ASSESSING STUDENT PARTICIPATION: 
A RUBRIC FOR HOLISTIC STUDENT-INFORMED ASSESSMENT

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Introduction
Student participation is an important component of undergraduate courses that encourages knowledge acquisition and skills development through active learning. As such, many university and college instructors incorporate participation grades within their syllabi as a means of assessing student engagement with course material. The realm of student participation, however, suffers conceptually from a narrow definition and operationally from limited student engagement and assessment challenges.

During my own undergraduate experience, I found myself frustrated with participation grades given their dependence upon raising my hand and answering questions shyly or contributing comments to plenary conversations that I was too intimidated to join. I was resentful that being attentive and reflecting quietly upon material in class, as well as outside-of-class involvement (through readings, conversations with classmates, or connections made to or within other classes and beyond) were not taken into account. Ultimately, I had little input towards an assessment of my engagement in the course as a whole and my ‘participation’ was deemed inadequate as a result. This experience has encouraged me as a university instructor to think more broadly about student participation defined as course engagement and to assess accordingly.

The aim of this paper is to provide a holistic and student-informed means of assessing student participation (read engagement) in undergraduate courses. By doing so, I hope to address a number of ‘participation’ shortfalls as identified in teaching and learning scholarship and, most importantly, to encourage students’ active learning through an expanded definition and assessment of their participation. As an instructional contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning, I do not provide thorough evidence-based research on the effectiveness of the active participation template introduced here. I hope to inspire other scholars to do so, however, through future contributions focused on student participation in higher education.

The paper is organized as follows: rationale for incorporating student participation; overview of student participation shortfalls identified in existing scholarship; argument in favour of course engagement rather than in-class participation; presentation of an ‘active participation’
rubric and brief insights gained and lessons learned from its application; and conclusion offering suggestions for ‘next steps’ in student participation.

Rationale for Student Participation
Student participation is viewed as an important factor in undergraduate learning and is seen as facilitating active learning. This is particularly the case as traditional lecture-only formats in higher education are losing prevalence in the classroom, replaced with more diverse delivery methods offering students more interactions from their classroom experience (Rocca 2010:186). Active learning requires students to become the centre of their learning (Warren 1997:16) and “involves students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison 1991:2). Active learning suggests that students need to be involved in the learning process to internalize the information (Pepper & Pathak 2008:260); it also provides students opportunities to reflect upon how they learn and what they think and feel about what they are learning. Such student-centred learning appears to yield positive results (Peterson 2001:189). In particular, participation in undergraduate courses encourages students to prepare for class, to think about and reflect on course content, to engage in higher levels of thinking (e.g. interpretation, analysis, synthesis), to interact socially, and to develop communication skills. In turn, students are more motivated, learn better, become critical thinkers, self-report gains in character, improve functioning in society, and earn higher grades (Jones 2008:59-60; Pepper & Pathak 2008:360-316; Rocca 2010:188).

Many undergraduate instructors include a ‘participation’ component on course outlines (Jones 2008) and allot grades to measure student engagement ranging from 5 to 50 percent (Peterson 2001:187); arguably, class participation grades have become an expected part of undergraduate syllabi (Bean & Peterson 1998). Countering sparse empirical evidence (yet much anecdotal support) for such claims, Rogers’ (2013:17) study of 352 college instructors (of courses with less than 50 students) confirms that of the 82% indicating ‘participation’ as a formal expectation state in course syllabi, 75% reported grading student participation.

Despite its purported benefits, the issue of student participation remains under-researched. Since Karp and Yoels’ (1976) seminal study on classroom participation, which revealed ‘consolidation of responsibility’ whereby few students participate, links to class preparation, and peer pressure as powerful regulator of student contributions, this issue has received intermittent attention, typically focusing on identification of student characteristics
influencing participation (Rogers 2013:13). Recent scholarship points to a need to focus upon out-of-classroom participation (Rocca 2010:186) and specific methods used to determine participation grades (Rogers 2013:18).

**Shortfalls of Student Participation**

Existing scholarship on student participation reflects that this realm suffers conceptually from a narrow definition and operationally from limited student engagement and assessment challenges. These three shortfalls are discussed below, providing a rationale for a more holistic and student-informed rubric for active participation in undergraduate courses.

