

## **Show Me The Money: A New Twist on “Pay to Participate”**

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### **Introduction**

Almost every college or university syllabus in the United States contains a section addressing *class participation*. Expectations for participation may range from students simply attending class (mere attendance); through adopting roles as interrogators, respondents, discussants, or moderators/facilitators; to giving full-fledged presentations. Nonetheless, allotting a portion of students' grades to class participation is a nearly ubiquitous faculty preference that requires explicit description of criteria, fair application (Emory, et al., 2004) and accurate accounting (Maznevski, 1996; Tunney, 2006).

Under ideal conditions, students are self-motivated to spontaneously initiate and maintain ongoing in-class engagement or interaction among themselves and their teachers. Several positive and desirable outcomes may result from this level of involvement including:

- development of critical thinking skills.
- development of oral communication skills.
- enhanced personal understanding of course information.
- enhancing others' understanding of course information (Hayes, 2006)

Despite participation's contributing roles as an input, process, and output toward successful learning (Luckie & Smethurst, 1998; Maznevski, 1996), many students, especially undergraduates, manifest a general reluctance to participate in class:

hence, the uneasy silences following almost any type of non-rhetorical question posed to the class. Conversely, willing interjections offered by the rare uninhibited student may overtly (or possibly covertly) monopolize the conversation, limiting inclusiveness and diversity of viewpoint (Emery, et al., 2004), and perhaps even inducing a discriminatory bias (both pro and con) into the instructor's participation evaluation mix (Luckie & Smethurst, 1998). It is incumbent on faculty, then to navigate these concerns by adopting objective methods that encourage evenly distributed or equitable contributions from their charges while at the same time promoting students' growth.

### *Shyness or Pathology (or Laziness)?*

If all students, at least some of the time, were predisposed to enjoyably participating in class, measures such as the one proposed herein would not be necessary. However, research demonstrates that many, if not a slight majority, of college students exhibit some form of "shyness" (Carducci & Stein, 1988) that may inhibit their enthusiasm. Seemingly an innate human trait, shyness actually is comprised of cognitive, affective, and situational dimensions Morris (1983) – commonly conflated (Kerr & Warren, 1997) – that are manifested as a complex set of behaviors ranging from low level anxiety in social settings to the debilitating pathology of agoraphobia.

Many articles and reports have investigated psychological barriers to participation, among them Morris (1983), who discovered that "timidity, audience anxiety [stage fright], and interpersonal anxiety are separate, distinguishable constructs." Encouragingly, many forms of shyness can be overcome, and most shy students correctly believe that they can – and are willing to try – to do so (Carducci & Stein, 1988; Kelly & Keaten, 1991; Walsh, 2002).

Three mitigating factors are involved: accommodating students' learning styles, the setting of expectations, and the willingness on the part of the instructor and the students to facilitate participation. Thus, the Center for Instructional Development and Research purports:

*"Equitable class participation* does not necessarily mean that all students are expected to participate in the same way, or even the same amount. Rather, the goal is to make sure that students are able to participate in class in ways that will help them achieve the learning goals for the course, and that no one is kept from participating as a result of the way the course is taught. Student engagement in class is greatly influenced by the expectations that instructors set for classroom behavior, teaching strategies that are employed, and ways student interactions are structured during class" (Emory et al., 2004)

Further, interventions such as the Pennsylvania State University Reticence Program have produced significant shyness reduction in students who willingly attended (Kelly & Keaten, 1991).

Psychology aside, every faculty member has encountered students for whom attending class is at best a chore, or at worst a distraction from something deemed more important. These students have acquired labels such as “social loafers” and “free-riders” (Bourner, Hughes, & Bourner, 2001; Joyce, 1999) so-known for their avoidance of meaningful investment in group work at any level. Their presence has a negative effect on both the morale of the class and the quality of discussions and activities. With appropriate motivation, however, it is not uncommon for these students to have a notable and positive impact on class outcomes.

### *Show Me the Money*

Given that class participation is a form of exchange – and is, therefore, quantifiable or measurable – a method congruent with those attributes may be perceived as imaginative, pragmatic, and effective. Quite simply, the instructor distributes (in class, or by e-mail or Web site download) an equal number of “participation dollars” (See Figure 1) to students enrolled in the class. Then, under predetermined circumstances, the instructor collects dollars from individual students during class in exchange for that student’s contribution.

Quantitatively, the instructor may accept one dollar for a thoughtful answer to a question, and a greater number of dollars from a student who volunteers to sit on a panel discussing a book chapter. Qualitatively, the instructor may collect a greater number of dollars for an answer or comment that extends a concept or demonstrates exceptional originality (Tunney, 2006). To accommodate learning style (Du & Simpson, 2002), acknowledge diversity, and promote inclusion (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005), a variety of participation categories are available, from which students may assemble a “portfolio” of opportunities and performance. Limits can be put on how many dollars may be allocated to a particular category, and the stipulation can be made that each portfolio must be comprised of a certain minimum number of categories.

As the term progresses, the instructor logs exchanged dollars in a matrix charting students’ progress and level of engagement, and even actual attendance. In concert, the instructor can use the matrix to manage participation so that a few vociferous or ambitious students do not “spend” their money too quickly or all at once, to the exclusion of more reticent or reclusive students whose; clustering them at the end makes the avoidance even more obvious and anxiety-inducing.

### *Words of Wisdom*

First, expect some resistance and perhaps even some resentment. As noted above, some students feel anxious about being, literally, accountable for their participation. A typical student may be accustomed to equating mere attendance with credit for participation. Others truly are uncomfortable or even threatened by having to speak in class. Still others are those notorious social loafers and free-riders. Be explicit about why class participation is valued, both in class and in the professional environment, specifically addressing the concerns mentioned previously. Include a rationale and a description of expectations in your syllabus (Maznevski, 1996).

Second, delimit in advance what the “price” of various contributions is. For example, does any response to a question warrant a dollar, or only “good” or correct answers? Does leading an in-class initiative net more dollars than an ordinary correct answer? If *any* utterance is a dollar spent, then students will perceive the currency – justifiably so – as “inflated,” or worse, “worthless.”

Third, print only as many dollars as you think can be “circulated” during the length of the term. If 60 students are enrolled in your class, and you issue ten dollars per student, you may find it difficult to collect all \$600 in a timely, organized, and equitable manner.

Fourth, keep the participation matrix up-to-date, and be familiar with who has contributed: using discrete serial numbers, as shown in Figure 1, is helpful. This tactic discourages reticent students from giving their dollars to more participative peers to spend in their stead. Make the participation matrix readily available so that students may check their “bank accounts” regularly.

Finally, be prepared and willing to discuss and co-design strategies for students who genuinely struggle with participation, earlier in the term rather than later. Similarly, do not post the matrix for all to see, as this may be perceived as embarrassing or goading.

### **Conclusion**

If thoughtfully designed, explained, and implemented – and tied to a “gold standard” – participation dollars can enliven discussion, enhance inclusion and diversity, motivate the reluctant, and provide equitable and accurate accounting of individuals’ contributions to classroom learning (and their own) by encouraging them to “show you the money.”



Figure 1.

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