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Participation, Motivation, and Engagement

Abstract:

This study examines perceptions and habits of participation in a 10th grade world history/world geography course at an urban public high school. Observation, surveying, and the intervention of a more participatory class provide the data for this report.

Learning how students view the idea of participation and their own participation will help their teacher shape a classroom where more students are motivated and willing to participate.

Introduction/Focal Concerns:

My action research occurred in a 10th grade world history/world geography course with a wide range of reading ability, comprehension level, and focus. 35 students are enrolled in the class and generally 28-32 are present. Much of the class time is spent on management and discipline rather than teaching content or working on analysis or critical thinking skill. Lesson plans are designed with thought going to both maintaining order and teaching and challenging the students. Few students ask questions or make on-task comments, disruptions are frequent, students are transient, and many students do not effectively use their work time during class. My project attempts to better understand students' perception of their participation and the factors behind their participation habits.

Research Questions:

- What is the profile of participation in the class?
- How do students view their own participation?

- What factors do students think positively or negatively affect their participation?
- How does the behavior and participation of others in the classroom affect students?

Summary of the Literature:

A great deal of education literature, particularly that focused on constructivist education, emphasizes students' need for choice and control in creating their education (Margolis and McCabe 222). Without a sense of choice, control, and relevancy, many students have little intrinsic motivation to participate. Some teachers value participation¹ as a way to gauge student learning and understanding, or to challenge the idea of the teacher as all-knowing and the students as simply receptacles for the teachers' knowledge. Though teachers can see the benefit of having student discussions they may not know how to lead a good dialogue, and students will not always respond well to teachers' good intentions (Dallimore 104). Karp and Yoels, cited in "Participation in Classroom Discussion," write that factors decreasing participation include the realization that other people in the class will probably answer the questions, instructors not asking specific students for responses, and instructions giving little wait time before answering questions themselves. Alternately, a students' silence can be their way of listening or an attempt to conceal their lack of understanding of the material or confidence in the classroom language (Tatar 289). This quote from a study of Turkish students at US colleges and universities describing this disincentive to participate:

“Because they found it inappropriate to subject other students to their efforts to communicate, they partly believed that the right to speak should be reserved for people who were able to communicate effectively with the language and even accused themselves of ‘sabotaging’ a good discussion by trying to join in with limited language abilities.” (Tatar 291)

¹ Unless otherwise noted, “participation” refers to voicing a question, response, or comment.

These different limitations to participation are present in every classroom, but sharing opinions and developing oral argumentation skills is important enough to most teachers that they assign a grade for participation. Grading participation can motivate students and also signals to them the importance of participation (Dallimore 105). When assessing participation teachers must use caution to not punish quiet, introverted, or non-native-speaker students (Bean and Peterson 38). This can be accomplished by creating and valuing diverse modes of participation such as whole-class discussion, journaling, asking questions before or after class, and on-task collaboration in group work (Bean and Peterson 34). Additionally, the teacher must consider the quality as well as quantity of a students' participation.

The strategy of diversifying methods of participation is a significant way to increase class participation. Other suggestions include peer-to-peer conversations about the material, using response cards for fact recall, teachers waiting longer for student responses to questions, and working with discussion dominators to occasionally step back from the conversation (Hartley 369, Hartley 364, Bean and Peterson 38).

Intervention and Data Collection:

From this theoretical background I developed a two month action research project on participation. My project combines quantitative data collection about student participation with qualitative collection on student perceptions of their own and others participation. Additionally, through my instructional design I will conduct a class with more opportunities for participation to see how students respond.

The quantitative data collection will be done through my observation of four class periods to record how often and which students ask on-task questions, make on-task responses to questions or comments, or make off-task questions, comments, or behaviors such as sleeping or loud side conversations. The qualitative collection will occur through surveys (see Appendix C). At the beginning of the project students will complete a self-assessment of their participation during the previous week and answer questions about what affects their participation and what could be changed to increase and improve their participation in class. Then I will observe student participation to collect quantitative data about on- and off-task time. At the end of the project (eight weeks later) students will complete a self-assessment of their participation over the entire trimester and a lengthier survey about the role they see for participation in the classroom and how their participation positively or negatively affects the classroom environment.

