

Service to the Course: Collaborative Community as an Alternative to "Participation"

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As my hyflex history class meeting began, a blinking notification on the computer screen informed me a remote student had sent me a private chat message in Zoom: "My son has diarrhea this morning so I'm going to keep my camera off if that's OK?" I scrambled to maintain composure, continued greeting the students coming into the physical and virtual classrooms, and quickly replied to the student that, yes, it was fine to keep the camera off, and I hoped that the poor kiddo recovered quickly, for both their sakes. This short, pressing exchange was the beginning of the end of my attendance and participation policy.

In the Before Time, when I taught this course entirely in person, this student would have been absent. I may or may not have known that she missed class to pump Pedialyte into her young child; I may not have known anything about the pressures she faced as a non-traditional student. If she wasn't in touch with me or didn't disclose the unfortunate reason she had to stay home, she might have suffered a deduction in her participation grade. If absences started to avalanche, the student might have gone silent and disappeared from the class entirely. The "slow fade" of a student from active engagement in the first weeks to invisible by the end of the semester was something I experienced nearly every term. But the shifting dynamics of the COVID classroom exposed me to something that had been happening all along: in striving for consistency, my attendance and participation rubric was both penalizing students who were doing their best to contribute to the course and was an inaccurate measure of students' commitment and efforts to learn.

Evaluating participation had long troubled me. It was hard to capture in a rubric and harder still to explain to students what constituted excellent versus average versus unacceptable participation. I had to contend with how to score the student who spoke constantly but contributed little substance, or the student who was active on the discussion board but never spoke in class, or the student who was unreliable in group work but prepared during office hours, and how to do so in ways that were transparent, consistent, and achievable for the students.

Prior to COVID, my approach to the participation problem was to frantically apply new Band-Aids each semester to fix the little issues. Quarterly scoring, self-assessment, rubrics, and prescriptive instructions on how to craft discussion posts gave me some helpful information about my students, and probably did improve some students' performance, but none of this treated the underlying condition. The big problem was that I over-evaluated the students' performance and under-evaluated my own expectations of what participation even was. I worked so hard to measure participation that I had lost track of what I wanted from the students in the first place.

What had participation become to me? It was an amalgam of engagement, preparation, curiosity, connection, and exchange. I value this highly because I consider it the essence of being a student, and a critical thinker. Pre-COVID, I considered participation important because I thought it created a community in the classroom. I believed then that participation was the best way to bring in student voices. From this premise, students who came to class having done the reading, ready to ask questions and give their own interpretations scored highly on the participation rubric. I rarely looked beneath the surface to really figure out what was going on with the students who were not scoring highly. I didn't always see, and reward, the other types of contributions they were making to the course.

But when COVID forced us first into emergency remote and then impromptu hyflex learning, and I lost the traditional classroom space, and our class community was on the brink of collapse, I started to see the bigger picture of what participation could be if I conceived of it differently. What the students were doing to pump life into what they darkly, humorously, called "Coronaskool" was not unlike the multitude of tasks and contributions I made to my college under the banner of "service". What if I invited students to contribute to the course in a major way that utilized their interests and skills, a way that gave them a real stake in the course?

Keeping our courses going during COVID required substantial service on the part of the students. In my hyflex course, the day began with the in-person students wiping down their desks and helping to hook up monitors so we could interact with the remote students in live time. Once I set up behind my Plexiglass pulpit, the in-person students made their own copies, dimmed lights, adjusted microphones, and did a hundred small acts to make the class run smoothly. Remote students on Zoom became responsible for monitoring the backchannel chat, bringing questions and comments to my attention in real time since I could not watch the PowerPoint and the in-person students and the remote students and the chat function all at once. In-person students took pictures of the white board and shared it with remote students faster than I could upload it to the LMS. Remote students gave reactions and shout-outs to comments made by the in-person students that were downloaded and shared.

The students were taking on meaningful, engaging work in the course that my previous evaluation of participation would not have captured. They were taking ownership and responsibility for the course. They were tending to their community of learning and deepening their knowledge in the process. What they were learning through this service was, in fact, the lessons I had always wanted my students to know about the purpose of our course, the material, and their assignments:

That everyone being prepared helps the class to move forward.

That the content is only one part of knowledge, and we will practice analyzing, applying, and interpreting it together.

That the class is for you and can only succeed if you're bought in and pitching in.

That the broader purpose of the course and of your liberal arts education is to think deeply, problem-solve, be creative, trust in your knowledge, and take action even in times of great uncertainty and fear.

I immediately threw out the old participation rubric and instead adopted Service to the Course as a graded category to replace the nebulous Participation. First, I thought of all the ways, common and unexpected, that my students were contributing to the course. I gave my class a list of examples of service and invited the students to design their own as well. During each 4-week unit, students could choose how to fulfill the service obligation and completed a self-assessment. Their options included more traditional forms of participation like posting questions on the discussion board as well as service unique to the COVID classroom, like taking notes for students in quarantine or isolation. We had fun with it, too: I sheepishly allowed "Stepping outside to call for AV Help for the Professor" to come into the list, and it was utilized!

Students gravitated towards the service they wanted to do, but as they grew confident, they challenged themselves, too. Students who professed to not understand technology began to make creative use of course platforms and tools. Previously "quiet students" as judged by the old rubric were extremely active on the chat and discussion board. Students who had been talkative, but not necessarily very prepared, tried their hands at editing the class PowerPoints and class readings on Perusall. I also encouraged, but didn't require, students to diversify their service; the most important thing was that it was the student's initiative. Tying service to the unit rather than the class day also allowed for flexibility. My student with the ill son fulfilled her service quota later that week through being the test audience for fellow students practicing their oral presentations.

But most importantly to me, the students who were struggling most during the pandemic had a path forward as learners and as community members in the course. Students who were doing child or elder care and keeping themselves muted during class still had service they could do. Students who did not have laptops with cameras, working microphones, or sufficient bandwidth to stream video could still contribute to the course by choosing service options on the LMS. In my previous system, these students may have been scored low on participation. Even if I had implemented workarounds for them given their hardships, it didn't change the fact that I was operating off a rubric that was elitist, ableist, and frankly, ignorant. Before COVID as now, my students had competing work and family obligations, or physical or mental health struggles, or housing, food, or economic instability, the stress of which sometimes manifested as disinterest or itinerancy. And sometimes, diarrhea happens!

For years I had been diligently grading students' day-to-day performance while totally losing sight of what I wanted the class as a whole to become, and accomplish. COVID made those efforts

irrelevant, and I am happy to let that go forever. My new service policy makes room for students to build, maintain, and, if necessary, repair or redesign their own course community. The power of classroom learning isn't for me to check off on a rubric. It's for the students to claim, use, and transform.