

## **Rethinking Participation: Benefits from Reflective Assessment**

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**Abstract:** Student participation has been an important goal for many Political Science faculty in the classroom environment. Pre and post COVID, participation has been a challenge to measure and effectively gauge as a successful tool for student learning. Based on a Faculty Learning Community Workshop that examined increasing participation in the classroom, this paper proposes that faculty rethink how they measure participation, allowing students to actively assess their participation with faculty input.

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## **Introduction**

Many faculty use participation as a means of grading. The methods used to measure participation can range from simple attendance/taking roll to marking or noting student questions and answers/taking note of student responses. Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) broke down participation into five categories: 1) preparation, 2) contribution to discussion, 3) group skills, 4) communication skills, and 5) attendance. Measuring participation as a form of attendance just requires the student to show up (Holdsworth 1998). The problem is whether or not the student is actively engaged with the material presented (Prince 2004). Measuring participation as a form of student answers is also problematic. The time that it takes to measure this can vary depending on the method (Cohen 1991). Some students may be introverts and lack the self-esteem to talk in front of others (Philips, Bobbi Smith, and Modaf 2004; Shultz 2009) whereas others might be competitive, requiring more interjection by the instructor (Fassinger 2000). Larger classes may suffer from too many hands and not enough time; students competing to be heard for the sake of meeting the participation grade (see Grasha and Riechmann 1974 on competitive model of learning), often making class size one of the more cited reasons for why students do or do not participate (Karp and Yoels 1976; Bowers 1986; Nunn 1996; Weaver and Qi 2005).

The aforementioned issues were present pre-COVID and continue to be an unaddressed issue post-COVID. Whether students were online, on-screen, or socially distanced in a classroom, attendance as a means of participation was often the first measure of participation, followed by discussion posts or breakout sessions. As a means of assessing grades, participation was, and continued to be, a failure in truly addressing how well a student engaged with the materials presented by the faculty member. COVID also brought out the problem of further isolating students from peers and faculty. A recent Inside Higher Ed piece, however, pointed out

that many professors were removing points and participation as a measurement (D'Agostino 2023).

At the University of Mary, the participation problem was seen as pronounced amongst the student body. The campus is a small community, highly interactive, and focuses on learning “for life” (<https://www.umary.edu/>). Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) have been used on campus to focus on specific problems faculty felt needed to be addressed either in teaching, scholarship, or service on campus or in the larger community. FLCs were developed by and for faculty for faculty to equally input into a problem, share research, and develop an action plan for implementation. One such FLC focused on “increasing student participation” in the Fall 2020 semester. Initial research found that “students in active learning environments...interact meaningfully with content and think creatively about information, resulting in deeper learning” (Prince 2004 cited in Johnson and Barrett 2017: 44). COVID and the campus shutdown in Spring 2021 effectively dissolved the FLC but the problem of participation was still there.

The purpose of active engagement should be learning but student engagement is often limited and focused on measurements over end results. Using both research and implementing a reflective piece to participation, starting in Spring 2021, both active learning through participation (students engaging in discussion) along with passive learning through participation (students being able to understand and grow from applying the learning) were used more effectively in the classroom. This paper will first examine the literature on effective classroom participation, examine the results from several courses that used this reflective piece, and discuss the implications for participation and future research.

## Literature Review

As mentioned, faculty use a variety of methods to check for classroom participation. One of the concerns that came out of the literature review was active participation measurement v. passive participation measurement. Active participation measurement is basically the amount of time spent actively engaging with the student, i.e., having the student respond to questions or develop a deeper understanding of the course materials. Passive participation measurement may just require taking attendance or making sure the student is present in some manner. It is important to note that this is different from active learning and passive learning. “Active learning is ‘the process of making students the center of their learning’” (Warren 1997: 16 as quoted in Peterson 2001). Active learning involves some form of discussion or collaboration between the faculty and student(s); this forces the student to actively engage the materials. Passive learning is basic lecturing, reading, and addressing the main issues without interaction; this has been the dominant approach in higher education for decades.

The shift from passive learning to active learning has been based on research that shows the effectiveness of active learning for “improving knowledge retention, communication skills, and self-directed learning and lead to deeper understanding of the material” (Bavishi et al 2022). Research indicates that student engagement in classes covers many areas of concern. Students’ emotional engagement includes “feelings of belonging or value to their teacher, their classroom or their school” (Nguyen, Cannata, Miller 2018: 164). “Students who participate also show improvement in their communication skills (Berdine 1986; Dancer and Kamvounias 2005), group interactions (Armstrong and Boud 1983), and functioning in a democratic society (Girgin and Stevens 2005)” (Rocca 2010: 187).