These data collection processes have two goals: the first, obvious, one is to collect information from multiple perspectives on how students participate in class. The second, more abstract and less quantifiable, goal is to encourage students to analyze their learning and recognize that they are actors in their education. High school students, especially in low-tracked classes such as this one, are rarely asked to evaluate themselves. The qualitative surveys let them share their opinion about their learning. Additionally, students were asked to consider the whole classroom environment to make them more aware of the positive or negative affect that they may have on other student's ability to learn. The intervention of a class with multiple forms of vocal and non-vocal participation will hopefully create a more accessible environment for participation. Some

students do not want to speak alone in front of the classroom but may want to engage the material in different ways.

Ethics:

The students participating in my research are minors and a captive audience in their classroom. Therefore, ethics are of the utmost importance. My role as an aide as well as a researcher gave me the relationships and the knowledge of the classroom to develop an action research project that hopes to improve the quality of teaching and potential for learning for these students. As other students in the seminar have eloquently stated, bringing typically-marginalized and lower-educated students up to grade level so they can be competitive with their peers is an act of societal change and justice. I am invested in the development of analytical and reflective skills in my students, and this project has given them practice in those areas. The project is worthwhile for students to participate in because currently most do not succeed in this class. Therefore it is valuable to find out why. This project offers self-analysis and analysis of the classroom, encourages students to take greater control of their education, and provides a new pedagogical strategy.

The first survey given to students about factors influencing their participation could have significant unexpected results. Students' lives outside of the classroom likely have a strong affect on how often and well they participate. When I administered the surveys I knew that it was possible that a student could share personal information about compromised health, comfort, or safety. Had this occurred I would consult my supervising teacher about reporting laws and opportunities for counseling or other health services for the student. When administering the survey I encouraged students to focus on

factors influencing participation that are within the classroom (they don't like history, other students are disruptive, the questions are boring, etc.). This limits the likelihood that students will share personal details and also focuses students onto those factors that are within the control of the teacher and students.

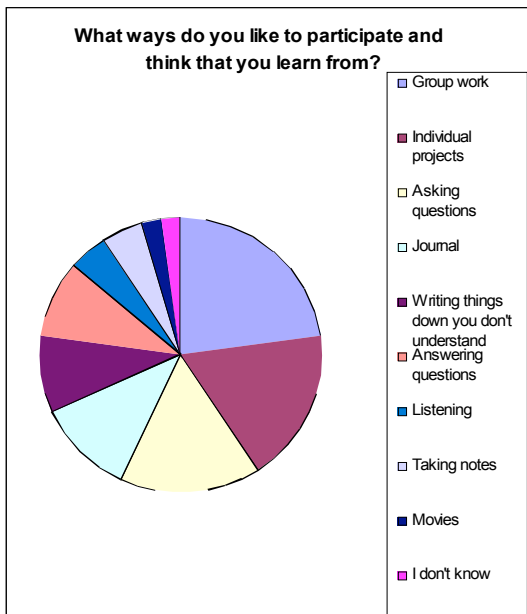
The school, teacher, and students remain anonymous in my work. The survey results will be shared with my supervising teacher and a student teacher in the classroom.

Data Analysis and Interpretation:

The first major component of my research was collecting information about student perceptions of their participation. At the beginning of the project students graded their participation in the previous week. Scores ranged from 12 to 24 out of a possible 25, with an average grade of 19. In the final survey covering participation for the whole first trimester grades ranged from N (failing) to A, with an average grade of C-. The significant difference between these two surveys is that students actually received the grade they gave themselves on the first survey, whereas the second survey was anonymous and thus did not affect their grade. That the averages and ranges are so close when one had the power to affect their grade and the other did not is significant. This shows that students' do not falsely inflate their participation grade when it counts toward their grade or, alternately, that they always falsely inflate their participation. In either case, the consistency between an assessment when it counts toward their grade and an anonymous assessment supports the validity of this data as an evaluative tool of students' perceptions of their participation and thus that it should continue to be used.

