



Clear Criteria: A Good Way to Improve Participation

I CONTINUE TO BE impressed by the need for teachers to clarify common aspects of instruction instead of assuming that students' understanding of what they entail are the same as ours. Participation is a good example. How often is it defined in the course syllabus? How often is it characterized beyond the basics when it's discussed at the beginning of the course or at different times throughout the semester? We do probably agree on the essentials—questions, answers, and comments—but much more than that is needed if classroom interaction is to realize its potential as a student engagement strategy. Here's an example of the degree of clarification I think we should be after:

“The final criteria for assessment of class participation ...

1. Preparation: the extent of your reading, analyzing and understanding of the material, demonstrated by contribution to discussion.
2. Contribution to discussion: the extent to which you volunteered answers, asked relevant questions, expressed your own opinions and analyzed the contributions of others.
3. Group skills: the extent to which you allowed others to contribute, avoided class domination, shared ideas with others, assisted others, provided positive feedback to others and exhibited tolerance and respect for others.
4. Communication skills: the quality of your expression, clarity, conciseness, use of appropriate vocabulary, confidence.
5. Attendance: includes punctuality.” (Dancer and Kamvounias, p. 448)

Would you be surprised to learn that set of criteria was generated by students? And their input was solicited via an easy, straightforward method. It started with a general discussion of participation. Then students were asked (anonymously) to submit three criteria for assessing participation. From their more than 40 suggestions,

these five categories and descriptions were generated.

Should attendance be considered a part of participation? You can't participate if you aren't present. I wonder if including it isn't a kind of tacit recognition of the value of being present, not just physically, but mentally attentive, listening, processing, and responding nonverbally. If that's the case, it's a good example of a criterion that merits clarification. On the other hand, in an early article on assessing participation, Armstrong and Boud offer an interesting comparison. They say that giving points for class attendance is like giving students credit for including their names on their papers.

Whether attendance counts toward participation or not, the benefit of more clearly delineated participation criteria is that they develop student awareness of participation, especially if the criteria are something they've had a hand in creating. That awareness is further deepened if participation assessment includes a self-evaluation component. The Dancer and Kamvounias article reports on their participation assessment project, during which around week 7 students rated themselves on each of the criteria and added comments justifying their assessments. In the multiple sections of this course, taught by different teachers, those self-assessments were returned with teacher comments, but their ratings were withheld. The authors used this approach based on the belief that comments without ratings encouraged student reflection and a focus on their performance. Although not shared, it's not terribly surprising that the teacher assessments were lower than student self-assessments. But it's the opportunity for student reflection that's important here.

At the end of the course, students once again used the criteria. This time they provided an assessment of their peers and another self-assessment. There were high correlations between those peer ratings and the teacher's final assessment. Even though students overrated their contributions—

probably because they were thinking more about the grade they wanted to get rather than the one they deserved—the authors have made this assessment process a permanent part of the course. Clear criteria and the opportunity to use the criteria are actions that communicate the importance of participation. Developing an accurate understanding of one's contributions to the class and in groups is a process and not one that is developed at all when participation criteria are not stated and are only assessed summatively at the end of the course.

References:

- Dancer, D. and Kamvounias, P., (2005). Student involvement in assessment: A project designed to assess class participation fairly and reliably. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30 (4), 445-454.
- Armstrong, M. and Boud, D., (1983). Assessing participation in discussion: An exploration of the issues. *Studies in Higher Education*, 8 (1), 33-44.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; “Clear Criteria: A Good Way to Improve Participation,” *Faculty Focus*; March 2, 2016 [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/clear-criteria-a-good-way-to-improve-participation/>] March 7, 2016

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Six Myths About a Teaching Persona

WHAT MYTHS ABOUT constructing a teaching persona merit review? Teachers regularly exchange general advice about how to establish an identity in the classroom. Like most myths, these contain kernels of truth, but we believe their conclusions require a critical look. What are your beliefs about teaching persona, how it develops, and the role it plays in student learning?

Myth 1: Try to be like your own best teacher: “The best way to develop your persona is by doing what your best teachers did.”

