

SMALL AND LARGE GROUP TEACHING

Using class participation to develop student engagement



Image: Wordcloud (J.Carr, via. [WordItOut](#))

This guidance is designed to support your developing practice whether you are new to supporting students in class participation or you are hoping to integrate new approaches.

The guidance includes:

1. **An overview of the benefits of class participation**
2. **Outlines of the different modes of class participation** – whole class discussion, cold calling, collaborative and group discussion, online discussion.
3. **Strategies for assessment** – assessment by the teacher, peer assessment and self-assessment.
4. **An overview of some of the issues** that should consider when implementing class participation activities.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of this guidance further or could contribute to a case study on class participation, please email the Teaching and Learning Centre (tlc@lse.ac.uk) or contact your [Teaching and Learning Centre \(TLC\) departmental adviser](#).

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Benefits of class participation



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Fostering students' active involvement in their own learning increases what is remembered, how well it is assimilated, and how the learning is used in new situations.

Activities involving class participation will:

- Encourage students to be active participants in classroom activities and encourage them to take responsibility for their learning.
- Encourage students to prepare for class.
- Encourage students to reflect on issues and problems that relate to the class.
- Support students in developing their communication and presentation skills.
- Enable students to demonstrate their communication and presentation skills through their interactions with peers and teachers.
- Foster students' analytical skills and their capacity to critique ideas and concepts in a supportive environment.
- Support students in developing their collaborative and team-working skills.

Modes of participation



Image: Idea <https://flic.kr/p/de5dUt>

For class participation to be effective in generating active learning by students we need to align the learning and teaching activity with our intended learning outcomes for the course. As such, the first step in designing a class participation activity must be to ask ourselves:

- What skills, attributes and behaviours are you intending students to develop through class participation?
- What mode of participation will best support the development of those skills, attributes and behaviours?

Whole class discussion

The teacher may pose questions, most commonly relating to a reading or readings students have been asked to read in preparation for an open discussion, but their main role will be to facilitate the discussion between the students. To emphasise that students should engage with each other rather than addressing their responses to the teacher, the chairs in the classroom can be arranged in a horseshoe or circle.

'Cold calling' – the Socratic approach

The teacher poses questions, again most commonly related to a reading or readings students have been asked to read in preparation, but then calls on students at random to provide their answers.

Collaborative and group discussion

Students work in small groups to provide a solution to problems or scenarios posed by the teacher, which could include an element of role play or simulation¹. This small group work can take place either during the session itself or be set as a preparatory activity. Students then present their solutions to the whole class group and respond to questions from other members of the class.

Online discussion

This mode can also be used in conjunction with the collaborative and group mode if the initial group work is to be a preparatory activity. Online discussion such as through Moodle can be used as a substitute for face-to-face whole class discussion. This is often more effective in promoting engagement if students are organised into smaller groups. Students can also be required to complete an individual writing task after the online discussion has closed. The writing task should require the students to address the initial question/s posed by the teacher, but also to cite contributions to the online discussion in order to substantiate their argument.

Whichever mode of participation is chosen the teacher needs to ensure that there is clear alignment between the activity, the intended learning outcomes and any criteria used to assess whether or not those outcomes have been achieved.

¹ If you are new to using simulations, you may find this guide useful. The guide focuses on simulations in Politics, but the guidance is adaptable to all disciplines:

<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Simulations%20in%20Politics%20-%20a%20guide%20to%20best%20practice.pdf>

Issues



Image: Question? <https://flic.kr/p/8RViG5>

Some students may not participate fully in the learning and teaching activities for a variety of reasons – shyness; cultural and/or language issues; class dynamics, including tensions caused by students who have more dominant personalities; simply a ‘normal’ anxiety about participating in an assessed activity. Some strategies to overcome these issues are:

- Preparatory activities can include a writing element based around the types of questions that the teacher is going to pose in class and which the student can read from in their responses rather than having to respond spontaneously.
- If the format of the activity is better suited to students not being aware of the questions that will be asked in advance of the class, teachers can introduce a brief free-writing period after the question is posed e.g. 3 – 5 minutes of silence during which students write their initial thoughts/responses down.
- Teachers can include an online component to the activity. Students who seem very quiet in face-to-face situations can often find it much easier to communicate online. An asynchronous online activity can allow students to think through their responses not pressured by having to listen to those students who might respond more readily and dominant the interactions.
- Teachers can implement a card system that allows students to make a set number of responses on a card, which they hand in at the end of the session. If you implement this strategy you do need to review the assessment criteria to ensure assessment of these contributions are authentic.
- One-to-one sessions with students to discuss their participation can be useful, particularly if teachers enable students to identify the reasons for their lack of participation. The reasons may not be what the teacher had assumed. Teachers should be prepared to ‘coach’ the students, providing practical suggestions for how they might develop their skills.