The large range in self-assigned participation scores reflects my observed disparities in participation in the classroom. I saw few students engage in on-task

participation, many of them frequently exhibit off-task behavior or participation, and almost one-third of the class go unnoticed during my participation, displaying neither significant on-task nor off-task behaviors or participation (see Appendix D). Given this, it surprised me that 87.5% (14/16) responded that participation in class is important. These differences between practiced participation and the value students assign to participation provide an excellent opening for dialogue between teacher and students about



students value participation as a way of learning and signaling their knowledge to the teacher, as expressed in their survey responses, then we must look further into why they do not participate in class. Some students reported that they do not participate out loud because they are afraid of being wrong or do not like to speak out loud. The graph to the left displays responses to a question on preferred methods of participation, and indicates the need for

diversity of participation options in the class. Developing more private forms of participation such as writing down questions, small group discussions, or individual conferences with the teacher would allow for the feedback and questions that come with participation without speaking in front of the whole class. Attentive but silent listening is also a form of participation and should be acknowledged as an important contribution to the class.

Another interesting contradiction in my research was between students' perception of their affect on the classroom and how they felt the classroom environment affects them:

	<i>How did your behavior and participation positively or negatively affect the classroom?</i>	<i>How did the behavior and participation of other people in the classroom positively or negatively affect you?</i>
<i>Positively</i>	10 responses	3 responses
<i>Negatively</i>	2 responses	10 responses
<i>Neither</i>	5 responses	6 responses
<i>Both</i>	2 responses	1 responses

This chart of student responses shows that most students think that their behavior and participation positively or neutrally affects the class, whereas they feel that the behavior and participation of other students negatively or neutrally affects them. The responses to the question of how classroom behavior affects you received the strongest response of all the questions, including "I wish people would stop talking so we could learn something" and "They don't let me learn." Only 4 students (the Negatively and Both respondents) see themselves as causes of class disruptions. From my observations I doubt that just 4 students cause all the disruptions in class. If students do not see themselves as personally responsible for the off-task environment, then how will this environment change?

Finally, one of the most interesting responses in the final survey was a student who gave themselves a D for participation over the trimester but wrote "I tried hard and paid attention" for why you gave yourself that grade. This is a complicated answer; if a student tries hard and pays attention why wouldn't they give themselves a higher grade? It raises the question, though, of what students think that the participation grade

measures. If the grade marks simply how you perform, then if you try hard but do not do well you would not give yourself a good grade. If grades measure improvement and effort, though, trying hard and paying attention should result in a grade much higher than a D. The final survey did not ask students to describe exactly what their participation grade measured, but it would be interesting to do further research to figure this out and perhaps include improvement and effort in the expectations of participation.

Action Plan:

My action research project focused on data collection; now the question becomes how to use these findings to strengthen the classroom. The next step with this research is seeing if student analysis of participation changes behavior. I recommend that my supervising teacher share and discuss my study results with the class. Important questions to cover include:

- Were you surprised by how few questions were asked and how few students spoke?
- If such a large percentage of students see participation as important, why do so few students participate frequently?
- Knowing how affected other students are by the disruptive classroom environment, what do we need to change in the next trimester? How can we be more respectful to each other?

I predict that students will be surprised by the results. I do not know of prior occasions when research or surveys have occurred in a class and the students directly receive the results, so that experience in itself will be new. After presenting the information and having a discussion I encourage my teacher to provide multiple and varied opportunities for participation during class for the next few weeks. If possible, he could then observe and chart participation for a few classes to see if anything has changed.

