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## Class Participation: Expectations, Rationale, & Grading

*Tell me, and I'll forget.  
Show me, and I may not remember.  
Involve me, and I'll understand.*

In my time at UW-BC (*University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire – Barron County*) my single greatest teaching challenge has been getting students to participate in class discussions. My teaching philosophy—why and how I teach—affects every activity we do in the classroom: I believe that the most profound and lasting learning comes *not* from listening to lectures but from actively engaging in conversations with others about ideas and texts.

My teaching philosophy emerges from personal experience and from well-established research. Education guru Parker Palmer, for instance, says that "Knowing and learning are *communal acts*. They require many eyes and ears, many observations and experiences" (27).<sup>1</sup> Other education researchers agree that "student involvement is the key to learning":<sup>2</sup>

"The theory...*students learn by becoming involved*...seems to explain most of the empirical knowledge gained over the years about environmental influences on student development.... Quite simply, student involvement refers to the *amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience*" (Astin 133-51).

"Analysis of the research literature...suggests that *students must do more than just listen*. They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems" (Bonwell & Eisen Executive Summary).

"The body of research on the impacts of the college academic experience is extensive. The strongest general conclusion [is that] the *greater the student's involvement or engagement in academic work or the academic experience* of college, the *greater his or her level of knowledge acquisition and general cognitive development*" (Pascarella & Terenzini 616).

"Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. *They must talk about what they are learning, write*

about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves" (Chickering & Gamson 3).

"You understand it only if you can teach it, use it, prove it, explain it, defend it, or read between the lines... The students must perform using knowledge to convince us that they really understand material that quizzes and short-answer tests only suggest they understand... *Understanding is developed through discussion, not instruction*" (Wiggins and McTighe 41, 159).

"Learning is least useful when it is private and hidden; it is most powerful when it becomes public and communal. Learning flourishes when we take what we think we know and offer it as community property among fellow learners so that it can be tested, examined, challenged, and improved before we internalize it." –Lee S. Shulman, *Teaching as Community Property: Essays on Higher Education* (36-37)

"When white college students are placed in *discussion groups* with a black student—or with students holding opinions in the minority (a student whose opinions on the topics under discussion were at odds with those of the other participants)—they display *higher levels of complex thought*, and that pattern shows that racial and other forms of diversity have *positive effects on education and thought*. . . . Although *homogeneity* of group members may increase solidarity and cohesiveness, it also tends to increase *'groupthink'*. By contrast, *'minority influence'* leads to *more-divergent thinking and perspectives, better critical thinking, and willingness and ability to change*" (Anthony Lising Antonio, Stanford University Department of Education).

1 From Parker Palmer's "Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing." *Change* 19 (1), 1987, 20-25.

2 Except for the Wiggins and McTighe quote from *Understanding by Design* and the diversity study from Stanford published in *Psychological Science*, this evidence was compiled by Barbara Walvoord, the Director of the John A. Kanel Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Notre Dame.

In light of this overwhelming evidence, I require each and every student to participate in class discussions on a regular basis. It may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable at first, so you will be graded for your efforts over the arc of the semester.

First and most logically, you must be present to participate, but presence isn't enough for participation. Below, you will find my class participation rubric (detailed criteria for different levels of performance).

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## CLASS PARTICIPATION RUBRIC

### Grade Level: **A**

Engages in class discussion by frequently doing the following:

- **voluntarily and frequently** offering creative or original responses/interpretations/observations beyond the obvious,
- consistently offering plenty of **effective** textual support for observations,
- involving others in class discussion by asking questions, seeking others' responses, etc.
- **eagerly** and intelligently attempting to answer questions,
- offering follow-up responses, and treating classmates and the professor respectfully.
- Eagerly treats class discussion as a conversation among students and professor.

## Grade Level: B

Participates in class discussion by doing the following:

- offering consistently appropriate and **occasionally** creative or original responses/interpretations/observations
- frequently (but less than A level, above) offering appropriate textual support for observations,
- answering questions frequently (but less than A level, above), and
- treating classmates and the professor respectfully.
- Treats the class discussion as a conversation among students and professor.

## Grade Level: C

Only sometimes participates in class discussion by doing the following:

- occasionally offering responses/interpretations/observations but nothing that really challenges the class to think/read beyond the obvious,
- occasionally offering textual support for observations, most of which is appropriate
- answering questions every now and then,
- demonstrating overall competence in comments or raising good questions in response to discussion, but rarely actively or voluntarily contributes to discussion, and
- treating classmates and the professor respectfully.
- Many comments are merely factual statements or merely entertaining comments, neither of which demonstrates careful and intelligent responses to class content.

## Grade Level: D

Rarely participates in class discussion, and then primarily by doing the following:

- offering a few instances of response/interpretation/observation and appropriate textual support,
- answering a couple of questions or offering one-word responses to discussion
- occasionally disrupting class by coming to class late, failing to contribute to the learning environment
- by blankly staring off into space or working on something else during class, talking with someone while someone else is speaking, being off topic, or being merely entertaining with little purpose beyond clowning around, or
- treating classmates or the professor disrespectfully, disrupting the learning environment.
- Primarily a non-participant in topics relevant to class discussion.

## Grade Level: F

Does not participate in class discussion in a constructive manner, doing the following:

- never offering responses/interpretations/observations or appropriate textual support,

- actively disengaging from class so that others may not know what this person's voice sounds like,
- much less what his or her opinions/interpretations/observations might be, or what his or her face looks like when looking directly at them,
- participating only at the level of snide comments, or
- treating classmates or the professor disrespectfully, disrupting the learning environment.
- Never involved in class discussions, or serves as a disrupting voice in discussion.

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**Open-Mindedness and Critical Thinking**

The five characteristics of *intellectual humility* as a gateway to open-mindedness (one of the keys to critical thinking):

- Having respect for other viewpoints
- Not being intellectually overconfident
- Separating one's ego from one's intellect
- Willingness to revise one's own viewpoint
- Willingness to try new experiences (including an openness to new information)

If your mind is so closed, why is your mouth always so open?

DON'T BE AFRAID TO BE OPEN-MINDED. YOUR BRAIN ISN'T GOING TO FALL OUT.

THE SAME OLD THINKING → THE SAME OLD RESULTS

Test your open-mindedness by taking the intellectual humility test, here:  
<http://www.shanesnow.com/articles/intellectual-humility/>