

Participation as Assessment: Political Science and Classroom Assessment Techniques

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From the beginning of my teaching career I had been drawn to class participation (Cohen 1991; 1993). I enjoyed posing questions and problems to the class, and they seemed to enjoy the interaction. At the same time, intuitively I was drawn to discussion and participation as ways to enhance learning. Later I learned that these were part of what was known as “active learning,” and they really did have the ability to enhance student learning (Barr and Tagg 1995; Chickering, Gamson, and Barsi 1989; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005, 101–2). My faith bolstered, I continued to explore ways to actively engage students through developing thought-provoking questions, assigning in-class writing, utilizing small group work, and integrating short presentations. Eventually I began to share my ideas with colleagues at conferences and publish them in respected journals. I discussed what I was doing in class, the basic principles underlying my approach, the challenges it provided, and the hoped-for results when it came to student learning.

However, although I was committed to enhancing student learning and developing ways to engage students, I studiously avoided the taint of assessment. From my perspective, I had neither the time nor the inclination to develop the elaborate techniques I assumed were required for real assessment to take place. While grudgingly acknowledging its relevance, I felt it was best left to others. Never did the word “assessment” cross my lips or appear in print. I should have been led to think otherwise, once I came in contact with the ideas of Tom Angelo and Patricia Cross.

In *Classroom Assessment Techniques* they inform us that much of what we view as assessment (e.g., exams, quizzes), while helpful, may come too late to affect student learning. Consequently, we need ongoing ways to monitor what students are learning. Thus the need for what they term Classroom Assessment, “an approach designed to help teachers

find out what students are learning in the classroom and how well they are learning it. This approach is learner-centered, teacher-directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice” (Angelo and Cross 1993, 4). The idea of Classroom Assessment had definite appeal for me. It would help me better determine whether learning was actually taking place in my classrooms, and it seemed like an approach I could apply with relative ease. I was particularly attracted by their minute paper suggestion. All I needed to do was to have the students write short answers to two simple questions at the end of class: “What was the most important thing you learned during this class? What important question remains unanswered?” Not surprisingly, “no other Classroom Assessment Technique has been used more often or by more college teachers” (148). I decided to try the minute paper in my classes. After receiving responses that I felt were not particularly helpful, such as answers that seemed pretty mechanical, or questions that seemed off subject, I decided to discontinue their use after one or two tries. Looking back, had I been more persistent and creative in applying Angelo and Cross’s techniques, they might have become helpful (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005, 113–4). However, I moved on as did any idea of applying Classroom Assessment Techniques. So I thought.

I was once again nudged in the direction of Classroom Assessment a student’s comment. Class participation is a portion of the grade in all my classes, and when going over the course syllabus on the first day of class, I ask students why one might consider class participation important. In one particular class I heard the usual responses such as, “It makes the class more interesting,” “It helps us pay attention,” and “We may have interesting ideas.” But then I heard something that caught my attention “It let’s you know how we are doing and if we understand the material.” The idea was simple and straightforward. For some reason it had never crossed my mind in such explicit terms. No, I did not think of applying the term “assessment.” However, I did start to notice a change in my behavior. I began paying closer attention to what students were actually learn-

ing as they participated. I began to see participation not as a means of learning that was then tested on an exam, but as feedback on the nature of the learning that was or was not taking place. Nevertheless, I was not ready to begin thinking of my change in perspective as somehow linked to assessment.

It was only after a colleague asked me to give a presentation as part of a campus session on assessment that I became conscious of the tie between participation and Classroom Assessment. My colleague and I had observed each other’s classes over the years and had frequent discussions about teaching. He had recently become interested in assessment and had come to believe that what was occurring in my classes had relevance to assessment. I trusted him, and so decided to see if what he suggested made sense. I began by consulting Lorna Earl’s *Assessment As Learning*, one of the works he had used when developing his own ideas on assessment.

In her book Earl describes three forms of assessment: assessment *of* learning, assessment *for* learning, and assessment *as* learning (Earl 2003, 21–8). The first, assessment *of* learning, is likely the most common of the three forms. When a colleague of mine recently said, “Of course, we all do assessment. We call them tests,” he was speaking of assessment *of* learning. Earl sees this form of assessment as focusing on quantity and accuracy, though I believe it could easily include other factors such as organization, insight, or analysis. Regardless of what is actually measured, this form of assessment usually takes the form of tests and is used as a summative judgment of student performance and as a sorting mechanism indicating to students our judgment of their achievement in the course. Depending on the nature of the assessment instrument, there may be little opportunity to indicate, not simply what was wrong, but also what needs to be done for improvement.

