



Center for Teaching Excellence Newsletter
Frostburg State University
March 2010

CTEAG membership: John O'Rorke (POSC), Jodi Welsch (EDUC), Tracy Edwards (GEOG), and Jennifer Flinn (PSYC).

Please feel free to contact any member of the CTEAG or e-mail us at CTE@frostburg.edu if you have any suggestions for future issues.

In This Issue: Something to Think About; An Invitation to Participate in a Virtual Book Club; This month's feature article on Class participation; our monthly ***In the Classroom*** (*What's In It For Me?*) & ***Tech Corner*** (*Virtual Book Clubs*); Teaching Excellence Pledge; and Announcements.

Something to Think About: "The secret of success is constancy of purpose." ~ Benjamin Disraeli

Calling All Readers!

CTE is boarding the virtual book club bandwagon (see this month's Tech Corner article) and invite all faculty, staff, etc to join. During the month of April, we will be conducting a virtual book club experience with the book [*What the Best College Teachers Do* by Ken Bain](#) (Harvard University Press). CTE will have several copies of this book available for loan. Our book club kick-off party will be on Friday April 2 at 3:00 pm at Sand Springs Saloon in Frostburg.

The virtual book club will be conducted on Blackboard and a CTE member will moderate the discussion during each of the 4 weeks in April. You can visit our site's Discussion Board to share your thoughts on each chapter and discuss the book with other readers in the university community. Plan to attend the kick-off on April 2 to become a book club member and receive a copy of the book. If you are unable to attend, contact Jodi Welsch at jwelsch@frostburg.edu to register.



Join the club for a great professional development opportunity!

Class Participation: Personal Involvement, Contribution, Leadership and Professionalism

by Paul Lyons (MGNT)

This article offers some ideas about the evaluation of what is generally labeled, "class participation". Many instructors include as part of course requirements an element such as class participation [CP]. Often, this part of a course may earn the student from 5 to 20 per cent of the final grade in a course. In some graduate-level, highly interactive courses CP can contribute as much as 30 per cent of the final grade in a course. CP may be considered for a live, in-person course; blended instruction, or for a completely online course. Each form of course likely will require a different approach.

Our graduates will probably go to work in some organization, more or less complex, and it is extremely important for them as neophytes as well as supervisors to be able to interact effectively with customers, clients, superiors, peers, subordinates, and so on. To favorably influence others and to convince others that we are competent and involved, we have to make consistent efforts to demonstrate that we are: connected & engaged in what is going on at the moment, able to give useful information, interpretations, and suggestions; prepared for tasks that face

us; and enthused about solving problems. Our graduates should be capable of engaging in social contexts in positive, helpful, and uplifting ways. Having a class participation requirement may enhance students' knowledge and skills regarding these matters.

In courses in which CP is a substantive requirement some instructors will clearly explain and define what is meant by CP and what behavior is anticipated and expected from students in the course. In 2001, an informal survey of more than 40 course syllabi from various universities and colleges in the U.S. reveals that more often than not, instructors do not do a lot to define and explain to students what is expected of them per CP. Frequently, a course syllabus will state: Class Participation: 15 % of the course grade. That's it, no descriptions, no particular behavior expectations, and no definitive expression of how a grade will be applied. I suppose we get what we ask for.

What follows is a set of performance categories that might be adapted (or adopted) by an instructor to give some definitions and expectations to the requirement of class participation. For our purposes here, the concept is more important than the actual language. The information is shaped as a rubric, of sorts, that indicates levels of performance, behavioral anchors and descriptors, and the payoff (reinforcement) for performance. The idea is to give students a guide for choice and action. Shy and retiring students are going to be somewhat disadvantaged by a CP policy. In a course that is online or one that has limited face-to-face interaction, no student should be disadvantaged by a CP course requirement.

While the suggested approach does help to diminish some speculation and/or subjective judgment on the part of the instructor, there is plenty of room for instructors to have some flexibility taken from their observations of student performance. This approach has been used for several semesters in a handful of MBA courses at FSU. While there is no data currently available to support the efficacy of this approach, observations of faculty using the approach reveal that student performance has improved when these behavioral descriptors are used. Students have a good idea of what behavior is expected – there should be no surprises and not much guesswork. Students have expressed their appreciation for the written set of guidelines.