What if your best teacher isn't at all like you as a person? That teacher created an impact on you by drawing from his or her own character traits. In following this advice uncritically, you end up trying to be like someone else. Linda had a favorite teacher who used wry sarcastic humor to comment on less-than-stellar assignments. When she tried to copy that in her own teaching, it came across as being accusatory rather than prodding. It's better to look at our favorite teachers and ask: “What did this teacher do that made me want to learn and helped me learn?” And then, “If that's my goal, how can I get there in a way that will work for me given the strengths I bring to teaching?”

Myth 2: Teach the course you'd like to take: “Teach the course using the approaches that motivated you and helped you learn successfully.”

Are your classes full of students who are just like you when you were a student? We are usually teaching courses we did well in ourselves, courses with content that captured our imaginations and motivated us to work hard on mastering the material. When we choose approaches and strategies with the intent of reaching students like ourselves, we create a singular learning environment that will work for some students, but not for all. We can start with the features of courses we'd like to take, but the next question is, “What else is needed to promote the learning efforts of my students?”

Myth 3: Consider your teaching persona as a mask: “Teaching is really a performance and the classroom is a stage.”

Masks may bear some resemblance to you, but a mask is something you put on to hide who you are. We may be motivated to hide behind a mask because teaching makes

us vulnerable and a mask offers protection. But masks hide a teacher's authenticity and students are good at detecting teaching that isn't genuine. Masks should motivate us to ask: “What am I hiding and why?”

Myth 4: Just do what comes naturally and your teaching persona will emerge: “You don't need to worry about it. Just be yourself.”

A teaching identity will emerge out of doing what comes naturally, but will it be one that motivates and supports student learning? The classroom is not the family dinner table where “doing what comes naturally” is appropriate. Sometimes our actions and behaviors can impede learning. They confuse students and are misunderstood. Take “what comes naturally” and ask how it can be adapted into attributes that contribute to an environment conducive to learning.

Myth 5: Start out being a tough teacher; establish that you are in charge: “If you don't get things set up properly in the beginning of the course, you can lose control, and once lost it's very difficult to regain.”

This myth speaks to the long-held stereotype of the stern, pointer-wielding authoritative teacher who frightens students into a silent submission. Do you have evidence other than hearsay that a teacher who doesn't establish his or her credibility in forceful ways has classroom management issues? Does this myth speak to who you want to be as a teacher or who you think you need or ought to be? This myth is often accompanied by the advice that “you can always let up on them later.” What are the consequences of dramatically shifting a persona midway in a semester? What benefits would accrue if you started class by being who you want to be?

Myth 6: Teaching persona is not important enough to merit much attention: “Teaching is about student learning, their mastery of the material and development of intellectual skills. Compared to that, persona is a trivial and unimportant matter.”

Students (especially beginning ones) identify more strongly with their teachers than teachers think they do. Teachers can easily stress students and compromise their confidence in learning. Ignoring your

teaching persona can lead to unexpected consequences. For instance, even positive teacher attributes, like Maryellen's animated enthusiasm, can seem excessive and off-putting to students taking classes at her favorite teaching time, 8:00 a.m. The role teachers play in the learning experiences of students is too important to ignore. We must continually examine who we are as teachers and what that contributes to the learning efforts of students.

Linda Shadiow, PhD, and Maryellen Weimer, PhD; “Six Myths About a Teaching Persona,” Faculty Focus; October 26th 2015; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/six-myths-about-a-teaching-persona/>] March 7, 2016

BOOK

Taking College Teaching Seriously: Pedagogy Matters!

by Gail O. Mellow, Diana D. Woolis, Marisa Klages-Bombich, Susan Restler, Rosemary Arca (Foreword)

Paperback: 140 pages
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This book presents a model of embedded professional development, which capitalizes on the affordances of technology to enable groups of faculty to examine their practice in a non-evaluative context, but with a clear focus on improvement. The core of the work involves individual reflection and the design provides for an accessible way to “see” into the classrooms of discipline peers. Most importantly, the Taking College Teaching Seriously experience is not an intense one-shot, but rather a structured opportunity for a faculty member to examine and adapt practice over time and to assess the impact of changes on student learning. - *Amazon online.*