2010

Assessing Online Participation

Exploring the Problem & Possible Solutions

Instructors often struggle with assessing and grading participation. This paper is intended to begin a conversation, by exploring nature of the problem, possible solutions, and examples of what others are doing .

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1/1/2010

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Context/Statement of the Problem:

Instructors often struggle with participation marks. Should participation be assessed? If so, why and how? In many online courses, **discussion forums** provide the basis for interaction and participation. How/should instructors evaluate and mark discussion **posts**? Are there **other** forms of participation that should be assessed? How can participation be graded in a fair and meaningful way, yet not require an inordinate amount of instructor time? How can participation marks encourage and support *learning* (vs. "posting for posting's sake")?

Some instructors have adopted the following strategies (which they may not like, but feel stuck with)

- give everyone (in the class, or on a given team) the same grade
- use participation to round final grades up or down (e.g., bump a B+ to an A)
- just do it "intuitively", from their memory/impressions of learners' work in the course
- count posts, giving the highest grades to the most-frequent posters
- create limits and requirements (on size, length, number of postings) to keep the volume down and/or perhaps encourage fewer, more thoughtful posts
- create writing assignments and use those as a basis for participation (e.g., teams write summaries and post, individuals write something and post...grades based on summary)
- create and apply rubrics to assess some or all of a learner's contribution to a course

What does a good solution or approach entail?

It seems important that...

- criteria and the approach are clear to learners. This seems obvious, but it's not always the case (particularly when participation is used to round grades, or is done intuitively)
- an approach should take into account the WHOLE of someone's online participation, or a significant sample (vs. choosing a specific timeframe or activity) to avoid "bad" marks if someone was just having a bad week (sick, travelling, etc)
- participation should actually be measured (again, seems obvious, but certain approaches (e.g., a writing assignment) may not be a *valid* measure of participation
- an approach should create invitations/a space/encouragement for a thriving learning community (not busy work, posting for posting's sake, etc)
- online behaviour that nurtures, challenges, and advances the learning *and* community should be acknowledged
- we consider the possibility of NOT having participation marks at all – if there are high-interest topics and VALUE in participating (i.e., to learn, to be successful in assignments), it may not be necessary in every case

Brainstorm: Possible Approaches

- Instructor does **interim review(s)** – (e.g., weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, 1/2 way point) of participation and assigns an interim grade. Average or add up these grades for overall score.
    - Spreads the work out (avoid having to do all participation grading at end, when final projects/exams are also due)
    - Gives learners a sense of how they're doing while there is time to adjust
- **Randomly select** 10 (or some number) of **posts** per learner and assess those
    - Select from beginning, middle, and end of course, as well as classwide and team forums?
    - Onerous for instructors?
- **Randomly select** 3 (or some other number) of class-wide **forums** and use those as the basis of participation (done at the end, learners won't know **which** forum will be used to assess participation)
    - Select from beginning, middle and end of course
    - Give feedback on one of them early in order to give students an indication of how they are doing and what adjustments they should make
- Focus on **Team forums only**? May be of greater use in some courses over others
- Assign learners (usually a team of learners) the task of facilitating a classwide discussion for a period of time, and use that as the basis of participation assessment (limited? Can be "unfair" if someone is sick or whatever during that specific time period)
- Have learners do a **reflection/self-assessment** of their own participation, demonstrating/giving examples (important)and making a case for a particular grade in light of specific criteria given up front.
- **Learner generated criteria & contracts** - Ask learners to write or sign a participation "contract" at the beginning, and a reflection at the end (see above). This could be a nice way to build the learning community at the beginning of the course – facilitate, but let them come up with criteria/ground rules instead of imposing them (can take time, but this sort of activity has been demonstrated to be useful/beneficial. Probably not great for large classes)

What are others doing?

Below, are examples of approaches to participation marks used at RRU and elsewhere. Browse them to get a sense of the range of approaches as well as the similarities between them.

Select one or two to examine in depth and think about adopting or modifying for your own use.