- Students may believe that assessment of class participation is overly-subjective. As discussed above, it is vital that the assessment criteria are explicit and clearly explained to the students. Students should have the opportunity to question the teacher about the criteria, and the criteria should be reviewed with students on a regular basis.
- Establishing ground rules about behaviour during class discussions is important, including an open discussion about expressing opinions and use of language that is discriminatory. Despite establishing these ground rules, instances may still arise, often unintentionally. Teachers will need to think carefully about the approach they will take when they do – Do you tackle the issue there and then? Is it an issue that can be dealt with after class?
- Facilitating and assessing class participation is hard work! Introducing a more interactive approach to class participation can seem rather a daunting prospect. If you would like advice and guidance from colleagues in the Teaching and Learning Centre please [contact your departmental advisor](#).

Assessment

In their discussion of the assessment of class participation [Bean and Peterson](#) (n.d.) summarise the arguments put forward that the assessment of class participation is wholly subjective. They argue, however, that teachers can create holistic rubrics for assessing class participation providing they take the time to conceptualise what an ideal class session will look like, relate this conceptualisation clearly to intended learning outcomes and explain the rubric to students. Bean and Peterson also suggest that involving the students directly in the design of the rubric may prove effective in promoting engagement.

Assessment by the teacher

In 2015/16, LSE's Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method introduced the use of class participation marks in its Philosophy of Economics (PH311) course. Co-convenor of the course Dr Alex Voorhoeve [outlines this project in his contribution to the Education Blog](#). This approach is now being extended to further courses in the department.

The rubric shown below is adapted from Bean and Peterson's holistic rubric for scoring class participation:

Mark awarded	Characteristics of contribution
6	Student comes to class prepared; contributes readily to the conversation but doesn't dominate it; makes thoughtful contributions that advance the conversation; shows interest in and respect for others' views; and, participates actively in small groups.
5	Student comes to class prepared and makes thoughtful comments when called upon; contributes occasionally without prompting; shows interest in and respect for others' views; and, participates actively in small groups. A 5 score may also be appropriate to an active participant whose contributions are less developed or cogent than those of a 6 but still advance the conversation.
4	Student has completed the preparatory activities. BUT Student participates in discussion, but in a problematic way - talking too much, make rambling or tangential contributions, continually interrupt others or otherwise dominate discussions.
3	Student comes to class prepared, but does not voluntarily contribute to discussions and gives only minimal answers when called upon. Nevertheless these students show interest in the discussion, listen attentively, and take notes
2	Students in this range often seem on the margins of the class and may have a negative effect on the participation of others. Students receiving a 2 often don't participate because they haven't prepared adequately. Students receiving a 1 may be actually disruptive, radiating negative energy via hostile or bored body language, or be overtly rude.
1	

Whilst this rubric may provide a good starting point for us to design our own adapted specifically to take account of intended learning outcomes, we should note the point made previously about ensuring that students understand the grading criteria.

In the example shown below Maznevski (1996) orientates the assessment criteria toward the students:

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

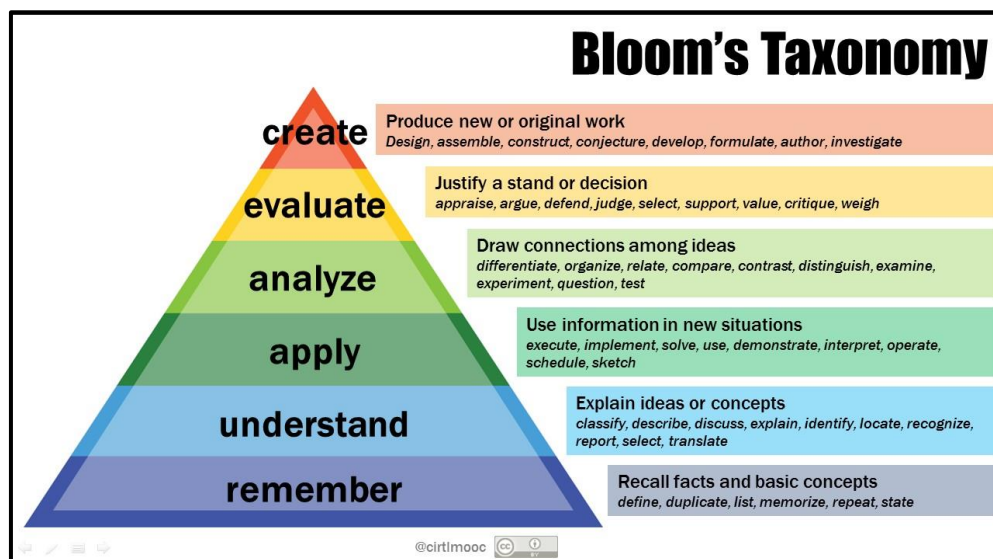
Grade	Criteria
0	Absent
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present, not disruptive. • Tries to respond when called on but does not offer much. • Demonstrates very infrequent involvement in discussion.
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates adequate preparation: knows basic case or reading facts, but does not show evidence of trying to interpret or analyse them. • Offers straightforward information (e.g. straight from the case or reading), without elaboration, or does so very infrequently (perhaps once a class). • Does not offer to contribute to discussion, but contributes to a moderate degree when called on. • Demonstrates sporadic involvement.
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates good preparation: knows case or reading facts well, has thought through implications of them. • Offers interpretations and analysis of case material (more than just facts) to class. • Contributes well to discussion in an ongoing way: responds to other students' points, thinks through own points, questions others in a constructive way, offers and supports suggestions that may be counter to the majority opinion. • Demonstrates consistent ongoing involvement.
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates excellent preparation: has analysed case exceptionally well, relating it to readings and other material (e.g. readings, course material, discussions, experiences etc.). • Offers analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of case material; for example, puts together pieces of the discussion to develop new approaches that take the class further. • Contributes in a very significant way to ongoing discussion: keeps analysis focused, responds very thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to the cooperative argument-building, suggests alternative ways of approaching material and helps class analyse which approaches are appropriate etc. • Demonstrates ongoing very active involvement.

Cold calling discussions

One of the disadvantages of a discussion based on the cold calling approach is that teachers have to assess contributions at the same time as being the main focus for the response.

Whilst the rubrics above can be adapted to the cold calling approach, Bean and Peterson outline an approach taken by Peterson in his Principles of Macroeconomics class. Peterson's approach allows him to score responses during the class itself and then employ a ratio scoring system at the end of term to assign an overall mark. For further details of this approach see Bean and Peterson, p.4).

Bean and Peterson also suggest that rubrics should take into account the difficulty of questions asked and the responses required. They suggest that Bloom's taxonomy is a useful guide to assessing the difficulty of the task i.e. if you are asking students to simply recall facts outlined in a preparatory reading, their answer should carry a lower weighting than if you were asking the student to draw connections between ideas. Appendix 1 contains examples of the types of questions that could be asked during cold calling discussions categorised according to Bloom's taxonomy.



Online discussions

The University of New South Wales, Australia provide a comprehensive guide to setting up, moderating and assessing online discussions, accessed via [this link](#).

[Lai \(2012\)](#) discusses how online discussion can form part of a wider set of assessed activities. Students are required to read a specific text, contribute to an online small group analysis of that text and then write an individually authored analysis of the text. Lai uses the online discussion element of the activities to assess a particular set of skills and dispositions rather than discipline-specific knowledge, in this instance critical thinking skills and dispositions.

Critical thinking skills and/or dispositions	Marking criteria
Values good reasoning	Made relevant comments Articulated (your) ideas clearly Presented well-structured arguments
Disposition to seek reasons	Posed questions to the group Sparked discussion and comments from others
Fair-minded in the assessment of reasons	Responded to criticisms as well as compliments Demonstrated consideration and respect of others
Governs his or her beliefs and activities accordingly	Built on the ideas and contributions of others. Contributed to the learning experiences of others.

