

Running Head = PARTICIPATION GRADING

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Reconceptualizing Participation Grading as Skill Building

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ABSTRACT

Two common ways that instructors assess participation in sociology courses are recalling participation by memory or counting times spoken during class in real time. However, these common assessments rely on faulty assumptions that do not support their usage. This article reconceptualizes participation grading as an opportunity to motivate skill-building across a variety of dimensions. The evidence from two classes of 45 and 47 students demonstrates that this conceptualization can be effectively implemented in undergraduate courses. Students set participation goals and all students met at least one and more than two-thirds met all three goals. Qualitative themes from their reflections include that students learned that participation is about skills not personality, that it gets easier once started, participation dimensions are interconnected, and that these skills can be applied in other classes. Benefits can be achieved when instructors implement a multifaceted skill-based participation system to assess participation.

KEY WORDS

classroom participation, student engagement, course assessment, inequalities, teaching and learning

The scholarship on teaching and learning consistently shows that participating in class increases student learning (Rocca 2010). Thus, as instructors, many of us seek ways to motivate students to participate to enable the individual learning that occurs via participation and facilitate a more active learning classroom environment that depends on student participation. In many classrooms, motivation to participate comes from grand standards, often around 10 percent of the student's final grade in the course. However, despite the widespread usage of participation

grades in undergraduate sociology courses, as a discipline we have not critically examined some of the common forms of participation grading and the assumptions underlying those forms of assessment. If we did, we would realize that common ways of assessing participation are not sociologically informed and they can reproduce inequality in classrooms.

Systematic evidence is lacking to know how most instructors assess participation in their courses. However, based on my own observations as an undergraduate student at a liberal arts college, a graduate teaching assistant at a research university, reading syllabi for a convenience sample of undergraduate syllabi, and the sometimes-vague statements in published teaching and learning articles about instructor assessment of participation, two common forms of participation assessment stand out. First, instructors may determine participation grades roughly based on how much the instructor remembers a student talking and/or attending class throughout the duration of the semester. This may be assessed across multiple time points—i.e. around midterm and the final—or sometimes just at the end of the semester. In either case, by this method the instructor is relying extensively on their own memory and observations, which is likely to be biased at best and downright faulty at worst (Armstrong and Boud 1983; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). Even worse, many instructors do not explain to students (either on their syllabus or during the semester) how their participation grades are determined, so students often have no idea how they will be assessed (Bippus and Young 2000).

A second common way to assess and grade participation in undergraduate courses is to count the number of times a student speaks in full class discussion each class period in real time (compared to trying to remember a rough estimate of participation at the end of the semester). This contemporaneous counting method has the advantage of being seen as more objective—it does not have to rely on instructor recall—but still has underlying problems. For instance, it

incentivizes students to think about participation as quantity of remarks rather than quality (Rocca 2010). However, even more troubling are the underlying assumptions that assume that students simply need to be incentivized to raise their hand and speak, even though education research questions this assumption. Many students do not enter college classrooms with the necessary skills to sufficiently participate in full class discussions (Rocca 2010; White 2011), and this has likely worsened in the last two decades as K-12 education increasingly focused on preparing students for standardized tests, not being active learners (Ravitch 2010).

In this paper, I seek to accomplish three tasks. First, I analyze the assumptions underlying two common participation grading relative to the known scholarship in education and teaching and learning by reviewing prior literature on instructor bias and on pre-college opportunities for building participation skills. Second, I propose a new framework for understanding the purpose and goal of participation assessment. Third, I provide evidence that this new framework can be applied successfully in the undergraduate classroom. To do so, I review the methodology I used to implement this framework in two undergraduate classes and evaluate the findings. I end with a discussion of the implications of the findings and limitations.

BIAS IN EVALUATIONS OF STUDENTS

Many instructors rely on their own recall and memory over extended periods of time to determine a participation grade at the end of the semester. As a discipline, we recognize that student evaluations of instructors are biased for a variety of reasons, including penalties for instructors who are female, who assign lower grades, and who teach required courses students do not want to take (MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt 2015). However, we have not sufficiently acknowledged how our own bias may influence our evaluations of student performance as well,

despite being aware of the fact that the potential for bias exists in assessing any student work. For essays, best practice is to grade them blindly so that instructor bias, positive or negative, will not influence the grade (Malouff 2008). Nevertheless, despite the fact that participation grading is possibly even more subjective than other forms of assessment (Armstrong and Boud 1983), and despite the fact that it is impossible to grade it blindly, many instructors still routinely rely on their own recall and memory over the course of months to determine a participation grade at the end of the semester.