Example 1: Assessment Criteria for Online Discussion for each unit/week

Mark	**Frequency	Discussion Quality
10	You participated at least 7-8 times during the online discussion period.	Excellent: You formed a strong opinion on the discussion question and provided creditable references to back your opinion. You offered valuable feedback to your classmates' opinions. You demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the issues involved in the discussion question.
8	You participated at least 5-6 times during the online discussion period.	Very Good: You formed an opinion on the discussion question and provided some creditable references to back your opinion. You provided feedback to your classmates' opinions. You demonstrated a good understanding of the issues involved in the discussion question.
6	You participated at least 3-4 times during the online discussion period.	Good: You formed a rather weak opinion on the discussion question and provided a limited number of creditable references to back your opinion. You provided limited feedback to your classmates' opinions. You demonstrated an adequate understanding of the issues involved in the discussion question.
4	You participated at least 2-3 times during the online discussion period.	Good: You formed a weak opinion on the discussion question and provided a limited number of creditable references to back your opinion. You provided almost no feedback to your classmates' opinions. You demonstrated a weak understanding of the issues involved in the discussion question.
2	You participated at least 0-1 times during the online discussion period.	Fair: You formed a very weak opinion on the discussion question and provided a limited number of creditable references to back your opinion. You provided almost no feedback to your classmates' opinions. You demonstrated no understanding of the issues involved in the discussion question.

** numbers could be adjusted to reflect participation per week, unit, or specific discussions

Notes: This approach focuses in part on counting posts, but provides qualitative description. Could be a useful structure as a starting point, but tweak both quantity and quality descriptions to suit

Example 2: Participation Grading Rubric from a Communications Course

	Criteria	Indicator	Weighting	Score	Points
Participation	Min. 2 postings per module throughout the course	Number of postings and even distribution of postings	3	4	12
Critical thinking	Postings indicate critical thinking about the topic at hand	Postings show: • Analyses • Insights • Observations • Reflections • • Substantive questions to further discussion	5	4	20
Response and synthesis	Postings draw from the assigned readings and reflect on the postings of other learners and possibly integrate ideas form others	Postings that: • Make references to readings and others' posting to advance the discussion • In making references, pose questions, ask for clarification or offer comment or different perspectives	10	4	40
Additional relevant information	Suggest appropriate websites or resources to move the discussion to a further level but not burden the class by including unnecessary information	Postings that • Include relevant resources with explanations on why such resources are of relevance and interest to the rest of the class	3	4	12
Succinct postings and netiquette	Keep individual posting brief; encourage others to participate; respect others perspectives	Postings that • Average no more than 2 paragraphs at a time • Invite others to comment and respond • • Are respectful of others	4	4	16
Total					100

Score:

4. Excellent –If the person were not a member of the online discussion, the quality of discussion would diminish significantly.

3. Good – If the person were not a member of the online discussion, the quality of discussion would diminish.

2. Adequate - If the person were not a member of the online discussion, the quality of discussion would somewhat diminish.

1. Not satisfactory - If the person were not a member of the online discussion, the quality of discussion would not be changed.

Example 3: Undergrad Business Course on Writing/Communication

Attendance: As an online learner you are expected to submit at least two valuable postings to your team discussion forum each week. Please try to post at different times in the week so that you can engage in the discussion as it develops.

- You are also expected to review the class-wide postings at the end of each unit. It may not always be necessary to post to those forums.
- Attendance will be based on your presence in your team discussion forum each week.
- If you plan to be away at all during the course, please inform your team mates and I so that we can make an alternative plan for that time period.

Participation: Below are some general guidelines for participation in the ENMN 312 on-line course. The guidelines are designed to help you contribute to the class so that your team mates can benefit from your presence.

Assessment Frameworks

- At the beginning of each week that includes a discussion forum your team will choose a facilitator who will start and monitor the discussion threads. I will provide the information needed by the facilitator at the beginning of each week. The discussion will continue until the following Sunday night, at which time the discussion board will close for that week.
- Postings should generally range from one to three paragraphs in length. (Remember how much reading we all have to do!)
- In your postings you MUST use proper etiquette, specifically respectful language.

Guidelines for postings to discussion forums

- Please focus on the questions posted. Your may include related thoughts and material, other readings, or questions that occur to you from the ongoing discussion.
- Postings should reflect an understanding of the course material.
- Postings should advance the group's negotiation of ideas and analysis about the material; that is, your contributions should go beyond a "ditto."

Some ways you can further the discussion include:

- Offer an opinion
- Suggest a conclusion
- Be thought provoking
- Pose a question
- Disagree

Of course not every good entry will do all, or even any, of those things, but do think about using the readings as a starting point and letting the discussion take off from there.