First, participation is a multidimensional construct yet it is often conceptualized in terms of active discussion in upper-level courses with student speech a commonly accepted if simplified operationalization of the term (Rocca 2010; Rogers 2013; Fritschner 2000). Specifically, classroom discussions are often cited as the main vehicle of participation and active learning (Pepper & Pathak 2008:260). Ideal discussions involve all students participating (e.g. responding to questions asked) and being interested, learning and listening to others’ comments and suggestions; instructors seem to favour quantitative assessment measures of these scenarios (Rocca 2010:187). Interestingly, while the predominant conceptualization of participation as in-class discussion remains, some scholars are pushing definition boundaries outwards. The literature includes acknowledgement that out-of-class communication exists and clearly is important (e.g. Rocca 2010:186) or even that learning that occurs beyond the classroom is “the most significant educational experience for roughly 40% of students” (Moffat 1989:32 cited in Peterson 2001:188). There are numerous in-between spaces and moments of a course where participation takes place. Further, previous research has found that outside-of-class communication is linked to positive outcomes for students, and relatively few students engage regularly in more conventional ‘class participation’ (Bippus & Young 2000:311).

Second, students learn in different ways and requiring students to speak in classrooms may be interpreted as coercion or is likely to be counterproductive (Pepper & Pathak 2008:361; Rogers 2013:18). This may be particularly the case for those students who are shy or lack confidence or it may emerge along gender or racial lines, generally demotivating students from learning. Also numerous logistical issues may present challenges to student participation, for example class size whereby it is more difficult to students to speak up
amongst a larger group or seating arrangements whereby a seats-facing-forwards scenario provides a non-conversational environment, and the instructor themselves, in terms of their attitude, approachability, and response to student comments, may be a deterrent (Rocca 2010:189-199). Differing degrees and types of student engagement emerges as a significant issue in Bippus and Young’s (2000) study whereby students consider several types of involvement, not just in-class discussion, to be ‘participation’. For example, central to students’ notions of participation were being fair and constructive with other students (especially in small groups contexts) and being present and alert during class. Students’ behaviours were found to be more reflective of ‘course involvement’ than traditional ‘class participation’, suggesting that students do not recognize the conceptual difference between being involved in a course and participating in class (Bippus & Young 2000:316).

Third, assessing student participation is not an easy task, and in fact may be one of the most controversial and difficult challenges that instructors face (Pepper & Pathak 2008:361). Challenges arise because participation may be poorly defined or cumbersome and difficult to track in a reliable manner given need for instructor recall (Armstrong & Boud 1983:36; Peterson 2001:187). Further, student participation is often assessed impressionistically given instructor bias and grade contamination whereby it is used as a ‘fudge factor’ when figuring final grades (Bean & Peterson 1998:33). That participation assessment is a subjectivity activity means that it is almost impossible for instructors to assign grades in a fair and objective manner (Armstrong & Boud 1983; Pepper and Pathak 2008:361). Instructors often fail to provide assessment criteria or instruction on how to improve participation, and interpretation of student behaviour is notoriously difficult (Bean and Peterson 1998:33).

Despite conceptual and operational challenges, impetus for student participation remains given that it fosters and reflects active learning in undergraduate courses. Grading class participation can send positive signals to students about what an instructor values (e.g. critical thinking, active learning, listening and speaking skills, ability to join a discipline’s conversation), and when students know their contribution is being graded, they adjust their study habits to be better prepared for discussion (Bean and Peterson 1998:33). Indeed numerous scholars argue that participation plays an important role in learning and deserves evaluations (see Pepper & Pathak 2008:361).
Embracing & Assessing Course Participation

Addressing the above detailed shortfalls of student participation requires that we talk about more holistic course participation rather than class participation given that ‘participation’ can mean many things (Peterson 2001). Participation can mean ‘being there’ (e.g. exposure or retention rates) or ‘taking part’ (e.g. doing activities) but it can and should be much more – it may include readily speaking, thinking, reading, role-taking, risking and engaging oneself and others, and it may occur inside or outside the classroom confines (Peterson 2001:187). It can be fostered through various activities, including initiate-respond-evaluate, cold-calling, open and unstructured talking, stimulated discussion, note cards, sticky notes, three-column notes, writing prompts, brainstorming, (un)structured discussions, which vary according to intent and type of participation (Jones 2008:60-61).

In my courses, I encourage student engagement through a variety of in-class exercises to capture different degrees and types of participation and to involve students of all learning styles. For example, I use focused-free writing (a three-minute moment to reflect on a question or issue raised) as a way for students to independently engage with course material during class sessions. Or think-pair-share opportunities to allow students to interact briefly with classmates or for longer duration via small group work. At the same time, I increasingly offer purposive outside-of-class opportunities for participation through, for example, journaling or short commentary papers meant to spark personal reflection on process or on specific course content. A range of participation options allows for inclusion of the majority of students throughout the course, not just those who dominate classroom discussions (Bean and Peterson 1998:38).