The social psychology literature provides abundant evidence to support the conclusion that bias is unconsciously or consciously part of assessments of students (Malouff 2008). For instance, individual characteristics of a student will shape instructors' memory or assessment of students including their gender, race, and attitude in class (Malouff 2008; Moss-Racusin et. al 2012). Professors are far more likely to remember the contributions of students they like compared to those they dislike (Armstrong and Boud 1983). Instructors are also more likely to remember the contributions of students that they know well which are shaped by student actions like sitting closer to the instructor or engaging in small talk with the instructor before or after class about unrelated topics (Rocca 2010). However, these small interactions are largely shaped by cultural capital; students need to feel comfortable engaging in conversation with instructors and this largely varies by social class background and other characteristics (Khan 2011; White 2011). In a broader sense, instructors are more likely to remember unusual events than typical occurrences. For instance, a student who one time falls asleep in class will be remembered as less participatory even if that was highly unusual behavior relative to the rest of their participation that semester. Instructors also recall far more frequent opportunities for students to participate in their classes than students experience, so that instructors often hold their students to unrealistic

standards (Howard, Short, and Clark 1996). It is unclear whether instructors are trying to recall quantity or quality of remarks, as the biased perception of one likely influences the other.

The extent that conscious and unconscious biases shape the memories instructors have of student participation has direct implications for the reproduction of inequality along the lines of race, class, gender and other student behaviors/characteristics. Considering many instructors do not learn all their students' names, especially in larger classes, their capacity to accurately recall students' participation is highly suspect. While participation assessment can likely never be free from bias, instructors must be more critical of the potential of bias in their assessments and design better strategies for overcoming it.

UNEQUAL PRE-COLLEGE PARTICIPATION BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Due to the potential for bias that instructor recall entails, many instructors have turned to more “objective” measures of assessing participation, most often tracking the comments made or questions asked by students each class period (for example Weaver and Qi 2005; Monson 2017). However, research in education and teaching and learning shows that social class, race, gender, and K-12 educational experiences all play a role in shaping the behaviors in the classroom necessary to participate. Despite how it is commonly assessed, being able to participate requires far more than simply the willingness for the student to raise their hand and answer a question. The student must have sufficient experience developing their perspective, feel sufficiently comfortable sharing that perspective, feel sufficiently respected by their peers and instructor, and otherwise be prepared with the course material (Howard et. al 1996; White 2011; McDuff 2012)—conditions that are not likely to be equally met for all students.

Socialization and structural opportunities provide differential access to the skills needed to engage in classroom participation. From the time that students enter formal education, parents socialize their children to have different orientations to school and interacting with their teachers (Lareau 2011). Students from working class backgrounds are socialized by their parents and later their peers to follow directions of teachers, but not to ask questions or develop their own perspectives about academic topics. Meanwhile, students from middle class backgrounds are encouraged from a young age to ask questions of authority figures and develop perspectives about the topics they are learning. While neither parenting strategy or socialization is inherently better than the other, the concerted cultivation practice is differentially rewarded in the school system as students advance in to upper level courses. By the time they reach college, almost all instructors expect students to be ready and able to read a text and provide their own perspective to the debate—generally measured through participation in full class discussions (Auster and MacRone 1994; Fassinger 1996; Rocca 2010). However, without having been socialized to build these perspectives or ask questions of authority figures, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are far less likely to be prepared to engage in these discussions in the college classroom compared to their advantaged peers.

Relatedly, children have been socialized to believe that participation is a product of personality rather than a skill set that anyone can accomplish (O’Sullivan et. al 2015). In studies analyzing why college students do not participate more, researchers consistently find that students report that they are “shy” or lack the “confidence” required to participate more (Fassinger 1996; Rocca 2010). Because psychological explanations dominate mainstream socialization in families and schools, personality traits such as introversion and extroversion are taken to be inherent and unchanging features of children and adults rather than seeing the ability

to communicate with others in different social settings as a skill to be learned. Taken to the extreme, for example, some seminars are instructing teachers of second graders that they should evaluate children differently who are tested to be introverts or extroverts, allowing introverts to participate by simply making eye contact with the instructor or leaning forward in their chairs (Iasevoli 2017)—but these behaviors will not be rewarded as participation later in their education or careers. A further limitation of the understanding of participation as a psychological characteristic of introversion or extroversion is that these traits are not inherent parts of a stable personality, but rather are behaviors that vary in different social settings. For instance, many of the students who report being “shy” on participation measures are friendly and active with their peers when discussing non-academic topics (Bippus and Young 2000). Therefore, socialization patterns that teach students that their personality shapes their ability to participate, not their communication skills in the academic setting, deny many students the opportunity see participation as a skill they can learn.