Earl’s second form of assessment, assessment *for* learning, moves from the summative to the formative. Here the goal is to give students feedback that helps them become better learners and to better achieve course goals. Assessment occurs on an ongoing basis, not simply

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when there is a test. It is also likely to be multifaceted, involving written work, both in and out of class, and interactions in class with the teacher as well as with other students. Comments, instead of being comparative and summative, are designed to “highlight each student’s strengths and weaknesses and provide them with feedback that will further their learning” (24). The teacher does not serve simply as a judge of the student’s performance but as the critical link that provides the information necessary to move up the learning ladder. In such situations the teacher’s diagnostic skills and ability to provide helpful feedback become critical. It is not simply about a student being right or wrong; it is about where the student may have fallen short, why this might be the case, and what can be done about it.

The third and most rarely used form of assessment for Earl is assessment *as* learning. It is here where students, and not the teacher, become the assessors. According to Earl, it is the goal we should all be striving for: “It occurs when students personally monitor what they are learning and use the feedback from this monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations, and even major changes in what they understand” (25). Students learn to reflect on their own work and become capable of making adjustments that enhance their learning. In this way they learn to become more like us, not necessarily in what we think but in how we think.

By this I mean that most of us have internalized ways of looking at our own learning and at ways that it can be enhanced. This does not mean that we no longer need input from others or that we do not value the ideas of others. However, it does mean that we have come to understand what it means to learn and have developed ways to enhance and monitor our own learning. We understand the importance of looking at our own assumptions. We understand that an example is not a proof, that an opinion is not necessarily a fact, and that a personal preference may be based on values, values that are not subject to being proven true or false. We are also incessant questioners, of ourselves and of those we come in contact with. Furthermore, we understand that for learning to take place, going public is often critical. We intentionally place ourselves in situations where learning will take place. Each time we teach a new course, add a new section to a prepared course, or decide to prepare a paper or to deliver a presentation, we know that we will be challenged.

Once I became acquainted with Earl’s three forms of assessment, I began to see

assessment, participation, and learning in a different light. Yes, I had been engaging in a good deal of assessment *of* learning, since I gave exams, graded the exams, and provided a summative evaluation at the end of the semester. However, I now realized that I had also been engaging in a good deal of assessment *for* learning, and from time to time in assessment *as* learning via the participation activities I had developed on a piecemeal and unsystematic basis. The student who informed me that participation was also about assessment turned out to be correct. In order to demonstrate how correct she was, let me now look at examples of class participation and how they relate directly to assessment.

Participation begins the first day of class with a simple question or exercise such as asking students to write down and later discuss thoughts/words that come to mind after I say a given word or words (e.g., “politics,” “bureaucracy”). The participation initiated on the first day of class continues throughout the course. This is particularly the case when it comes to course readings. Depending on the course these readings may be speeches, essays, books, or articles from contemporary periodicals. Discussing readings in class has become core to my teaching as it is my opportunity to have a much closer look at student learning. This was not always the case.

When I first started teaching, I thought I knew what was occurring in my classes. I would make assignments and the students would read them. Once they read the assignment, they understood what was being conveyed. In class when I said something, they would understand what was being said. I believed that they would read and understand the selections I had carefully chosen for the class. I also believed that when I said something, they would get it. I assumed they would ask questions if they did not understand. When I asked if there were any questions, no one responded. I took for granted that they understood what they had read and what I had said.

Eventually I understood that this was not the case, and that a more focused effort on my part, particularly when it came to readings, was needed. I could not simply say, “We will be discussing X in class next week.” In addition to preparing myself for the discussion, I needed to help students be better prepared as well.

Prior to beginning a reading in class I ask students to be prepared to discuss one point, one where there is no single correct answer (e.g., What is the point you most agree with? Most disagree? Most important point? Most interesting point?),

and to be ready to discuss why they chose that particular point. I also let them know that when responding and explaining their points they must cite passages from the text. Just saying the author(s) said X will not be enough. They must go to the text itself. I explain to them that it is through a discussion of their points that we will come to understand and analyze the reading. I ask them to send me their points as well as the passage(s) and page(s) from the reading a day prior to class. In some cases I will also ask them to say a few words on why they chose the point and passage they did.

The day we are to discuss the given text I begin the discussion with a general question such as, “How did you like doing this reading?” or, “How did you feel when doing this reading?” This gives any student an opportunity to comment on the reading, since there is no right or wrong answer and differing perspectives are welcome. In some cases they may bring up the substance of the piece itself, or they may compare it with another reading. In other cases they may comment on style and whether the reading was easy to follow or difficult, and if difficult, what seemed to make it difficult for them.

After these opening comments, we then go on to discuss the points they chose and to analyze the passages they selected to support their chosen points. At the end of the discussion I ask students to write. In some cases I ask them to summarize the text in three sentences. In other cases I may ask them to briefly compare this author to one we had just read or, if they had to choose between authors, which one would they agree with more and why. Depending on circumstances (e.g., time, previous exercises) we may share the writing in class that day, or I may collect it, and we discuss it the following class.