High Performers (85 – 100 points) will consistently and frequently:

- Present their position on a topic with conciseness & clarity; demonstrate that they are prepared and have thought carefully about the material,
- Demonstrate enthusiasm for the course material & its implications,
- Integrate & synthesize (pull together related ideas) information for the class,
- Identify and/or summarize issues (problems) and offer suggestions for finding solutions, and
- Demonstrate a positive, helpful, encouraging demeanor.

Competent Performers (65-84 points) will often:

- Present a position on a topic,
- Show familiarity with course material and will use concepts/theories correctly,
- Demonstrate interest in the course material and its meanings,
- Give information, ask questions,
- Identify issues and problems and offer suggestions, and,
- Demonstrate a helpful, positive demeanor.

Less Than Satisfactory Performers (45-64 points) will:

- Seldom present a position on a topic,
- Show little familiarity with course material,
- Not demonstrate much interest in course material or in its meaning and applicability,
- Seldom give information or interpretations pursuant to issues, problems, and general discussions; and,
- Do little to demonstrate helpfulness or interest in what is going on.

Extremely Poor Performers (less than 45 points) Individuals who demonstrate these behaviors (one or several, below) probably should reconsider their enrollment in the course and in the degree program. A poor performer will:

- Participate in discussions or activities infrequently or not at all,
- Attempt to pervert or degrade the contributions of others, the course material, and/or the instructor's attempts to promote learning,
- Fail to study and apply materials used in the course, and,
- Hand-in required written (or other) work late or not at all.

Other information that may be shared with students:

You should keep some notes (or, a log) that reflect on your performance in this domain. You could do this on a weekly basis.

On a weekly or session basis, your instructor is making judgments regarding the quality and quantity of your performance. If you have questions about how your performance is rated, etc., you should talk with your instructor and obtain some feedback on your efforts.

If periodic grades are used, the final grade in this domain is the average of the periodic grades.

It is reasonable to assume that students will be guided by this approach and will take some comfort in knowing what behavior is desired, expected and recognized. We believe this approach reflects sound management practice and helps to model some aspects of quality management.

In The Classroom: Developing a Sense of “Personal Value in Students”

by John O’Rorke (POSC)

Have your students “hit the wall” yet? Have they reached that psychological space where their motivation levels have begun to drop precipitously? Where their focus is on spring break rather than knowledge acquisition? It happens to all of us, but it doesn’t do our students any favors.

One of the reasons students lose interest in a course is because they do not see the relevance of the course or course materials to them and their lives. A useful technique is to remind students of “what’s in it for them” when you introduce a new concept topic, theme, etc. Using Gartner’s typology of learners, I have found that a large percentage of my students are intrapersonal learners – they learn by relating things to their lives. When they cannot relate something to themselves, they become disinterested. Our job is to help them realize the relationship between what they do in class, on the test, for homework, etc. and their self development. If they do not see it for themselves then we need to point out to them the benefit **TO THEM** of this activity. What will they get out of this and how will it help? (If we cannot do this, then we really need to stop and think about why we are making them do these things).

Some benefits to them that you might associate with assigned learning activities are:

- development of job skills,
- useful in future classes,
- development of test-taking skills,
- the importance of reading comprehension skills to independent adults

Frequently, all it takes is a reminder that there is something in it for them to re-spark the motivation and hype up the energy levels in a classroom. Remember, disinterested students are not learners.

Resources:

Gardner, Howard (1983; 1993) *Frames of Mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*, New York: Basic Books.

Tech Corner: Virtual Book Clubs by Jodi Welsch (EDUC)

Have you read a good book lately? Most university faculty probably see themselves as readers and enjoy reading, especially in their field of interest. Often after reading something especially meaningful or interesting, you may want to discuss what you've read with a friend or colleague. The urge to share one's response lends itself well to the most important aspect of reading; the ability to comprehend the message from a written text. Without this meaning making, reading is just a process of analyzing letters and sounds, words and sentences. One method of increasing comprehension is through reader response. Research by Kucan and Beck (2003) suggests that small-group discussion supports intellectual engagement with text. As readers, we are often highly motivated to take part in this social aspect of the reading process. By hearing others' response to a text, a reader's ideas are challenged and one will often modify or change one's thinking, furthering overall understanding.

