

Tommy Carlson
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Professor Ruthanne Kurth-Schai
Action Research – Report

Abstract

Introduction: Discussion participation has always been an interesting pedagogical topic to me (as a student and as a teacher in training). I have questioned my own varied participation from class to class and I've contemplated whether strategies to encourage greater participation, even among individuals who rarely join in discussions, could be helpful.

Setting: The class in this study is an "honors" level 10th grade World History class at a public high school in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Problem: Some students seem to participate at a much higher level in classroom discussion, while others do not participate at all.

Concern: Are those that participate less receiving lower grades and might different learning styles account for variation in discussion participation?

Opportunity: Discover how students view their participation, how it affects their educational performance and achievement, and determine potential methods for increasing participation.

Research Questions

1. Do some students participate in discussions at a much higher level, while others participate much less?

2. Does participation affect performance in overall assessment for the class?
3. Does learning style affect how much someone participates?
4. Is there a correlation between learning style and overall assessment performance in the classroom?

Literature Review

There has been a great deal written for educational studies about the importance of student participation in the classroom and about how teachers can work to foster greater participation. I will focus on three studies here that were helpful in choosing what I looked at in my own study as well as considerations for my suggested action plan.

Deborah Douglas researched the importance of self-advocacy for students or taking ownership over their education (2004). Part her plan for self-advocacy included the students understanding their own learning style and working to participate more in the classroom (Douglas). These ideas encouraged me to look at learning styles in the first place as well as to consider sharing them with the class.

On the same note of self-advocacy, research done by Diane Dancer and Patty Kamvounias looked at how involving students in participation assessment might also improve participation (2005). Participation is not actually part of the overall assessment in the social

studies classroom I studied, but this research may raise questions as to whether it should be.

On the other side of the classroom, it is important for the teacher to take steps towards fostering participation. While it is important for students to take initiative on their own, there are also possible methods for the teacher to run an inclusive classroom. Bill Lovgren and Jeff Pietsch describe how methods such as the “Learning Cycle” positively increase student participation in the classroom (2000).

Data Collection and Sources

Summary: My data collection relied heavily on enquiry (survey) and examination (class grades as artifacts). While I did spend a few class periods observing the class participation, I felt that my own observations were not thorough or comprehensive enough to be included in my data analysis. Rather, I felt it was more helpful to assess how the students felt about their own participation and how the teacher viewed their participation. Then I took the data from these surveys and compared it to a learning styles assessment taken by each student, as well as each student’s grade in the class.

- -*Surveys*: Students filled out a survey in which they rated their discussion performance in terms of frequency compared to other students and quality in terms of being relevant to the class. The

teacher also provided ratings for each student based on a similar scale. In addition, the students completed a learning styles assessment called the "Vision, Auditory, and Kinesthetic Survey" (Clark)

- *-Artifacts:* I also compared the survey data to student grades to see if there were any correlations between participation, learning styles and overall assessment.

Analysis and Interpretation

The following themes emerged from the analysis of teacher and student surveys as well as student grades:

- *Discussion Participation is indeed higher for some students than for others*

The student surveys showed variation in how the students viewed their own participation (quality and frequency) and the teacher survey showed variation in how he viewed each student's participation.

- *Higher participation generally associated with a higher overall assessment, but not in every case*

On a scale of 1 to 5, the average teacher rating for those receiving an A in the class was a 3.4; 2.53 for those receiving a B; and 2.33 for those receiving a C. This could mean that

participation may have an effect on how the teacher views students overall as well as how students perform in other assessment areas of the class. Alternatively, it could mean that the better a student was performing in the class - the more likely he or she was to participate. There were exceptions: for instance, some earning "As" also had low participation ratings and a higher participation rating did not always mean a higher grade in the class.

- *A higher percentage of Visual learners were performing at a higher overall assessment level in comparison to Auditory and Kinesthetic learners*

To be exact, 14 of 15 Visual learners were at the A or B level, while the figures were 9 of 13 for Auditory learners, and 8 of 11 for Kinesthetic learners. Or 93 percent for Visual; 69 percent for Auditory; 72 percent for Kinesthetic.

- *There was little correlation between learning styles and the teacher's participation ratings*

As noted above, learning styles varied greatly in the class. However, there did not seem to be much of an association between a student's learning style and how the teacher rated their participation. For those receiving the top two teacher rankings (4 or 5), two were Visual, two Auditory, and three

Kinesthetic. For the middle level (3), seven were Visual, four Auditory, and four Kinesthetic. For the bottom levels (1 or 2), six were Visual, seven Auditory, and four Kinesthetic. The variation is significant on each level. On the other hand, 9 of 15 (60%) Visual learners received a 3 or higher, compared to 6 of 13 (46%) Auditory, and 7 of 11 (64%) Kinesthetic. This way of looking at the data may give a slight edge to Visual and Kinesthetic learners but I am still unconvinced that it is significant.

- *Visual learners were the most likely to give themselves a higher participation rating than the teacher had given them*

In comparing the students' own rankings to the teacher's rankings, I found that a higher percentage of Visual learners ranked themselves higher than the teacher had. For visual learners 10 ranked higher, 3 the same and 2 lower. For auditory it was 5 higher, 6 the same, and 2 lower. And for Kinesthetic it was 4 higher, 3 the same, and 4 lower. This could mean that visual learners are more confident with their performance in the classroom.

Action Plan

Based on the themes that emerged from the study, the main suggestion I would make would be to consider more Kinesthetic and

Auditory approaches to assessment and teaching. Since Visual learners tend to be achieving at higher rates than other students, this could be because they are given more opportunities to perform in a fashion that is in line with their favored approach to learning. This might also explain why they were more confident with their own participation level within the class. Talking to the teacher of this class, I learned that most of the assessment is visual (tests, papers, notebooks, etc).

Interestingly, the lowest percentage group performing at the higher participation ratings was the auditory learners. It seems that overall performance in the class is tied to discussion performance; perhaps if more assessment and pedagogical approaches were geared toward auditory and kinesthetic learners they would perform better not only in the class, but also within discussion.

Final Thoughts

While this research is not comprehensive enough to resolve the issues involved in varied participation performance, it does open the door to more questions and offer some possible paths to greater participation.

The strongest link seemed to be between overall assessment performance and discussion performance as viewed by the teacher. The teacher speculated that good participation may reflect well on a

student, which affects how the teacher views performance in other areas as well. It is also possible that high performance in the class leads to greater confidence. This confidence could in turn fuel greater participation in the class. Either way, this research would point to a link between the two, which makes further research and searching for answers relevant.

I believe there are more questions to be asked and perhaps looking at students in more than one of the teacher's classes would be helpful to find greater trends. From such a small sample, it is hard to determine anything concrete.

In this case, having opportunities for assessment that are auditory and kinesthetic could create a more inclusive classroom for learner differences. It would be interesting to research whether other methods might also increase participation – such as teaching methods of effective participation or including discussion performance as part of overall assessment. Either way, having more varied ways of assessment might increase overall class performance and increase discussion performance.

Annotated References

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