Weekly participation will be based on a 1-5 scale.

Criterion	1	2-3	3-4	5
Timely discussion contributions	One posting just checking in	1-2 postings checking in at beginning or end of the week	2 postings with content at the beginning or end of week	2 postings with content in different points throughout the week.
Responsiveness to discussion and demonstration of knowledge and understanding gained from readings	No evidence that readings were understood	Postings have questionable relationship to reading material	Readings were understood and incorporated into responses	Postings demonstrate understanding of readings and take discussion to a deeper level by asking questions or drawing conclusions

Should I worry about grammar when in discussion groups?

Because ENMN 312 is a writing class, some learners may grow overly concerned with the quality of their writing and, consequently, feel inhibited about expressing themselves on-line. In writing for your on-line discussions, follow these guidelines:

- Do not worry about the quality of your writing when exchanging ideas; your ideas must be expressed clearly, but your grammar need not be perfect. I want you to participate and I understand that you will not always have time to perfect your postings. When exchanging ideas back and forth, as long as your team mates can understand what you are communicating, you will not be assessed on your grammar and punctuation.
- Do write correctly when crafting conclusions for the class-wide discussion. After each team discussion, you will be expected to summarize and post your conclusions so your classmates can read them. Please edit and proofread these summary postings.

Example 4: Masters Leadership Course: Participation Feedback

Learning Outcomes	Assessment Criteria	B	A
Distinguishes between and skillfully practices discussion and dialogue.	Minimum of one original, substantive post each week in discussion groups		▮
	>4 weekly posts reference course material		▮
	>4 weekly substantive responses to another learner in online discussion	▮	
	>4 weekly posts reference material beyond course reading	▮	
Examines own assumptions and mental models through critical self reflection and reframes them if appropriate.	>4 weekly posts demonstrate reflection on assumptions, mental models and/or behaviours		▮
	Evidence of reflection on coaching practice and plans for improvement (weeks 4-10 and 12)		▮
	Evidence of reframing of assumptions, mental models and/or behaviours.	▮	
	Evidence in posts that coaching improvement plans are put into action	▮	

Example 5: BCom course in Organizational Change

You are required to participate in a variety of discussions and activities with your team and the larger cohort. Your participation will be evaluated on the extent to which you demonstrate an understanding of the course content and the application of same in dealing with organizational dynamics.

"Attendance" (virtual) and active participation in every discussion is required to achieve the maximum participation mark.

In particular, your Instructor will be looking for commentary that:

- indicates critical thinking about the topic at hand
- draws from the assigned readings
- interacts and/or responds to the postings of other learners
- doesn't place a burden on the rest of the group by including unnecessary information
- The following is a guide as to how your online participation will be evaluated:

13 - 15	**Outstanding contributor**: Contributions reflect excellent preparation. Ideas offered are always substantive, yield one or more major insights, and provide direction to the class. Arguments are well-substantiated and persuasively presented. In addition learner must have been involved in ALL discussions to receive a 13 to 15.
11 - 12	**Good Contributor**: Ideas are usually substantive, provide good insights into the topic under discussion, and sometimes provide direction for the class. Arguments reflect clear thinking.
9 -10	**Adequate Contributor**:Contributions in class reflect satisfactory preparation. Ideas could be more substantive, could provide generally more useful insights. Seldom offers a major new direction for the discussion.
5 - 8	**Minimal Contributor**: Ideas offered are seldom substantive OR are often off-point OR provide few (if any) insights, OR give no constructive direction to the class. Clear argument on the topic at hand and/or integrative comments are absent.
0 – 4	**Non-participant**: The person has contributed little or nothing to this class.

Example 6: University of Calgary

Points	Skills
4	Posts in discussions indicate careful reading of and thoughtfulness about reading assignments. Readily offers interpretations of course readings and supports opinions with evidence from the readings. Comments on other posts and responds appropriately to comments on own posts. Ideas are expressed clearly, concisely. Uses appropriate vocabulary. Is attentive to spelling and grammar.
3	Posts in discussion indicate reading and basic understanding of reading assignments. Supports some opinions with evidence from reading. Offers occasional comment on other posts and usually responds to comments on own posts. Ideas are sometimes unclear due to poor organization, or poor word choice. Occasional spelling and grammatical errors.
2	Posts suggest incomplete reading or poor understanding of the material. Either does not offer an opinion on reading material or fails to support the opinion with evidence from the reading. Rarely comments on other posts and fails to respond to comments on own work. Frequent spelling and grammatical errors.
1	Posts are rare and do not answer the discussion question, or do not indicate reading and comprehension of the reading assignments. Does not comment on other posts or reply to comments on own posts. Spelling and grammar are so problematic the message is garbled.
0	Student did not use the discussion boards.