Structural opportunities are also responsible for differences in participation skill development prior to the college classroom. For instance, as K-12 education has undergone the standardized testing transformation, public schools have been forced to divert more time and resources into preparing students to perform well on standardized tests (Ravitch 2010). In order to prepare students for these tests, teachers generally must rely on a “banking method” of education, whereby the teacher is seen as holding all the knowledge and the teacher must try to effectively deposit that knowledge into students, so that students can reproduce it on tests (Friere 1970). Because standardized tests generally do not involve oral communication or discussion, teachers cannot spend as much time developing these skills if they want their children to succeed on the tests—tests their own job security is often tied to (Ravitch 2010). However, not all schools

have been subjected to the same standardized testing transformations, as elite public schools and especially private schools have been able to avoid the worst of the structural transformations in their schools and still generally provide rigorous opportunities for discussion and participation. Income segregation across schools and even school districts drive gaps in student achievement and educational experiences (Owens 2017). Furthermore, even within school differences exist, as students from disadvantaged social class and minority racial/ethnic backgrounds are more likely to feel disrespected by teachers or their peers in their K-12 classrooms (White 2011) and to be disproportionately disciplined by teachers and administrators (Morris and Perry 2017). Thus, even if they attend better schools, disadvantaged students have had fewer opportunities to develop participation skills.

Based on this evidence, it is unreasonable to assume that all students simply need an incentive to participate given the vast disparities in educational quality/structures, socialization, and prior respectful treatment by peers and teachers. In that case, even “objective” measures such as counting the number of times students add a comment or ask a question in class have bias built into the measures that will reproduce inequality in our classrooms.

NEW FRAMEWORK: PARTICIPATION AS SKILL BUILDING

As evidenced by the review of literature, it is clear that the underlying assumptions behind two common participation assessments are not sociologically informed and are likely reproducing inequality. Furthermore, the notion that participation grading primarily serves to provide an incentive—regardless of how it is measured or assessed—is ineffective. Instead, I propose that instructors conceptualize participation grades in undergraduate classrooms as opportunities to incentivize and reward skill-building. Instead of assuming that students have sufficient skills to

participate equally, instructors can incentivize and assess how well students improve their participation skillset over the course of the semester. By conceptualizing participation in this way, the system allows students to improve relative to the skillset they have when they enter the classroom. Students who attended better quality K-12 education and have sufficiently developed the necessary skillset can be held to higher expectations than students who have not had the opportunity to develop this skillset—but both can be held to objective, measurable, and individualized goals.

When conceptualizing participation as skill-building, students are able to learn that participation is a skill rather than a personality trait. Many studies have found that students tend to think that their ability to participate depends on their personality, whether they are shy or outgoing (Fassinger 1996; Rocca 2010). However, learning to participate in the classroom is a skill that all students can learn. Furthermore, participation can be far more extensive than simply speaking up in full class discussions and attending class on time. It can also include coming to class prepared, discussing course material with friends outside of class, peer editing with a partner, attending office hours, paying attention in class, and listening respectfully to peers during discussions—behaviors that many students already believe are important components of participation but are rarely rewarded by instructors (Stein, Colyer, and Manning 2016). Instructors can incorporate this more holistic view of participation by rewarding students for a wider variety of behaviors. When students are incentivized to work on improving multiple dimensions simultaneously they see that each part of participation is interconnected: coming to class prepared and discussing course material outside of class make it easier to speak during discussions in class time.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how classes should be designed to best facilitate participation and learning, it is clear that having active learning classrooms where instructors provide student-centered opportunities and guide respectful discussions will be far better at aiding students in building their participation skills than courses primarily based on lecture (Auken 2011; Dougherty and Andercheck 2014; Monson 2017). However, regardless of the classroom structure, skill-based participation assessment can facilitate improvement on a variety of dimensions of participation. I discuss these dimensions and opportunities below as I explain how I operationalized and implemented a multifaceted skill-based participation system.