The idea of book discussions as a teaching technique is not a new one, but in the last few years, readers' involvement in formal book clubs outside of the classroom has been on the rise. Participation in this kind of comprehension builder is usually self-directed through the choice to become a member of a group and the group's selection of reading material. Recently, online book clubs such as those at www.barnesandnoble.com now provide all readers with a forum to respond to books and to interact with other readers around the world. Since many students take part in these experiences with their pleasure reading, it makes sense that bringing the book club into the university classroom would be an engaging classroom experience that would also improve students' comprehension of course reading materials. Taking these clubs online also provides a great deal of flexibility for both readers and faculty.

In my own courses, I've used book clubs in several different ways. In my graduate course for future secondary and K-12 teachers, students select a non-fiction book that interests them and then are grouped with other students who selected the same book. This spring I have book clubs for texts such as *Dreams From My Father* by Barack Obama, *Rocket Boys* by Homer Hickam and *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortensen. While reading these books during the semester, students are required to engage in an ongoing discussion with their clubmates. Using the "Groups" area of Blackboard, I've created an area for each club. This tool provides club members with their own discussion board, e-mail list, file exchange and virtual classroom. In their discussion board, members post threads during their reading of the book, responding at their own pace. The requirements for these threads are fairly open ended, but I encourage students to share their general thinking, make connections between the text and themselves, describe their visual images while reading, evaluate the author's craft and generate questions about the text. I also require that they post a specific number of threads and make several responses to others' posts. Happily, many students go above and beyond these requirements. Sometimes, I've asked students to take on specific roles within the book clubs, in order to focus their thinking. These roles require attention to connections between the text, self, other books or the greater world (Connector), key sentences or passages that should be discussed (Passage Master), important words or terms (Vocabulary Enricher), background information on the topic or author (Researcher), related visual elements (Illustrator) or questions that arose during reading (Questioner). These roles represent the kinds of thinking that good readers do and reinforce comprehension strategies that can assist students when reading other course materials (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004). In a more short term club experience, I've asked my undergraduate students to select and read a professional article from several I've provided or a specific chapter or passage from our textbook and to engage in online discussions with others who have read the same piece of text.

In feedback from both my graduate and undergraduate students, the book club experience has been very highly rated. Students have expressed appreciation for being allowed to select a text based on their interests and to interact with their classmates in a meaningful way. It seems to give their reading a purpose beyond just completing the course requirement. In the online format, respondents valued the opportunity to respond at their own pace and the time to thoughtfully craft their response in writing. As an instructor, taking the clubs online allows for more instructional time and a deeper discussion of the texts than what might occur in the last 15

minutes of class. I also felt that the students' comprehension benefited more from conversations with their peers than from lectures or activities I might have planned in class. I feel that my students' experiences with virtual book clubs confirm this technique as a way to both engage readers and to support their understanding of text.

Resources:

- Beeghly, D. (2005). It's about time: Using electronic literature discussion groups with adult learners. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 49.1.2.* 12-21.
- Daniels, H. & Zemelman, S. (2004). *Subjects matter: Every teachers guide to content area reading.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Scharber, C. (2009). Online book clubs: Bridges between old and new literacies practices. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 52, 5, 7.* 433-437

Teaching Excellence Pledge

Commit yourself to teaching excellence. Take the pledge today, strive to fulfill it this year and use it in your self-evaluations next year. Did you take the pledge last year? Don't forget to include it in this year's self-evaluations.

"Teaching Excellence is a journey, not a destination."

I pledge to strive to be a better participant in the learning process. As a teacher, I pledge to try at least one new technique, approach or activity in each of my courses. When I review the results of my activities and strategies in the classroom, I pledge to focus on learning. I will not ask "How did I do?" Rather, I will ask "Are they learning from what I am doing? What can I do differently to encourage them to learn 'better'?"



Upcoming Events

Contact Jodi Welsch jwelsch@frostburg.edu for more information about the CTE Virtual Book Club in April. Hope to see you at the Kick Off event on April 2 at Sand Springs Saloon in Frostburg.

Watch for additional presentations and events.