The importance of the type of assessment used for the students' purpose should also be something considered by the instructor. A majority of the literature on measuring participation focused on the actual self-assessment by students as having a stronger impact on the student participation throughout the course. Using self-assessment has been shown to increase learning for life (Davies 2000), build critical thinking skills (Skillings and Ferrell 2000), and overall increases the student participation over the course of a semester if the student is actively involved in the assessment of participation (Zaremba and Dunn 2004). Student involvement in their own assessment also leads to student accountability over their own learning (Logan 2015: 8).

## **Design and Results**

When classes were moved to online during the Spring 2021 semester for the University of Mary, many faculty either dropped the participation requirement or used the Zoom or Teams lists to take attendance. Based on the research done for the FLC, this presented an opportunity to address participation as both active engagement and reflective experience by the students.

Three 100 level classes and one upper division class were used for the initial purpose of the study. Students were required to watch online lectures, interact with each other in online discussions, and use weekly assessments of their participation. Participation, for this purpose, included, but was not limited to, 1) emailing the professor, 2) having substantial discussion and feedback by addressing others in the online discussion format, 3) reflecting and discussing what was learned from both the lecture and readings for the week, and 4) if applicable, group work for various projects. At the end of the week, students would have a "weekly participation" text box in the Learning Management System (LMS) which is Canvas for the University of Mary. Students would address all of these forms of participation by discussing what was done or how

this was met and ask any questions they still had from the readings. The weekly participation was set at roughly 10 percent of the grade for the course in points and a rubric was used to show the students how to improve their participation.

The initial reflective experience saw an increase in the number of notes, information shared, and questions asked by students for the remaining four weeks of the semester. Students that would normally not discuss in class had a number of important observations online, demonstrating a deeper understanding of the material than was once thought in class of these students. The 100 level classes benefited the most from this, seeing increased grades for many students that would have otherwise been lost on the materials entering into the online exam, not willing to ask question or participate in class. The most significant change was seeing students reflections on their notes creating a deeper understanding of the materials. Several of them commented on this in their course evaluations, one going so far as to state “this class actually got better once we shut down for COVID due to how much I learned the professor cared about what I thought about in and out of class.”

The University of Mary decided to reopen for Fall 2021 with significant changes to course delivery. Instructors would require students to be masked and socially distanced in the classroom. Classrooms where normal discussion took place were now spread out, creating a disadvantage for students 1) to hear each other and 2) to fully understand what was said by others (due to masks and distance). This is where the online weekly assessment was very helpful because the learning environment was often restricted in how well they could hear each other. Further, we had mixed classrooms with students interacting via Zoom so that they could still get the materials if they were isolated for testing or exposure to COVID. I used the same guidelines as before for measuring participation, not wanting to change up the experience too much to make

sure it was effective for learning. There were a few changes, however, that needed to take place from the previous term.

Due to many students being first semester freshmen, the first few weeks were used as feedback to help improve the students' understanding of how to give both critical feedback for improvement of the class along with reflective responses that demonstrated their involvement with the assigned materials. Initially, students were short in their responses and looked at it as a quick, easy assignment. Eventually, students were very honest in their own self-assessment, especially if they did not read or did not understand the materials. Further, their questions now drove the content of the course toward a better overall understanding of the course materials. For example, in a 35 student section of a 100 level course, I occasionally had 5 – 10 students with the same question. This indicated to me that either they were not picking up the information from the reading or lecture or their notetaking needed improvement. As the semester progressed, it was easier to see if it was something missed in the lecture or something they missed taking notes.

This current academic year, post COVID (at least according to the University of Mary), this method has continued to be successful in drawing out students and increasing their self confidence in and out of the classroom. In a pre-test this year, over half of the students self-identified as “introverts” and “did not want to participate in class.” By the end of the semester, students in the post test saw themselves as “more likely to participate.” The small number of participants at the beginning of the semester (roughly 10 percent of the class) had grown to over half of the class actively engaging in some manner in class. Nearly every student was active outside of class due to the requirement of weekly participation as an assignment.