METHODS: IMPLEMENTING THE NEW FRAMEWORK

The participation system I implemented in my classes is a multifaceted skill-developing participation assessment—which I successfully incorporated into classes of 45 and 47 students by having students track their own participation. I broke down participation into five dimensions that I believed to be important ways that students participate or prepare to participate in my class:

- *Attendance and tardiness*: coming to class every day, being on time, and not leaving early
- *Preparation for each class meeting*: Completing readings, taking notes, reviewing quiz questions [as both courses had required daily reading quizzes to complete before class]
- *Participation in small group discussions*: Actively sharing thoughts, listening to group members and considering their perspectives, being respectful, and remaining on task
- *Participation in full class discussions*: Actively sharing thoughts, listening to classmates and considering their perspectives, being respectful, and remaining on task

- *Participation in other ways:* A variety of activities including, but not limited to, attending office hours, going to the Writing Center, using working groups, peer editing papers with a partner, and discussing course material outside of class with peers or friends

Breaking participation down into multiple dimensions has several advantages. First, it allows students to be incentivized and rewarded for far more than simply speaking up in a full class discussion. In order for students to contribute quality remarks during full class discussions, students need to be prepared for class, attend class on time, and be actively listening to and respecting other speakers (Hourigan 2013). By explicitly breaking participation down in this way, students can be incentivized to do all of the steps leading up to the full class discussion so that when they do speak up they will be better prepared to contribute something of substance to the conversation. Likewise, it is clear to students how they will be assessed for participation, as previous research finds that students often do not know how their participation grades are determined (Fassinger 1996; Fritschner 2000).

The second advantage is that it no longer simply rewards students for the quantity of remarks they make. While most instructors lament that more students do not speak up in class, it is also common to lament students contributing simply for the sake of contributing (Rocca 2010). However, most participation grading assessments only explicitly reward speaking up in full class discussions so it is little wonder that some students have interpreted this as an imperative to speak up regardless of whether they have something good to contribute. In contrast, this multifaceted system shows students that there are a variety of ways to improve their participation so that they should not only be focused on speaking up. Even within the category of participation in full class discussion, as stated above, this assessment requires them to be aware of whether they are listening to classmates and considering their perspectives, being respectful, and

remaining on task. By having students focus on improving these multiple dimensions, students no longer feel compelled to say something just to say something because they have other dimensions to focus on as well.

The third advantage is that this system allows students to be incentivized and rewarded for behaviors that we know are beneficial for students but that are rarely acknowledged formally in assessments or grading. For instance, many students reported that they frequently discussed course materials with roommates or friends who were not in the class. This is not a behavior that could ever be rewarded with a traditional participation assessment system. However, these frequent outside-of-class discussions undoubtedly helped students to think more deeply about the material and enabled them to practice explaining the material to someone else—which we know is the most effective way for students to learn and retain material (Markle 2016). Likewise, we know that students who talk with faculty and instructors perform better in college (Markle 2016) but students are not usually explicitly rewarded for doing so. However, when all students are incentivized to come to office hours, it helps encourage students who would otherwise not be likely to come to meet with the instructor to develop this cultural capital that will serve them well in future settings—which, as seen in the results, was exactly what happened.

In order to implement this system, I relied on a self-reporting student-goal centered approach. They completed these evaluations digitally, submitting them electronically, so that they easily could refer back to their goals throughout the semester. At the beginning of the semester, students self-reported quantitatively and qualitatively how well they usually do along each of the five dimensions in other classes that are similar to this one with the following instructions:

On a scale of 1-5, with one being needs a lot of improvement and 5 being excellent, please assess your typical levels of participation in classes like this for each of the following

categories by highlighting or bolding the appropriate number. Also write at least one sentence to justify the score you are giving yourself.

Next, students were asked to create three concrete, measurable, feasible goals to improve this semester compared to their normal participation. Examples include “I will speak every other week in full class discussion,” “I will attend office hours twice this semester,” and “I will be on time to every class”—students usually set their goals across multiple dimensions, usually covering three of the five dimensions with their three goals. They must also write a full paragraph describing a plan for how they will attempt to achieve these goals. Because the students are choosing their own goals they feel agency in choosing goals they think are important for them to achieve, and by creating a plan for how they will achieve these goals they will be forced to consider the actions necessary to accomplish those tasks. This system is an application of metacognition, which encourages students to think about the process of learning in order for them develop their own strategies to help them learn best (Pelton 2014). When the students submitted this completed participation form, I responded to each student’s goals and plan to ensure that the goals were measurable and feasible, to share helpful tips specific to each goal, and to be supportive and encouraging of those goals. The time to respond to each student at each stage was generally about five minutes per student, shorter than the time taken to grade short student essays (though it could take longer if student goals did not meet the criteria and needed to be rewritten at the beginning of the semester or if student assessments at the middle or end of the semester did not match my observations of their participation—which was very rare).