Example 7: California State University at Hayward EDUI 6707

From: http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring51/edelstein51.html

Category	1	2	3	4	POINTS
Promptness And Initiative	Does not respond to most postings; rarely participates freely	Responds to most postings several days after initial discussion; limited initiative	Responds to most postings within a 24 hour period; requires occasional prompting to post	Consistently responds to postings in less than 24 hours; demonstrates good self-initiative	
Delivery of Post	Utilizes poor spelling and grammar in most posts; posts appear "hasty"	Errors in spelling and grammar evidenced in several posts	Few grammatical or spelling errors are noted in posts	Consistently uses grammatically correct posts with rare misspellings	
Relevance of Post	Posts topics which do not relate to the discussion content;makes short or irrelevant remarks	Occasionally posts off topic; most posts are short in length and offer no further insight into the topic	Frequently posts topics that are related to discussion content; prompts further discussion of topic	Consistently posts topics related to discussion topic; cites additional references related to topic	
Expression Within the Post	Does not express opinions or ideas clearly; no connection to topic	Unclear connection to topic evidenced in minimal expression of opinions or ideas	Opinions and ideas are stately clearly with occasional lack of connection to topic	Expresses opinions and ideas in a clear and concise manner with obvious connection to topic	
Contribution to Learning Community	Does not make effort to participate in learning community as it develops; seems indifferent	Occasionally makes meaningful reflection on group's efforts; marginal effort to become involved with group	Frequently attempts to direct the discussion and to present relevant viewpoints for consideration by group; interacts freely	Aware of needs of community; frequently attempts to motivate the group discussion; presents creative approaches to topic	
				TOTAL	

Facilitator's Comments:

Sample Application of Assessment Rubric

In order to determine how "facilitator-friendly" and realistic the rubric - **Assessing Effectiveness of Student Participation in Online Discussions** – would be in an online course and to assess whether or not it provides dynamic objective assessment of student participation, a practical example of a threaded discussion is presented. The example assumes that the sampling of students presented:

- is reflective of different levels of contributions/participation,
- provides for a variance in the promptness of each post, and
- offers postings that are different to some degree in most of the assessment categories

Practical Example

Within a threaded discussion developing in response to an assignment provided by the facilitator in which students are to post responses re: how gender affects maturity, the following student responses/posts might occur:

Student A: Boys who mature late would have a double whammy--not only are they behind other boys, but way behind the girls too. Early maturing boys would likely be more confident, less self-conscious, etc. Most adolescent girls are so self-conscious, no matter when they mature. I guess I matured on time, although I didn't have the genes for a "full figure," so I felt like I was behind, and was envious of the more "shapely" girls the boys stared at. I would say that the late maturing girls have a harder time early on. Early maturing girls most likely feel better about themselves early on. However, this exposes them to older boys who will exploit them, and experiences they are not emotionally prepared for. Has anyone had a similar experience?

Student B: Negative consequences for early-muturing girls appear to be more severe than for early-maturing boys. Girl problematic behaviors include depresion, eating disorders,and early sexual activity due to their early physical development. Early-maturing boys percieved themselves more positively and had more successful peer relations. However,overall, the research states that late- muturation for late adolescenses has an overall positive impact on there body image, and senses of identity. Took me several years to accept my body and maintain a positive self image.

Student C: I think this like everything else is relative.

Applying the rubric **Assessing Effectiveness of Student Participation in Online Discussions,** the objective scores for each of the students are as follows:

CATEGORY	Student A	Student B	Student C
Promptness and Initiative	4	2	3
Delivery of Post	4	2	3
Relevance of Post	4	3	1
Expression within the Post	4	3	2
Contribution to the LC	4	3	1
TOTAL	16	13	10

The facilitator would determine the range of acceptable participation for each of the modules within a course. For example, scores of less than 10 might indicate that the student is participating below an acceptable standard and strategies for improvement might be presented in order to improve the student's contribution to the threaded discussion and ultimately, the learning community.

