Practical Reflections on Assessing Active Class Participation in a Sino-British Context

by Dirk C. Moosmayer, Nottingham University Business School China

Project Context

In order to encourage students to participate in class discussions at the Nottingham University Business School China (NUBS China), I introduced the assessment of class participation in two marketing modules at the M.Sc. level. One module was taught to a small 13-student cohort on a M.Sc. in Entrepreneurship programme in the fall of 2012; the other module was taught to 108 students on four different M.Sc. business programs in the spring of 2013. This research was supported by the UK Higher Education Academy through a Teaching Development Grant (TDG-GEN0155) for “Assessing Active Class Participation in a Sino-British Context”.

The project was part of a larger initiative at NUBS China to introduce the assessment of class participation. This curricular change was somewhat challenging because assessing a classroom experience contradicts the norm in British higher education that any assessment should be reviewed by external examiners for quality assurance purposes. As a result, a very strict form of Assessed Class Participation (ACP) was negotiated with Nottingham’s mother campus and with the external examiners. Specifically, (1) the ACP component must account for exactly 20% of the module mark; (2) contributions must be assessed in at least 9 sessions; (3) only the best four marks for each student count; (4) to assure that at least four contributions can be assessed, students must be called if they do not volunteer to speak; and (6) each mark can be 0, 35, 55, 65, 75, or 85 on a scale from 0 to 100 (see Appendix at the end of this document).

Marking Participation

Attributing marks creates two distinct challenges: first, identifying a contribution and second, evaluating it. Attributing a mark to a contribution usually seemed quite feasible. My colleagues and I were usually quite confident in judging whether a contribution was poor (35), adequate (55), good (65), very good (75) or exceptional (85) (see rubric in the appendix). In contrast it seemed more difficult in practice to actually identify the contributor and assign the mark, i.e. to remember all the contributions at the end of the session. The following comments reflect my experiences.
Identifying contributors

Working effectively with students and assessing them requires identifying them. Typically, our faculty office would prepare name plates that each student was supposed to put on his/her table in assessed settings. Additionally, the faculty office produced seating plans with pictures of each student. Some challenges here were the old pictures provided by some students that did not help much in identifying them in class. Moreover, the quality of the images was poor as a result of resizing by the faculty office. Finally, because students are allowed to add and drop classes in the first two weeks of each semester, final seating plans were usually not available for the first two weeks.

Although these challenges remain, it may nevertheless be possible to encourage students to make themselves more easily identifiable. E.g. students often forgot their name plates or did not use them. As a practical solution, it was helpful to announce that students’ participation could only be marked for a class when they did have their name plate on the table and were thus identifiable.

Identifying contributions

Unless one wants to constantly note down who said what, which distracts teacher and students, it is useful to assign marks after each class. However, this requires remembering the students’ contributions and is particularly difficult for larger classes and at the beginning of the semester when one doesn’t know the students yet. In some classes I thus had student helpers who were studying on a different program and who attended my class in order to take notes on student comments and the names of students making them. This allowed me to more easily remember the comments and attribute marks to them later. Moreover, by having an agreed code with the student helper, e.g. “excellent comment” indicating an 85, “very good comment” indicating a 65, and so on, allowed for an on-the-spot teacher assessment that could be noted by the student helper either as a teacher comment (“very good”) or directly as a mark (65).

Other colleagues have asked students in the class to mark on a seating chart the order in which students made comments in the discussion. These colleagues felt confident that the order of comments on the seating chart would be enough information to allow them to remember the content and to assign a mark after class. Usually, one student was asked to note the contributions for two rows (i.e. there would be 4 student helpers in a
room with 8 rows), and these students were be given priority when they wanted to make a contribution.

A further option is to give paper tokens to students who participated in the class discussion (e.g., 1 for a comment/answer to a question, 2 for a relevant comment, and 3 for a particularly important contribution) and ask them to write their names on them and return the tokens to the teacher after class. This gives the teacher a score for each student which can be converted to a mark at the end of the semester. This approach is particularly suitable for larger classes in which it is difficult for the teacher to get to know each student individually.