The next step in the implementation is to have periodic check ins on goals and participation, with at least one of them being a formal self-report. In my courses, I periodically reminded students that they needed to be working on their participation goals, but I formally required them

to reflect on their participation at midterm. Students had to quantitatively and qualitatively self-report how they were doing along each dimension of participation, reflect on how well they were meeting their goals so far, and describe a plan for ensuring that they achieved their goals by the end of the semester. At this point, students sometimes adjust their goals if they were too ambitious, too easy, or if the student is experiencing some sort of personal crisis that is impeding their ability to fully engage in class. Again, as the instructor I gave feedback to indicate whether I thought they were on track to meet their goals and to encourage them to keep working hard—and to reach out to students who used this as an opportunity to inform me of problems going on in their lives.

Finally, the students must self-report at the end of the semester how well they participated during the semester along all dimensions of participation, the extent to which they achieved their goals or not, and a broader reflection on how they improved their participation this semester and a justification of the letter grade they believe they deserve for participation. I then took all this information from students and assessed their participation with a grade and wrote comments explaining their grade and encouraging them to continue using these participation skills in future semesters. I almost always agreed with the grade the student proposed because at this point I had made clear exactly how they would be assessed and they had thoroughly reflected on their own behaviors in the course. This clear and transparent system allowed students to have specific steps to take to achieve their participation grade and the instructor had a clear way of knowing how to assess it.

Students and Classes

This participation system was implemented in two undergraduate sociology courses at an elite public research university in the Southeast. The first course was a 400 level Sociology of

Education course that primarily consisted of sophomores, juniors, and seniors who were interested to varying extents about the topic of education and secondarily about the discipline of sociology—with no pre-requisites for this 400-level course, more than a third of the class had never taken a sociology course before. The second course was Sociology 101 that consisted primarily of first-year students, though had a variety of more advanced students as well. The vast majority of the class reported that they were taking the class to fulfill a general education requirement or because they are intending to go to medical or nursing school—very few had any prior experience or interest in sociology upon beginning the course. The courses consisted of 45 and 47 students, respectively, though one student in each course declined to sign the consent form to be included in this research and an additional three students did not submit the final participation evaluation; these five students will be excluded from the analysis. Both courses had extensive diversity of students by race and class background. Two students were in both classes, though they set different participation goals in each course, so each semester is analyzed as a different case. This study was conducted with IRB approval.

Analytic Plan

In order to analyze the effectiveness of this participation system, I relied on student's self-reported evaluations. Quantitatively, I calculated the percentage of students who met one, two, or all three goals. Qualitatively, I examined themes that emerged from the written reflections of students' self-reported final evaluation. I analyzed their reflections of their behaviors along each of the five dimensions, their reflection on the extent to which they met their goals, and the broader reflection about overall improvement in participation during the semester. As necessary, I referred back to the initial evaluation to compare reported behaviors. I inductively analyzed emergent themes from student evaluations to see how their perspectives on participation

changed, strategies they used to improve, and any skills they believed they took away from the semesters' participation.

RESULTS

My implementation of the participation system was successful in helping students work to achieve goals they set. All students met at least one goal and more than two thirds met all three goals: 2 percent met one goal, 29 percent met two goals, and fully 69 percent met all three goals. While not every student met every single goal they set, these figures clearly indicate that this participation system is effective in helping all students improve their participation, regardless of background. Thus, I now briefly review of some of the qualitative themes that emerged from the students' reflections on how they improved their participation throughout the course of the semester.

Skill Building Instead of Personality Trait

One theme that stood out in the reflections is that many students came to realize that speaking in class—in small or full class discussions—is indeed a skill. Many reported at the beginning of the semester that they do not participate much because they have a shy personality, but by the end of the semester they acknowledged it was a skill they could improve on. For example, a white senior woman in the upper level course, wrote of full class discussions on her beginning of the semester evaluation:

This is my weakest area of participation in all classes. I am generally a shy natured person, so this is not a way I generally participate. I speak once or twice in class a semester, so a score of 1 is justified.