In addition to encouraging students to read and think about assignments prior to class (Green and Rose 1996), the above approach has clear linkages to ongoing assessment. First, student pre-class communications give me some inkling of their understanding of the text and what they may be taking away from the assigned reading.

Second, when we actually discuss their points in class, assessment is ongoing and integral to the discussion. Students need to have passages to support the points they wish to make. After reading a passage, I ask the students to say in their own words what the author has just said, in addition to explaining how the passage relates to the point (e.g., agree/disagree, important) they are making. As a result, we are assessing reading comprehension on a number of different levels, including

understanding of terminology and major ideas. Students read passages in class and not infrequently come across words they do not know, or if they do know the word may not understand the sense in which the author is using it.

Finally, do they grasp the main ideas? More specifically, are they able to identify the main ideas and if they do, are they able to understand what the author is saying? Can they understand the context of the ideas, understand the terminology, and how an author may be using a particular term? For example, the meaning of words that may seem rather obvious to us (e.g., elite, hierarchy, faction) may not be so obvious to our students. Something as simple as not knowing a word or misunderstanding how an author may be using a particular word could lead to major misunderstanding on the part of the reader. This is the place where feedback to students becomes critical. Their difficulties may not simply be about individual words, but may be about understanding the idea(s) being conveyed. For example, in one reading I have used for a number of years there is a passage that reads, "Notice, however, that this basic definition [of democracy] does not require liberty but does require political equality" (Diamond 1980, 21). Students often select this passage when discussing how the author defines democracy. However, when I ask them to explain what she means, they rarely find the words to clearly express her point.

Granted, in some cases it may be about the complexity of new ideas or the obscure nature of the language. After all, John Locke and Max Weber are not necessarily the easiest reads. However, in some cases a student's inability to explain a reading may or may not be about the difficulty of the work itself. It may also be about how one reads and understands. I find that students frequently quote passages out of context, using part of a sentence or part of a paragraph to demonstrate a point. In this way they sometimes misconstrue the point being made by the author or miss the larger implications. Had they included more information, they might have noticed that the author's point was not really what they claimed it was. When these instances occur, all I need to do is have students read the remainder of the sentence or paragraph and they can often correct or add to their initial comments.

Feedback on particular misunderstandings and suggestions for more careful reading are thus part of the discussion. However, I do not believe that assessment means that I am the only one who provides feedback. Students themselves

offer feedback through their own readings and interpretations, and as we progress through the semester, they begin to help each other see when a point is being made out of context or when the author's words are possibly being misunderstood. Most noticeable are the moments when students comment on their own responses and notice that what they have just said is in fact out of context or does not fit with their previous interpretations of the readings.

A final opportunity for assessment, and feedback, comes when the students write their three-sentence summaries of the reading. This gives me a chance to assess not only their comprehension, but also their ability to clearly state their ideas. I provide brief feedback on these paragraphs and the following class I distribute an example of what I consider a well-written summary. We then discuss, based on their responses, why someone might consider this to be a good summary (e.g., important ideas, connection among points being made, logical progression of ideas). I also make the point that there is not one correct format, though ideas, connections, and organization are critical.

The above is one example of the way I have used participation as an assessment tool. One may ask: Does it make a difference whether I see activities and the accompanying participation, things I may have been doing for a number of years, as assessment? I think it does. The literature on assessment led me to understand that the starting point of assessment was a statement of goals (Angelo and Cross 1993, 13–23; Palomba and Banta 1999, 6–7), and seeing participation as assessment pushes me to be more conscious of my own goals. Yes, participation is supposed to enhance student learning, but what specifically do I want out of participation? Once I asked myself the question, I began to see my courses in a different light. Of course, there is the content that we want students to understand and participation provides an indication of their understanding. At the same time, as I more closely examined my own goals, I understood that I was after more than assurance that students had grasped the specific material. I found that I had an overarching set of goals, regardless of the course I was teaching. As a result, the following statement became part of all of my syllabi (emphasis added):

Regardless of the course I am teaching, the objectives are similar. While I certainly want you to learn facts and develop a solid informational base, I see course material as the raw material used to develop particular critical thinking and

communication skills. First, I believe it is important to develop the **ability to ask good questions**. It is good questions that will guide you to think about and come to better understand the world around you. A good question is the first step to a convincing analysis. Without a good question things pretty much stop. In addition to good questions, I want you to be able to express yourself in ways that others can understand and to which they can respond. In particular, I think it is important that ideas or points are connected to one another and not random thoughts. Random thoughts are good and very helpful, but at some point you will need to **express yourself in a clear and organized manner**. If you want your ideas to have some impact, others need to be able to understand and to respond to what you are saying. Third, **hearing what others say and taking seriously the points they are raising**, even if they are not stated in the clearest and most organized way, is not simply being courteous, it is being intellectually honest. Finally, I think it important that each of us **understands who we are and what parts of ourselves we bring to the enterprise**. We are not blank slates. Each of us has a history, ideas, and feelings as we engage others. I believe that understanding ourselves and our own ideas is crucial to our understanding of others and their ideas.