Final Reflection:

Conducting this action research offered me an excellent opportunity in the classroom. Giving the first survey early on allowed me to establish my role as both a researcher and an aide in the classroom. I think that my interest in students' opinions also helped me gain their trust. Observing the classes gave me a sharper eye for watching the classroom and students' engagement with each other and the teacher. I really enjoyed reading the survey results and in a large classroom this is an efficient way to learn what students think. I hope that my research aides my supervising teacher in working with this class for the remainder of the year.

Appendix A: Annotated Bibliography

Bean, John C. and Dean Peterson. "Grading Classroom Participation." *New Direction for Teaching and Learning* No. 74 (Summer 1998): 33-40.

This was the most useful article that I read on class participation. The authors offer an insightful but concise review of the literature on classroom participation as well as realistic strategies to improve classroom participation. The research and recommendations are based on undergraduate students but much of the information applies to the high school classroom. The article discusses diverse methods of participation, how to create an effective participation assessment, and ways to work with discussion dominators.

Margolis, Howard and Patrick P. McCabe. "Improving Self-Efficacy and Motivation: What to Do, What to Say." *Intervention in School and Clinic* Vol. 41, No.4 (March 2006): 218-227.

A good theoretical overview of the four sources of self-efficacy and how they relate to student motivation and performance. The authors give really good techniques to improve confidence and self-efficacy such as moderately challenging assignments, peer modeling, and teaching learning strategies. The section on student choice and interest was especially useful for this paper. Authors also include multiple charts and graphs to plan lessons for increased self-efficacy and chart progress.

Tatar, Sibel. 'Why Keep Silent? The Classroom Participation Experiences of Non-Native-English-Speaking Students.' *Language and Intercultural Communication*.

Vol. 5, No. 3 & 4, 2005. 284-293.

Most of the literature that I encountered on participation focused on how to encourage more students to speak up in your classroom. This article pushed me to examine why I so strongly value that particular form of participation and the reasons that students may not want to participate. The Turkish students at American colleges and universities identify five reasons for not speaking, including as a way of listening and out of a lack of confidence in the language and material. The students' critique of low-quality discussions also gives a good reminder of the need to value quality, as well as quantity, of participation.

Appendix B: Bibliography

- Bean, John C. and Dean Peterson. "Grading Classroom Participation." *New Direction for Teaching and Learning* No. 74 (Summer 1998): 33-40.
- Burchfield, Colin M. and John Sappington. "Participation in Class Discussion." *Teaching of Psychology* Vol. 26, No.4 (1999): 290-291.
- Dallimore, Elise J., Julie H. Hertenstein and Marjorie B. Platt. "Classroom Participation and Discussion Effectiveness: Student-Generated Strategies." *Communication Education* Vol. 53, No. 1 (January 2004): 103-115.
- Hartley, Eunice T., Melissa A. Bray, Thomas J. Kehle. "Self-Modeling as an Intervention to Increase Student Classroom Participation." *Psychology in the Schools* Vol. 34, No.4 (1998): 363-372.
- Hedeen, Timothy. "The Reverse Jigsaw: A Process of Cooperative Learning and Discussion." *Teaching Sociology* Vol. 31, No.3 (July 2003): 325-332
- Margolis, Howard and Patrick P. McCabe. "Improving Self-Efficacy and Motivation: What to Do, What to Say." *Intervention in School and Clinic* Vol. 41, No.4 (March 2006): 218-227.
- Moskowitz, Joel M., Janet H. Malvin, Gary A. Schaeffer, and Eric Schaps. "Evaluation of a Cooperative Learning Strategy." *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Winter 1983): 687-696.
- Tatar, Sibel. "Why Keep Silent? The Classroom Participation Experiences of Non-Native-English-Speaking Students." *Language and Intercultural Communication*. Vol. 5, No. 3 & 4 (2005): 284-293.

Appendix C: Research Instruments

Preliminary Survey

What grade did you give yourself for participation? Why did you choose to give yourself this grade?

What affects how much you participate?