Beyond expanding the conceptual definition ‘participation’, more student-informed assessment would serve as a valuable complement to instructor-informed grading alone. Rocca (2010:187) highlights numerous studies, including Melvin (1988), Melvin and Lord (1995), Burchfield & Sappington (1999), Dancer & Kamvounias (2005), Gopinath (1999) and Fritschner (2000) that compare and contrast student and instructor evaluations of participation with both similarities and differences in grades emerging. Broadly, these studies suggest that student perspectives on their own participation are important to consider in assessment strategies. Bean and Peterson (1998:35) argue that ‘impressionistic’ assessment may be alleviated through more holistic or analytic rubrics that include student self-assessment (asking questions such as Where do you currently rank yourself on the rubric? Why?). Such
self-assessments encourage students to think reflectively about their role in course discussions and exercises and provide instructors with useful insights regarding the broader learning environment.

**An Active Course Participation Rubric**

To operationalize a holistic definition and student-informed assessment of participation, I offer a simple rubric for ‘active course participation’ at the undergraduate level comprised of two parts. The first is an instructor-informed participation assessment (Table 1) offering criteria for participation along a 10-point scale informed by Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956). This is a fairly standard participation rubric that relies on instructor observation of student involvement in a course, most often through class activities, that may be quantitatively and qualitatively recorded on a daily or weekly basis.

**Table 1: Instructor-Informed Participation Assessment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Earned</th>
<th>Participation Criteria</th>
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| 9-10         | • Demonstrates excellent preparation: has analyzed material exceptionally well, relating it to readings, other material, and other experiences  
• Offers sophisticated synthesis, analysis, and evaluation of course material  
• Contributes significantly to ongoing discussion: responds very thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to cooperative argument-building, suggests alternative ways of approaching material and helps class analyze which approaches are appropriate  
• Demonstrates ongoing excellent active involvement |
| 8-9          | • Demonstrates very good preparation: has analyzed material very well, relating it to readings, other material, and other experiences  
• Offers strong synthesis, analysis, and evaluation of course material  
• Contributes often significantly to ongoing discussion: responds thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to cooperative argument-building, suggests alternative ways of approaching material and helps class analyze which approaches are appropriate  
• Demonstrates ongoing very good active involvement |
| 7.5-8        | • Demonstrates good preparation: has analyzed material well, relating it to readings, other material, and other experiences  
• Offers good synthesis, analysis, and evaluation of course material  
• Contributes at times significantly to ongoing discussion: responds thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to cooperative argument-building, suggests alternative ways of |
approaching material and helps class analyze which approaches are appropriate
• Demonstrates ongoing good active involvement

| 7-7.5 | • Demonstrates solid preparation: has analyzed material, relating it to readings, other material, and other experiences
• Offers solid synthesis, analysis, and evaluation of course material
• Contributes solidly to ongoing discussion: responds thoughtfully to other students' comments, contributes to cooperative argument-building, suggests alternative ways of approaching material and helps class analyze which approaches are appropriate
• Demonstrates ongoing solid active involvement |

| 6-7 | • Demonstrates average preparation: knows case or reading facts well, has thought through implications of them
• Offers interpretations and analysis of course 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 |

| 5-6 | • Demonstrates adequate preparation: knows basic case or reading facts, but does not show evidence of trying to interpret or analyze them
• Offers straightforward information (e.g., straight from the case or reading) without elaboration or very infrequently
• Does not offer to contribute to discussion, but contributes to a moderate degree when called on
• Demonstrates sporadic involvement |

| >5 | • Present, not disruptive
• Tries to respond when called on but does not offer much
• Demonstrates very infrequent involvement in discussion |

The second rubric is a student-informed participation assessment (Table 2) providing students the opportunity to assess themselves according to criteria describing an ideal ‘active participant’. This self-assessment provides insights beyond those an instructor may observe during class sessions, thus extending conceptually the definition of participation and attempting to measure the degree of engagement achieved. Notably, it offers reflection and assessment of attentiveness, as well as connections made between course material and other milieu. Thus while simple in design, this rubric pushes forward boundaries of what counts as participation, the degree to which students engage in these realms, and the extent to which students feel these realms contribute to their overall learning experience.
In order to develop the rubric, Question 1 was informed by scholarly literature (detailed in previous sections) that collectively identifies elements of active learning (e.g. class preparation, session attentiveness, discussion contributions, exercise engagement, connecting class materials to other contexts). Question 2 was based on formal course evaluations that ask students to rate the level of effort required in a course relative to the level of effort required in other courses. Questions 3 and 4 were included so as to ensure that my own perspectives on which students exhibit ‘active participation’ or what this entails did not pre-determine the possibilities of engagement – these questions also tried to establish what I may have ‘missed’ as an instructor.