In her article Lai provides examples of how to grade contributions using the assessment criteria shown above.

Everything you are saying here is true, but it leaves us in a very difficult situation. **[demonstrating consideration and respect for others]** By choosing the ability to acknowledge why we suffer, as the distinguishing factor for considering interests, you are not saying that all human's interests should be considered over animals. You are actually saying that only humans that can understand why they are suffering should have the same consideration of interests. **[making relevant statements]** For example a baby can't understand why it is suffering. When it is hungry it cries, this does not mean it knows that it needs substances with nutritional value in its stomach. But it does come to learn that if it has food then its suffering stops, only later in its life comes the realisation of why it needs food. Even human infants and adults have times when they are suffering without knowing why. In fact there are many times in life where you may be suffering and never truly understand why. Does this mean our suffering should not be considered on the same level as someone who always knows why he/she is suffering? **[Clear articulation of ideas by use of examples]**

What I am proposing (and Singer in his article) is that it is not the why, rather the fact that they are suffering. It doesn't matter that a baby can't pin point why it is suffering, the same way it doesn't matter why a dog can't, but it matters that they are suffering. Because in their world of comprehension this is the worst this that they can experience and there should be no discrimination in the consideration of interests. Now this doesn't mean give animals rights like humans, they have no need or understanding of this. But they can understand and experience their suffering, so being the higher, more rational beings; shouldn't we give them the same consideration in avoiding this suffering? **[Posing questions, sparking discussion, contributing to the learning experiences of others, well-structured arguments]**

Peer assessment

One issue that can arise when using the collaborative and group discussion mode is that students may feel that assessment carried out solely by the teacher does not adequately recognise the contributions made by individuals to the group activity.

One way of overcoming these concerns is to introduce an element of peer assessment within the group. [Lombardi \(2008\)](#) provides two examples of templates that could be used as part of the overall assessment strategy, with a proportion of the overall score being allocated to peer assessment. The templates – one more qualitatively focused and other more quantitatively focus – can be found on p.9 of Lombardi's paper.

Self assessment

[Knight \(2008\)](#) discusses how students' perception of their contributions and the teacher's assessment of participation can be a problem, particularly if that discrepancy undermines the students perceived self-efficacy and thus discourages the student from participating fully in future class discussions. A strategy that we can use to address this potential issue early on in the process is to ask the students to carry out a self-assessment of their contributions.

One approach suggested by Knight is to provide a brief questionnaire with graded options and ask students to assign themselves a grade. They are then asked to provide a brief rationale for the grade they have awarded themselves. The teacher can then collect the questionnaires, provide a brief written response and return to the students.

In the example Knight provides the questions focus on frequency of contributions – I contribute several times/ at least once/ often/ occasionally/ rarely – but this example could be adapted to focus more on the quality and/or nature of the contributions.

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Appendix: Questions categorised according to Bloom's taxonomy

Remember Recall facts and basic concepts	Understand Explain ideas and concepts	Apply Use information in new situations	Analyse Draw connections among ideas	Evaluate Justify a stand or a decision	Create Produce new or original work
Can you list three...?	How would you compare...? Contrast...?	How would you use...?	How is ___ related to ___?	How would you improve...?	Do you agree with the actions/ outcomes...?
What is...?	How would you rephrase the meaning...?	How would you solve --- - using what you have learned?	Why do you think...?	What would happen if...?	How would you prove/ disprove...?
When did...?	How would you summarise...?	What approach would you use to...?	What conclusions would you draw...?	Can you propose an alternative...?	How would you evaluate...?
Why did...?	Which statements support...?	What other way would you plan to...?	What evidence could you find...?	How would you test...?	How would you justify...?
How would you describe...?	What is the main idea...?	What would result if...?	Can you make a distinction between...?	Can you predict the outcome if...?	How would you select...?
How would you summarise ...?	What facts or ideas show...?	What elements would you choose to change...?	What is the function of...?	Can you construct a model that would change...?	Based on what you know, how would you explain...?
Where is...?	Which is the best answer...?	What facts would you select to show...?	What ideas justify...?	What can be done to minimise...m aximise...?	What choice would you have made...?