This woman, despite being a sociology major, hardly ever spoke in class and saw this as a result of her personality. However, she set her goal to speak once a week during class—for a class that met three times a week—which was very ambitious given her starting point and the fact that the class had 45 students in it. By the end of the semester she reflected:

I reached my goal by the end of the semester of making sure to participate once a week in large group discussion. I made progress toward becoming more confident in my ideas and answering questions...My participation has improved tremendously in this class...

Overall, participation has been a valuable resource in this course, and I am glad I had to make goals initially to guide my participation for the rest of the semester.

Note that in this final reflection she states that not only did she successfully achieve her goal of speaking at least once a week, she now sees participation as a “resource”—a skill that she was able to develop by setting goals to work toward it.

This woman was not alone in her transformation of her way of thinking as she went through the semester. Even if students leave the semester still nervous to participate in various ways, they come to see that it is possible and beneficial if they push themselves out of their comfort zone. For instance, a first-generation black sophomore woman set a goal to go to office hours once during the semester in the upper level course. At the end of the course, she reflected:

Overall, I met all of my goals. While I did not go to office hours during the first half of the semester, by the end of the year, I ended up going twice. For some, this is not much. For me, however, this is a significant improvement. Meeting with professors gives me extreme anxiety. The same goes for asking questions. Throughout the semester, I have grown more comfortable with my peers and my instructor...

While she is still nervous about meeting with instructors, by setting her goal to meet in office hours once, she pushed herself to meet that goal, realized it was beneficial to her learning, and ended up coming a second time as well. She is on her way to developing cultural capital that is rewarded in the education system and labor market. Thus, this goal-oriented system recognizes that students have significant fears about participation, but it allows them to push themselves to meet the goals they set, allowing them to develop a skillset that will serve them well in the future.

While the most common skill students developed from this participation framework was learning to communicate in small and large classroom settings and communicating with the professor, occasionally students set goals to learn other non-communication skills as well. For example, a student explained on the initial self-assessment at the beginning of the semester for attendance and tardiness that he only deserves a 4 because: “I come to class every day in all my classes but sometimes I come in a little late because I have to drive to my parking spot and then walk to class (I live off campus), so sometimes traffic makes me late.” Prior to this course, he allows “traffic” to be an excuse for being late to class. However, he sets the following goal for himself: “I am going to force myself to leave my house earlier so that I can prepare for and beat the traffic so that I am not late to class. To do this, I will have to wake up earlier than usual but this is something that I will put forth my full effort toward.” Despite relying on excuses in the past, this participation system allows him to realize that getting to class on time is a skill he can develop, and he comes up with a reasonable plan (waking up earlier) to ensure that he develops it—which he successfully accomplished and was never late to class once the entire semester.

Gets Easier Once You Start

A second common theme that emerged from the student reflections is that they realized that participation is easier once they start working to improve the skillset. Because so many students enter with a close-minded perspective about participation—that it is something they are not capable of and therefore should not even try—many are surprised to find that participation is easier to do once they start. A couple example quotes from students demonstrate this theme well:

While I do still struggle with doubt to share my ideas, I find that participating becomes easier with practice; it is often just difficult to get that practice initially [white, senior, female, introductory course]

At the beginning I was terrified of speaking in my group, and didn't enjoying discussing. However, by the end of the semester I engaged in the discussions and enjoyed talking with my group members [white, first-year, male, introductory course]

All these students reiterate the same theme that as they spoke more often in the course, they got more comfortable with it, and found themselves more easily sharing their perspectives. While this pattern of it becoming easier to speak could happen in any classroom, it is more likely to occur when students have set goals that will push them to overcome that initial fear to start.

Like the skill-building theme, the getting-easier theme was also most likely to come up in student reflections regarding speaking up more often. However, some students also learned how to speak less if they recognized that they usually spoke too frequently discussions. For instance, an African American junior woman in the education course set a goal to “Be less dominating in small group discussions” and noted that she mostly successful in achieving it: “Throughout the semester, I became more cognizant of whether or not I was dominating group conversations.

Although I don't think that I was completely successful, I think that I improved in learning how to listen to my group members." While at the end of the semester she recognized that she still had to work to do to continue to improve, she recognized that it got easier to listen to her group members as she become more aware of times she was dominating—a behavior that took practice but got easier once she started paying attention to it.