Once I took the effort to more clearly articulate the goals that had simply been implied, I could better explain to students what I wanted from them and why I was doing what I was doing in the course. They might have better understood why I nudged them into being more active participants, and why I kept asking them questions.

At the same time that it helped clarify what I wanted from students, assessment's demand for clear goal setting highlighted what I needed to expect from myself. In particular, I became acutely aware of the critical role that my ongoing feedback played in enhancing student learning. Once I attached feedback to explicit goals I found that my comments became more focused and conscious. I was not simply responding to what students said. I was responding in ways that would help them reach the communication and thinking goals I had set out for the course. Commenting that the phrase being read is only part of the sentence, and that a different meaning may result if the entire sentence or paragraph were read, provides students with more than helpful information. It also provides

them questions to ask when reading. Asking students to clarify why they respond as they do is not an idle comment or to provide for interesting discussion. It is a way for students to reflect on their own thinking and what might lead them to think in certain ways.

How I handled that role became central to worthwhile participation and to achieving my course goals. By engaging in the ongoing assessment that participation requires, I had many more opportunities to be helpful, but also many possibilities to do damage. How I responded to student comments, the feedback I gave on various exercises, and the way I used the results from class participation could significantly impact student learning. An inappropriate comment or pushing for participation where it was really feared would not enhance student learning; it might stifle it.

Thus this is one of the major challenges of using participation as an assessment tool. If it is to be part of the assessment toolbox, participation must apply to the class and not simply to individual students. Participation must be widely engaged in and not remain the focus of a few. As a result, I make an effort to obtain participation from each student during each class session. While this may not always be the case, students know it is likely that they will contribute something during most classes. In order to make certain that everyone is included, I may ask those who have already said a good deal to wait or I may limit responses to those who have not already contributed in a given class. And the students who are more reticent? They too have something to say or contribute. That contribution may simply be to bring up a point they do not understand. Assessment requires wide inclusion, and I have come to believe that to identify

what is not understood can contribute immensely to the learning process.

In the end, no approach to teaching or to assessment will, or should be, universally applicable. Clearly, while many of Angelo and Cross's Classroom Assessment techniques may be applied to larger classes, those of us with smaller classes will find their suggestions easier to implement. However, even in larger classes, one can actively encourage and assess participation. For example, one can divide students into pairs or small groups where the pool of responses is more manageable. While this type of work is time consuming, it is not necessarily as prohibitive as one may assume, particularly if one takes into consideration the benefits that may result by providing ongoing feedback for our students as well as for us (Tagg 2003, 185–99).

Unfortunately, many of us may not see assessment as a friend. We may view it as an imposition from the outside, an imposition that is time consuming and may detract from teaching rather than contributing to it. My point is the opposite. I believe that assessment, when done well, will contribute to student learning by clarifying expectations, giving students ongoing feedback on their strengths and weaknesses, as well as providing feedback to them and us on their progress toward course learning goals (Suskie 2004, 11). Assessment will also help faculty to become better teachers by encouraging us to be clear on our goals and more explicit when relating our course material, assignments, and classroom processes to these goals (20).

In order for the above to take place, we must more carefully think about assessment and how it relates to our teaching. For example, one needs to differentiate between evaluation and feedback (see Tagg 2003, 108). The former,

sometimes referred to as summative assessment, may be equated with testing and scoring a student's performance for grading purposes. For many students, based on their experience and personal goals, this is the only form of assessment they know. On the other hand, feedback, or formative assessment, is designed not to grade learning (i.e., performance) but to enhance learning. This is the kind of assessment discussed in this paper. It is precisely this kind of formative assessment that may get lost in current discussions. For example, the recently released report by The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, sometimes referred to as the *Spellings Report*, devotes considerable space to accountability (U.S. Department of Education 2006, 13–4, 21–5). In particular, the report is concerned with measuring student-success outcomes and values added. According to the report's authors, these measures would then provide feedback to institutions and could be used by both consumers and policy makers to make better-informed decisions.

Accountability measures, by themselves, however, may not be as helpful as they at first appear. As with exams, information may come too late to enhance learning among the students we are teaching when the evaluation takes place. Ongoing assessment, such as I have described above, may provide the opportunity that the larger, institution-oriented procedures and exams may miss. Ongoing assessment through class participation is not a panacea. It is simply a useful tool to enhance the likelihood of success through ongoing feedback and focusing on what students are learning and not focusing primarily on what we have said or assume they have read (Bok 2006).

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