Reviewing the scores that the students obtained, it is clear that **Student A** is participating in all categories to a high degree. It would be further assumed that this student is achieving the learning outcome of effective contribution to learning community development.

Student B is participating at a more average degree. The facilitator may opt to contact the student to reiterate the need for grammatically correct postings which are free of spelling errors and to prompt the student to post in a more timely fashion.

With **Student C,** a less than acceptable participation is noted in at least two of the categories – *Relevance of Post* and *Contribution to the Learning Community*. The facilitator would be obligated to address concerns with the student and may need to develop strategies to assist the student in becoming a more engaged and successful e-learner.

It would be the facilitator's preference as to the frequency of assessment. For smaller class sizes, the assessment rubric could be used as the end of each module or unit of instruction. For larger classes, it may be more prudent to complete an assessment rubric at the midpoint of the class. This approach would permit the facilitator to make suggestions for improvements and detail strategies that would facilitate a more active participation by the student.

Example 8 & 9: Flexible Learning (Australia)

http://community.flexiblelearning.net.au/TeachingTrainingLearners/content/article_6959.htm

Criteria	Excellent	Average	Poor	Total
Number of responses	More than 20 responses. Evenly distributed throughout the course	Between 10 – 20 responses. Uneven distribution throughout the course	Under 10 responses. Uneven distribution	
Responsiveness to the discussion/ building of a learning community	Often presents reflections that become central to the group's discussion; interacts freely and encourages others Consistently presents creative reflections on topic; aware of needs of community; frequently prompts further discussion of topic	Occasionally makes meaningful reflection on group's efforts; marginal effort to become involved with group	Not actively involved in the online discussion. Needed constant encouragement from the teacher.	
Integration of subject content/readings etc	Clear that readings were accessed and understood. Issues and knowledge gained was incorporated well into responses		From the evidence in the postings it was not clear that readings were understood or used in the learner's own knowledge construction	
Problem solving	The postings indicated a willingness to be involved in online issues and problems. The learner was able to utilize problem solving strategies to address these issues and to offer options to the group for discussion.			
Synthesis and evaluation of own learning	Shows excellent reflection of their own learning			
Regularity of responses	Constant engagement with the discussion. Responds promptly to postings; demonstrates good self-initiative	Makes some contributions to the online discussion but not always present in an ongoing way	Infrequent participation. Only participates after prompting by the teacher	
Expression/language	The learner used clear and appropriate language for the context. The message was clear and unambiguous.	The learner usually expressed themselves clearly but there were times when the language impeded the meaning of their message.	Poor expression and grammar. Inappropriate language for the context and intended audience.	
Online protocols (set by the teacher or negotiated by the group)	Obviously aware of online protocols and rules and addressed themselves appropriately	Occasionally slipped in observing online protocols	Serious misuse of the medium and failure to meet protocols	

Category	1. Drifting	2. Moving in the Right Direction	3. Valuable Performance	4. Our Goal (with due allowance for finitude)	POINTS
Contribution to the Learning Community	Does not make effort to participate in learning community as it develops; seems indifferent	Occasionally makes meaningful reflection on group's efforts; marginal effort to become involved with group	Often presents reflections that become central to the group's discussion; interacts freely and encourages others	Consistently presents creative reflections on topic; aware of needs of community; frequently prompts further discussion of topic	
Relevance of Post	Posts topics which do not relate to the discussion content; makes irrelevant remarks	Occasionally posts off topic; most posts offer no further insight into the topic	Posts are related to discussion topic; makes some connections with readings	Posts consistently are related to discussion topic; brings readings into discussion; cites additional references related to topic;	
Expression Within the Post	Does not express opinions or ideas clearly; no connection to topic	Unclear connection to topic evidenced in minimal expression of opinions or ideas	Opinions and ideas are stately clearly with occasional lack of connection to topic	Expresses opinions and ideas in a clear and concise manner with obvious connection to topic	
Delivery of Post	Utilizes poor spelling and grammar in most posts; posts appear "hasty"	Errors in spelling and grammar evidenced in several posts	Few grammatical or spelling errors are noted in posts	Consistently uses grammatically correct posts with rare misspellings	
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