Participation Dimensions are Interconnected

A third theme that emerged from the self-evaluations and reflections was that students realized that the participation dimensions were interconnected. That is, they realized that improving their skills in some areas enabled them to improve their skills in other areas. For example, a white, first-year woman in the introductory course realized how interconnected speaking *and* listening are to learning during the full class discussion:

I've 100% improved on participation in full class discussions. At first I used to get scared of sharing my own opinion/perspective because in a group of strangers, it's hard to know how it will be accepted. I've gotten over that and learned that sharing is a great way to open my eyes to new perspectives and genuinely think about the topics discussed in a more sociological way. For example, someone else will share about how a topic has affected them and it completely changes my mindset because I usually only think about how something is relative to me.

Two of this woman's goals in the class were to speak up more often in full class discussions and to be more respectful when listening to peers with whom she disagrees and consider their points of view. She realized that working on each of these goals helped to improve the other. This kind of engaged learning was critical to her success in the learning how to think sociologically.

Another student—also a white-first year woman—reiterated this idea, explaining that participating more in their small group helped her be able to think more critically and thus write better papers: “I feel like discussions with my group in class really helped with my papers and I was able to write about sociology effectively.” A third student of similar background saw this interconnection with preparation before class. This white, first-year, woman in the introductory course found that as she worked harder to understand the readings she found herself more easily able to participate in the discussions during class:

I have been able to focus more intently on readings and give myself more time to read the readings and analyze the meaning behind them before taking the quizzes, allowing me to not only maintain my good quiz grades but to understand more the content presented in each reading or assigned video. Also, this has improved my discussions within my group as I have had more background knowledge to go back on.

Because this multifaceted system of participation not only focuses on speaking during discussions, but also incorporates other critical skills like preparing well for class, students come to see that participation is built on a variety of skills, all of which help each other.

Transfer Effects

A final theme that emerged from the reflections was that being incentivized to participate in this course had a spillover effect to other courses that same semester. For example, a black sophomore woman in the introductory course achieved her goal of coming to office hours—her first time ever during college—and then transferred that new skill to attending office hours in other courses as well: “I’ve also gone to office hours to ask for help when I needed it, which has also pushed me go to office hours for other courses this semester.” Another African American

woman in the introductory course expressed similar spillover effects in terms of speaking during class discussions:

I would say this is the furthest I've pushed myself out of my comfort zone in terms of participating in full group discussions since I've been in college, and I think pushing myself to do this has made me more comfortable participating in other classes as well. In the beginning of the year, I was a little more skeptical that I would ever feel comfortable talking in front of a larger group, but I feel that I have improved significantly on this.

A white junior woman in the upper level course set a goal of going to the learning or writing center at least once during the semester. She successfully met this goal, as she explains: "I attended several learning center seminars. I was finally able to make it to the writing center, although it was unfortunately not for this class due to time constraints." Thus, even though she had already met her goal by attending the learning center seminars, she still went to the writing center—even though it was not for this class—because she learned that university resources could be useful for her. This transfer effect is evidence that the students are not just doing behaviors because they are incentivized in the course but that they are gaining skills that they can apply to other settings—evidence of capacity building (Floden, Goertz, and O'Day 1995).

DISCUSSION

Overall, a multifaceted skill-based participation system is effective in helping students improve their participation. All students met at least one goal and the vast majority achieved all three that they set for themselves. This achievement is strong evidence that students can set feasible goals, build skills, and critically reflect on the process of building those participation skills. The

qualitative evidence further demonstrates its effectiveness by helping students figure out that participation is a skill set instead of a personality trait, that it gets easier once you get started, that the dimensions of participation are interconnected, and that these skills can easily be transferred to other classes.

This conceptualization of participation as multifaceted skill-building overcomes shortcomings of other common means of assessing participation: it is based on clear, objective criteria for students and instructors; it takes past student opportunities into account; it helps students feel agency in improving participation skills; and it goes beyond speaking up during full class discussions. By showing students that participation means many behaviors, and by incentivizing them to work to improve along several of those dimensions, students can develop a skillset that will serve them well in future classes, as well as in other contexts like jobs or political discussions. Likewise, it is an application of metacognition, whereby students are forced to consider how they learn and build strategies to improve it. Thus, it is a significant improvement over participation systems that generally rely only on instructor memory, instructor counting contributions to full class discussions, or unclear participation assessment systems. It does not rely extensively on biased instructor recall nor does it assume that students enter the course with previous exposure to opportunities to develop their participation skills.