What could be changed to increase or improve your participation? What would make the material more interesting and make you want to participate more?

Observation Rubric

Date:

Focus of the class period:

Description of lesson:

On-task comments or responses to questions:

On-task questions:

Off-task behavior (talking, off-task questions, writing notes or doing other homework, head down or sleeping):

Notes:

Final Survey

1. What grade would you give yourself for participation this trimester? Why?
2. What affected how much you participated?
3. How did your behavior and participation positively or negatively affect the classroom?
4. How did the behavior and participation of other people in the class positively or negatively affect you?
5. Do you think it is important to participate in class? Why or why not?
6. What ways do you like to participate and think that you learn from? (Like asking questions, answering the teacher's questions, journals, working individually, working in groups, writing things down you don't understand)

Appendix D: Summary Results

Preliminary Survey

What grade did you give yourself for participation this week?

- Grades ranged from 12 to 24 out of a possible 25. The most frequent answer was 19

Why did you choose to give yourself this grade?

- I come prepared
- It's what I deserve
- That's how much I contribute to the class
- Sometimes I work a lot but sometimes I get lost in stuff so I don't work after
- I think I understand the material and this is my favorite class

What affects how much you participate?

- The class is interesting
- I think it's important to participate
- My life outside of class
- My parents
- Sometimes the questions are too hard
- I don't like doing group work
- The journal really helps me
- I don't know
- If I'm tired or bored
- I want good grades so I can graduate
- Sometimes the topic is not interesting
- The people in the class make it hard
- Nothing affects my participation, I participate when I want
- My mood

What could be changed to increase or improve your participation? What would make the material more interesting and make you want to participate more?

- My participation is ok how it is
- Doing more projects and researching
- I don't know
- Staying focused, concentrating
- Doing the homework and classwork
- If other students participated more, if the students acted different
- More videos
- Not so many hard questions, more answers that I understand
- Sleeping more
- Handing work in on time
- Listen, doing the work in class

Observation Rubric

Over the course of four periods:

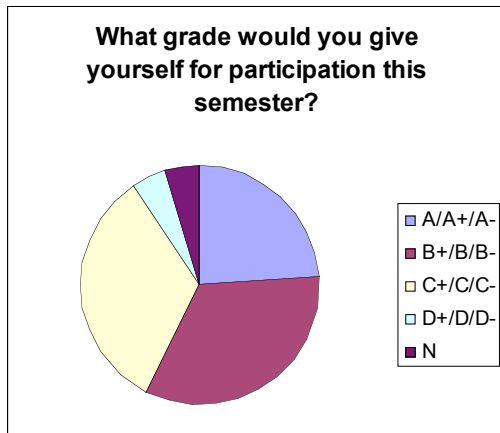
- 5 on-task questions were asked (by 3 students)
- 66 on-task comments or responses were made (by 14 students)
 - Only 4 students made more than 5 responses or comments
- 32 significantly off-task behaviors occurred (by 22 students)

I recorded no noticeable on-task or off-task behavior for 10 students, 9 of whom were in attendance for at least two of the classes and 1 of whom was absent for all four classes

Final Survey

21 surveys were turned in; not all students answered every question. The responses below represent the general themes represented in the answers. For the final question, responses add up to greater than 21 because students could select multiple methods of participation.

1. *What grade would you give yourself for participation this trimester?*



Why?

- A+, A, or A- (5 responses)
I know that I did well, I cooperated, I always participated, I'm trying really hard, I always get my work done
- B+, B, B- (7 responses)
I paid attention most of the time, I spoke up sometimes, I do everything but participate out loud, I ask good questions, I only participate half the time
- C+, C, or C- (7 responses)
I participated enough, I didn't really do my work, I don't like participating if I don't know the answer, I usually paid attention,
- D+, D, or D- (1 response)
I paid attention and tried
- N (1 response)

