although these students will participate in a positive class environment, they will resort back to quietness when the environment becomes less positive. The recurrence of low participation demonstrates the fact that change in learning environment does not solve the problem.

Furthermore, online communication tools such as the email fail to offer personal interactions. One must recognize the fact that students participate in the class by personally interacting with their instructors. Interactions outside of the classroom thus must also share this personal nature to make students feel more comfortable interacting with their instructors in the classroom. Emailing will not



increase in class participation because it does not offer personal interactions. In fact, this technology actually works against the solution as students will use it as a replacement for participating in the classroom.

The faculty members, students and university staff who believe that they will eventually stimulate classroom participation by focusing on its current priorities are merely delaying, ignoring and exacerbating the problem.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Having determined the common causes of low classroom participation shared by China and the west, it is reasonable to design and implement solutions to treat these commonalities first as it will bring mutual benefit to both China and the west. The type and the specific components of the solutions is an area where researchers should further study. The solution will likely need to balance the competing goals that the stakeholders have. It is likely that there may not exist a universal solution for this universal problem as the implementation process depends heavily on the culture and social aspects of each country and region in the world. Regardless of the existence of a universal solution, the reasons illustrated in this report should still provide great assistance to one when designing a proper solution to address low classroom participation.

It is undoubtedly difficult to address an issue when all of its stakeholders have competing goals that prevent the implementation of an effective solution. First, faculty members who become comfortable with the traditional teaching style eventually shift their focus to mainly deliver all the information. Then, students willingly participate less to create an ideal learning environment where they feel accepted by their peers and professors. Not only that, the universities also design its environment to reduce cost. Upon recognizing all of these universal factors, one now understands the reason that low classroom participation is a prolonged and complicated issue that all institutions struggle to fix. In the current era of knowledge economy, institutions from the east and the west participates in many partnerships and joint-initiatives, the opportunities definitely exist for collectively solving this issue on a global scale. Although the stakeholders are incapable to solve this issue, one should remain curious to see if international interactions will eventually synthesize an innovative and adequate approach.

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