The evidence from these two classes—an introductory course of 47 and an upper level education course of 45—demonstrates that bigger classes not only can be participatory, but that instructors can effectively assess participation in these contexts. Previous research has suggested that class sizes should be capped at 35 whenever possible to enable more discussion opportunities (Rocca 2010), but when less than ideal circumstances leave us with bigger classes we can still effectively incentivize and assess participation. For instance, the theory behind skill-

based participation can be applied to large lecture hall classes—such as incorporating Molborn and Hoekstra’s (2010) usage of clickers in very large classes alongside other dimensions of participation like discussing course material outside of class or coming to class prepared. While this scaled up system would no doubt present extra work for the instructor—as I estimated that I spent an average of 5 minutes per student at the beginning, midterm, and final—there are ways of reducing the required work in larger classes. For instance, the students could set only one or two goals instead of three, there could be fewer dimensions of participation used in the assessment, or other strategies that would maintain the framework of student goal setting and reflection but less work to grade for the instructor to make it more feasible. Based on my experience, relying only on the quantitative measures without the qualitative explanations probably would not be successful for several reasons. The quantitative measures are not uniformly interpreted the same by students, the explanation of the goal and the student reflection are essential in the metacognition at the root of this skill building, and the instructor would have a much more difficult time assessing how student self-report matches their own observations if it is not as clear how students have derived their numbers. Thus, although it may be tempting to rely solely on quantitative measures to save time, I do not recommend it based on the evidence in my courses.

Nevertheless, this system of participation does have some limitations. The biggest limitation is that I must rely on student self-report, which can also be biased (Bippus and Young 2000), especially considering they have an incentive to report good behaviors to receive a better grade. I attempted a few measures of triangulation to check the validity of responses—most critically taking notes on students who were frequently visibly not engaged in class by skipping class, using their cell phones, or not sharing in small or full class discussions (though I will admit

this was not always systematically done). Similarly, in the 101 course, I tried implementing an additional check by asking students to report about their group members—which I only used in cases when a student’s self-report conflicted with my notes and memory of the students’ behavior (fewer than 5 percent of students). However, this system evaluates many behaviors that would be impossible for anyone else to observe such as considering other students’ perspectives and discussing the material with friends or family outside of class—making reliance on student self-report an unavoidable problem. As a general principle in my classroom, I believe students until they give me reason not to do so—which is largely reflected in the way that I only used checks on student self-reports if they seemed suspicious to me. Furthermore, because students were instructed to choose measurable and objective goals, they could generally keep track of their own participation across the many dimensions—and they generally referred to specific numbers or examples in their self-reflections.

Nevertheless, this limitation deserves further consideration. Thus far in the very rare instances in which I disagree with a student, I address it at midterm so that the problem is corrected before the final (as they only receive a participation grade at the end of the course). For instance, a first-year male student athlete in the introductory course consistently rated his participation with his small group far higher than I observed—which was further reiterated in the peer evaluations completed by his group members. I used two strategies to deal with this situation with this student and others like him. The first strategy was communicating with the student individually to ensure that he correctly understood my expectations and what I believe it means to be participate actively with his group members. This strategy enabled me to both make the student aware that there was a discrepancy between his stated behaviors and my own observations, as well as making it clear how to reduce the discrepancy so that the student would

not inadvertently rate himself higher. The second strategy was reminding him that the university has a strict honor code and that I expect students to be honest in their self-assessments. This strategy was used to deal with students who might purposely write extremely misleading or untrue self-assessments. In my experience with this student athlete and others, the students were unhappy to have the conversation with me, but they generally reported behaviors much more in line with my own observations on the final participation assessment—showing that the strategies seemed to be effective. Nevertheless, I still believe the strategies can be further refined for dealing with these rare but inevitable situations.

The other major limitation of my own implementation is that I do not yet have a formal system in place to train students how to participate. While I walk them through the participation assessment system and offer feedback about their goals with suggestions for how to meet them, I do not yet formally train students during class time on ways to improve participation skills—something I plan to consider more moving forward. Therefore, I think that the evidence of success documented in this article is particularly compelling that despite lacking formal training, all students were able to show improvement.

The field of teaching and learning has done tremendous work in developing more quality assessments of learning in college classrooms (Paino, Blakenship, Grauerholz, and Chin 2012). However, we must ensure that participation assessment is not overlooked. By failing to do so, we will not only continue to reproduce inequality due to our own biases of recall and failure to take into account previous opportunities for skill development, but we will also continue to miss out on contributions of students who have different life experiences or perspectives that they could share if had the skills or comfort (Packard 2011; Pitt and Packard 2012). Sociologists must take

issues of inequality as seriously in our grading as we do in our instructional content and moving toward a skill-development participation assessment system is a good step in that direction.

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