Table 2: Student-Informed Participation Assessment

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<tr>
<th>PART A</th>
<th>Please rate your “active participation” in GEOG*XXXX based on the following:</th>
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The ideal “active participants” are students who contribute to most of the discussions during every class period, or try to contribute by raising their hands often when questions are asked. These students are highly engaged and take seriously in discussions, asking/answering Qs, sharing insights, making comments, and using these moments to explore their understanding and thoughts regarding course material throughout the duration of class sessions; they always come to class prepared for the readings. Ideal active participants are also those students who engage with course materials in class by making links with other course offerings, and processing or relating information learned in a course in other realms of their lives.

Student self-assessment of their “active participation” is based on the extent to which they feel they fit the above ideal, as translated into the following (out of 10):

- A+ range = between 9 and 10
- A range = between 8 and 9
- B+ range = between 7.5 and 8
- B range = between 7 and 7.5
- C range = between 6 and 7
- D range = between 5 and 6
- Poor range = less than 5

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<tr>
<th>PART B</th>
<th>Please answer the following questions:</th>
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1. How would describe your “active participation” in GEOG*XXXX in terms of the following elements?

   (i) Preparation for class (keeping up with readings, discussions with peers etc.)
   (ii) Attentiveness in class sessions (paying attention rather than laptopping/daydreaming, actively listening, minimally disruptive etc.)
   (iii) Contribution to class discussions (asking/answering Qs, sharing insights, making comments etc.)
Engagement in class exercises (focused writing, think-pair-share etc.)
(v) Connections to class material (links made to other courses, assignments, media, pop culture, everyday life, etc.)

2. How has your participation in GEOG*XXXX differed from other classes at UofG?

3. Out of your fellow classmates, who do you feel were particularly “active participants” of GEOG*XXXX? Why?

4. What other elements do you feel should be considered in assessing your participation grade?

The first time I applied this two-part participation assessment rubric, I had naively allotted ten minutes for students to fill out the questions listed above. Yet my class of forty-five students took a solid sixty minutes, heads down, writing madly with and a determined energy in the room. I was amazed at not only the seriousness with which students took their self-assessment but the insights that emerged on how students learn, what they feel contributes most significantly to their learning experiences, as well as reflections on course content and design. While subsequent use of the rubric has required approximately twenty minutes for students to complete but with no less intensity and attention to detail.

When I read their self-assessments I was struck by a number of things. First, students were very honest and reflexive in their comments. One student, for example, rated themselves as overall “poor” based on their preparation for class: “While I have read most of the book now in order to complete assignments, I did not read every chapter prior to the presentation” or another student candidly and constructively noted “I usually pay attention in class but suffer from drowsiness with a side order of cranky which limits my ability to stay on task in class – I could improve my note-taking skills to be more successful in class”. Second, students viewed peer-learning as valuable (contrary to anecdotal evidence elsewhere that this is not the case) and included comments explaining its impact, for example: “[Student X] includes very social, intellectual input to the discussion causing me to reassess what I think of the topic at hand”. Third, students shared insights on the many ways that they ‘participate’ in a course. One student, for example, wrote “I recently flew to Calgary . . . The person beside me asked what I was studying at school… and I had a great answer for them as to ‘what is geography’ [what we had discussed in class the week before]”. Fourth, students offered suggestions of participatory elements that were or were not working for them – in particular they gave constructive criticism on incorporating podcasts more effectively or providing clearer directions for focused-free writing exercises to help them feel more comfortable. Ultimately,
these initial student-informed assessments encouraged me to continue along a path of expanding the conceptual definition of participation and seeking holistic and more effective ways of assessment.

**Conclusion**

In sum, this paper provides a holistic and student-informed means of assessing student participation in undergraduate courses. It emphasizes an extended conceptualization of the ways in which and degrees to which participation take place both inside and outside the classroom, and encourages student-informed assessment as a complement to instructor-informed measures. The paper thus addresses a number of conceptual and operational ‘participation’ shortfalls identified in existing scholarship of teaching and learning.

Ultimately, I hope through this paper to inspire others to take productive ‘next steps’ in our understanding and exploration of student participation in higher education. For example, it is important to investigate further specific ways to operationalize course participation – for example, using student portfolios to rigorously and systematically document engagement throughout a course. Perhaps most important is to engage in evidenced-based research as to the effectiveness of course participation (rather than or compared to class participation) in achieving particular student learning outcomes.

**References**


Rogers, Susan L. "Calling the Question: Do College Instructors Actually Grade Participation?." *College Teaching* 61.1 (2013): 11-22.