Measures for supporting learning
I distributed small pieces of paper and asked students to name the top three peer contributions of each session and the names of the peers who made them. The goal of asking for the top three was so that students would feel that they were rewarding the best, not punishing weaker peers. It also gave me a good sense of whether I was perceiving the discussion very differently from my students. Perhaps most important was that once students understood that they would be asked to report on the best peer performances for every session, they paid more attention to the comments in the class discussion and evaluated them. This thus improved attention during the session.

For encouraging student participation among Chinese students, it was further effective to allow students to have discussion in small groups of 5-6 students before discussion in the whole class setting. This allowed students to test their ideas in front of a smaller audience, and when presenting an idea they felt like representatives of their group and thus less exposed and vulnerable.

Student and faculty perceptions
Some students do not seem to like ACP. Generally, there was a tendency for elective courses to have fewer participants when class participation was assessed. For example, I taught a module without class participation in 2012 to 120 students, in 2014 to 142 students, and in 2013 with ACP to 108 students which I taught in three groups of 36.

Some colleagues, particularly those in the 50 minute undergraduate sessions with larger classes, reported that they felt under pressure and actually held a mark sheet during the class to assure that they would not miss marking a comment. This approach seemed to
put more pressure on students because they felt that they were in a permanent assessment situation. It also distracted the teacher from moderating the discussion as effectively as possible. As a result of these concerns, we now aim to use ACP for smaller class sizes and longer sessions; e.g. we lengthened the sessions at the undergraduate level from 50 to 80 minutes.

Organizing the Assessment of Class Participation

Timing and scheduling
This section reflects on some experiences that I gathered when introducing Assessed Class Participation in a postgraduate module that would usually be taught to 120 students in 10 sessions per semester with each session containing 3 units of 50 minutes each. I taught this module as a 90-minute lecture to all 108 students (Mondays 12:30-14:00), followed by three case discussions with 36 students each (Mondays 14:20-15:20; 15:40-16:40; 17:00-18:00). From students’ feedback, I concluded that many would prefer more time for case discussions. As a consequence I plan to shift to a 60-minute lecture plus 90-minute case discussion in the future. These changes imply further adoptions that require consideration.

First, teachers spend more time in the classroom. While this is good for supporting students’ learning (one spends the same amount of time per student but in smaller groups), it naturally leaves less time for other teaching, administrative tasks, or research. This sounds obvious but needs to be considered by the individuals involved and by the institution when introducing this new assessment method.

The positive part of the module schedule (lecture: 12:30-14:00; case discussions: 14:20-15:20, 15:40-16:40, and 17:00-18:00) is that it was possible to avoid major time clashes for students. The different parts were delivered without lengthy interruptions, which I think is preferable for students as they perceive the lecture and application parts as one connected session. Bundling all teaching for this module on one day per week was also my own preference. Nevertheless, there are some drawbacks. Students were sometimes late because they did not have enough time for lunch, particularly when a previous class ran late.

More important for the assessment was that the 20-minute breaks between the interactive sessions were not long enough for answering the remaining student questions, cleaning the whiteboard (which is important to avoid that students in the next session simply repeat what they read on the white board), getting mentally ready for the next session, and, in cases where I did not have an assistant, for noting the student contributions
and attributing marks to students. I thus attributed participation marks at the end of the day. The advantage is that I had an overview over all students’ performances. Capturing some of this information directly after each session would have been better but was difficult to accomplish in practice.

**Physical environment**

Instead of one 120-student room for 3 hours, for ACP I needed one 120-student room for 1.5 hours and one 40-student room for 4 hours. Besides the different number of rooms needed when introducing ACP, the room set-up may require modification.

From my first application of ACP and earlier student interviews which I did as part of the project, it became evident that Chinese students would feel much more willing to contribute to a class discussion after discussing their thoughts in a small group. An amphitheater-style setting that is used for case teaching in most U.S. schools thus did not appear best. It was more useful to seat students at table blocks of around 6 students. Moreover, our traditional lecture rooms for groups of around 40 are long rather than broad. For teaching to smaller groups I thus had two white boards fixed to the long wall of the room. At the same time, chairs and tables in the room had to be rearranged. With the movable single-seat tables in all our teaching rooms, this was easy to accomplish. Our facilities team arranged the seating at the beginning of each class. However, rearranging the tables to the initial position was left with me and the students of the last session because facility services stopped working at 5pm.