2. *What affected how much you participated?*

- What I was interested in
- My grade, I want to go to college
- The kids in class, my friends, whatever was going on in the classroom
- I worried about being wrong, if I knew the right answer
- Sometimes I didn't feel good, sometimes I fell asleep

3. *How did your behavior and participation positively or negatively affect the classroom?*

- Positively (10 responses)

I stay focused

I don't talk unless I have a question and then I raise my hand

I help class move faster

I didn't do anything wrong

- Negatively (2 responses)

I'm kind of loud and I might get people off task

- Neither (5 responses)

I don't really affect the classroom

I talk

I didn't have anything to say so I didn't talk

- Both (2 responses)

I didn't do any talking when the teacher talked but I talked when he wasn't

Sometimes I listen and sometimes I don't

- No answer (2 responses)

5. *How did the behavior and participation of other people in the class positively or negatively affect you?*

- Positively (3 responses)

Sometimes when people talked what they were saying was good

People participate a lot

- Negatively (10 responses)

Too loud, too much talking and it made me laugh, too many distractions

When people talked I was more into their conversation than what we were doing in class

Some people interrupt the class and take time to learn away from us

People's negative behavior got me off task sometimes

- Neither (6 responses)

I didn't let it bother me

- Both (1 response)

- No answer (1 response)

4. *Do you think it is important to participate in class? Why or why not?*

- Yes (14 responses)

The more you ask the better you will understand

Even if it seems boring you learn not just from the teacher

That's how you get more comfortable with other kids

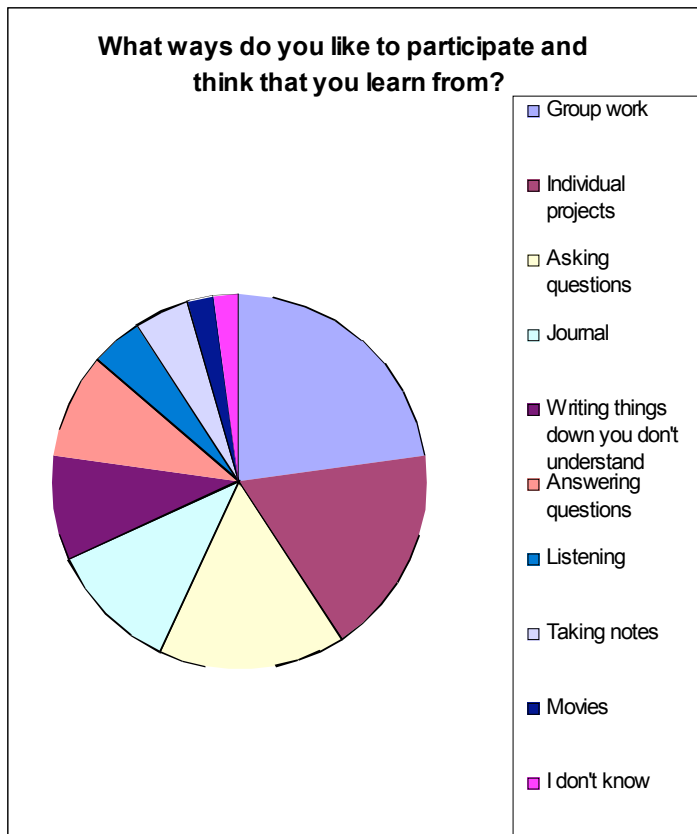
The teacher knows you are listening, make sure you understand everything

It's a way of learning

We get a grade for it, you get credit for the work you do

- No (2 responses)
- No answer (5 responses)

5. *What ways do you participate and think that you learn from? (Like asking questions, answering the teacher's questions, journals, working individually, working in groups, writing things down you don't understand)*



- Group work (10 responses)
- Individual projects (8 responses)
- Asking questions (7 responses)
- Journal (5 responses)
- Writing down things you don't understand (4 responses)
- Answering questions (4 responses)
- Listening (2 responses)
- Taking notes (2 responses)
- Movies (1 responses)
- I don't know (1 response)