Overall, the assignment has resulted in several important changes in student behavior. First, students are more likely to take notes and pay attention to how they use their notes. Second, students, by reflecting on their learning, have a deeper understanding of the materials. Third, students are more accountable for their own learning, resulting in many feeling better about the course overall (reflected in the course evaluations) and about their own ability to comprehend politics. Finally, this has allowed students that are normally labelled as “introverts” to interact and ask questions. As noted, many of them become more open to discussing issues in class once they realize that they are listened to outside of class along with the shared experiences they find with classmates regarding understanding or not understanding course materials.

For the instructor, the most important benefit is having invested students in and out of the classroom. Another benefit has been in using this information for formative and summative assessment. The need and use of formative and summative assessment, along with their connections to each other, is evident from research (Taras 2008; Lau 2016). The formative assessment used by the weekly assignment, to see how the students are learning, allows the instructor to work on how the summative assessments are being used within the course to measure student learning. This additional benefit allows for easier access to artifacts that benefit departments, schools, and universities in their overall assessment of programs. In the case of POL 101 at the University of Mary, this course is also a General Education requirement for all students so the need for clear communication in the assessment techniques (Ussher and Earl 2010) is helpful for examining the data and information submitted.

### **Discussion and Limitations**

Some could argue that simple in-class assessment tools would serve the same benefit as the weekly participation assessment proposed. For example, classroom response systems,



commonly called “clickers,” are often used for KWLs (What I know, What I want to know, What I learned)(Steele and Dyer 2014). Some instructors prefer using Kahoot! for immediate assessment as well. A huge disadvantage of using clickers is the cost associated with the technology. There is also the added time of handing out and returning the clickers. There are also problems, on some campuses with technology working correctly in the classroom (Caldwell 2007, Filer 2010). The research on long term learning also shows limitations to student response systems like clickers or Kahoot! (Liu, Gettig, and Fjortoft 2010).

Some of the same issues may cause problems for faculty in universities or colleges where the LMS is limited in responses. Again, technology may or may not be present for students as well. At the University of Mary, students have access to multiple lab areas and are encouraged to find and schedule time for this type of activity. No students have raised technology as a concern for not getting their weekly participation assessment done.

There is also the time consideration that needs to be considered for instructors willing to take on this assignment, along with the time students need to get this done. With three sections of 35 students in POL 101 for Fall 2022, along with two upper level courses with 10 students each, reading and short reply (sometimes saved for time and convenience if the same issues occur with multiple students) still took, on average, 2 – 3 hours a week. Likewise, a few student athletes complained that it was an additional chore on weekends. However, the data provided to both the National Collegiate Athletic Association representative and office of the Athletic Director demonstrated that grades increased for students in the classes I used this compared to their other General Education requirements. Further, students could also document in the participation exercise why they were gone from class, creating a further bond between the

student and instructor (should the instructor choose to utilize this as a means of drawing in the student athlete).

Finally, this a methodology that lacks a large amount of data to demonstrate that it is effective and worthwhile. Besides a basic pre/post-test design to see how students reacted to engagement, the information is anecdotal and based mainly on the increased scores and comments in course evaluations. Overall, students feel better about learning and react better to the instructor, something that would be beneficial to both groups in the long run.

## **Conclusions**

Although there is limited evidence, the added gains from using the weekly assessment appears to fit with the literature review of what benefits students most in and out of the classroom for both information retention and increased participation over the semester. First, students gain additional skills through self-assessment. Second, the pre and post test results demonstrate an increased willingness to participate, along with the observation that students learn to communicate and take notes better. This leads to better overall learning throughout the course. Finally, the additional benefit of data for assessment of internal and external factors allows the instructor and department to gather data that helps validate course and department outcomes.

Future studies should consider more precise measures that would allow for better quantitative data that would allow for better comparisons between groups, taking into account factors such as upper v. lower level course instruction strategies, gender, race/ethnicity, along with specific course and department outcomes. As noted, students reported feeling better and closer to the instructor throughout the course due to the weekly assessments. This helps with not only better attention to the course and learning but overall retention for the university. Research

needs to also consider additional measures for how class environment contributes or detracts to retention since many campuses are turning to faculty in recruiting and retaining students.

Post COVID, faculty need to consider a variety of ways to help students remain engaged in and out of the classroom. The increased amount of students with mental health issues nationwide (Vestal 2021) means that these issues will carry over into the college environment where many campuses are not equipped to deal with the issues (Abrams 2022). Research shows that introverts, in particular, are less likely to seek help (Swickert et al., 2002; Atik and Yalçin, 2011; Kakhnovets, 2011). Faculty are at the front-line of this issue. Implementing measures that can help students cope Post COVID and increase participation would be ideal in managing both of these situations in a productive manner.

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