**Some Higher-level Considerations**

*What competences do we want to develop – and assess?*

In my discussions about ACP I found that many colleagues, and especially those coming from a UK HE culture, find it inappropriate to assess students’ spoken contributions in class. The first procedural concern is about controlling for quality as a classroom experience cannot be reviewed by external examiners. Moreover, many scholars think that we should assess knowledge and not talkativeness or spontaneity or extroversion. These concerns were further fed by empirical results from a study that I did with colleagues at my institution that showed high perceived English competence and low perceived shyness as strongest predictors of ACP score.
At a presentation of these results at the University of Hull in March 2013, some audience members were shocked because it seems unfair to punish students for being shy. However, one listener spoke up and reported on conversations with company representatives who perceive a core deficit in graduates’ inability to speak up and contribute to corporate meetings. Particularly in business schools we may need to realize that we are educating most of our graduates not for an academic but for a business career, and that communicative competences and the ability to contribute one’s position is crucial for career success. Moreover, in western companies, a group discussion or problem solving activity in a competitive team of job applicants may often be part of the selection process.

I thus believe that assessing class participation is useful because it evaluates, and I believe also supports, a competence type that is important, at least for business majors. That said, there are obviously many types of knowledge, skill and competence that schools need to develop and that should be assessed by other assessment methods. At NUBS China, when class participation is assessed, it accounts for 20%; i.e. it is only one among multiple skill dimensions that are accounted for in the module mark. Our own qualitative research showed that our students found that 20% is an appropriate weight.

**Distinguish assessment from class size and teaching approach**

Assessed class participation (ACP) is at first an assessment method. However, ACP obviously requires opportunities for students to deliver contributions that can be assessed. This usually goes hand-in-hand with small classes and with specific interactive teaching approaches, e.g. case teaching instead of lecturing. When introducing ACP in an institution and promoting it as a tool that enables the effective engagement of students in class, it is important to recognize prior existing approaches for interactive and small class teaching. It thus seems wise to distinguish carefully between discussions around class sizes, teaching approaches, and assessment formats. All three are highly connected when introducing ACP, particularly in an institution with large class lecturing. But one should not neglect the experiences of those faculty who have interactively taught small groups before, though without assessing participation. Certainly, it is possible that one may not favour ACP but nevertheless be an extremely passionate interactive small class teacher.

**Communicate ACP as a reward for proactive students**
In some discussions among staff it seemed that the non-participating students are considered ‘free riders’ who need to be punished for being lazy, or because they are subverting a learning activity that works only if students participate. This is probably an inappropriate way of framing the problem. Non-participants may not be lazy, but rather they may just have a different learning style. In my interviews with students who had experienced ACP, some informants indicated that feel they learn better from listening and observing than from speaking and contributing. It is thus important to explain that interactive classroom experiences are about building discursive and social competences which are important in business life. Assessing class participation is thus not about punishing bad behavior but about assessing an additional competence that assures preparedness for business life. It seems important to emphasize this positive component when explaining why we assess class participation.

Appendix

*Marking rubric provided by the school (as negotiated with mother campus and external examiners)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Absent or no class contribution or Contribution was completely incorrect or irrelevant, with no evidence of understanding or knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>A weak contribution. Poor knowledge &amp;/or understanding of source material, and with possibly major errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>A middle-of-the-range contribution. Demonstrated basic understanding &amp;/or knowledge of source material. A relevant but not particularly focussed contribution to the class discussion, and with possibly minor &amp;/or major errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>A good contribution. Demonstrated good understanding &amp;/or knowledge of source material. A perceptive contribution to the class discussion, with evidence of analysis rather than just the expression of opinion or facts. Only minor errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>(this category has been dropped in a revised version) An excellent contribution. Demonstrated excellent understanding and knowledge of source material. Added significant value to the discussion, with evidence of analysis and critical thinking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
No errors.

85 An outstanding contribution. Demonstrated excellent understanding and knowledge, beyond the source material. Evidence of critical thinking, analysis and originality. No errors.

Note: Based on initial experience, this scale has now been revised and the 75 mark has been dropped because faculty felt there were too many steps.