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## **GET OUT THE MAP: THE USE OF PARTICIPATION MAPPING IN PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT**

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### **Introduction**

While drafting my syllabus for Advanced French Composition, Conversation and Grammar last summer, eagerly anticipating the opportunity to teach in the new context Haverford College would provide, my mind raced with excitement as I imagined the engaging round-table discussions we would have on texts and films. I envisioned constructive peer-editing sessions and student-led grammar corrections. With only seven students, there would be no room for anyone to hide; forced intimacy would lead to active participation and sharing of ideas. This resulting class dynamic would allow us to work together to brainstorm composition topics, answer problematic questions of style, and quickly target collective grammar errors, while taking pleasure in expanding our understanding of French literature and culture.

While participation would be part of students' assessment, I chose not to outline specific ways for students to ensure their contributions "counted," nor did I prescribe a quantitative figure on the syllabus for students' involvement; instead, I hoped this would arise naturally, and simply noted in class that "advanced conversation" was indeed part of the course title and that students should prepare for active class discussion accordingly.

Through Bryn Mawr College's Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI), I worked with a student consultant who observed my class once a week. Over the course of the semester, we analyzed students' classroom participation and the ways in which my pedagogical approaches supported — or needed better to support — student engagement along the lines I had envisioned. In this essay I focus on the key role my consultants' participation maps played in this process and the lessons I am taking forward about how to scaffold student participation in future courses.

### **Development: Creating and Using Participation Maps**

From the beginning of the semester, I adopted a role as course facilitator, working to provide students with the necessary scaffolding to further their critical thinking and analysis but expecting that they would actively participate. The weekly classroom observation notes that my student consultant shared with me, which were primarily descriptive early on, helped me to adjust the way I framed questions and initiated discussion. She would note, for example, how I asked questions, to whom, when, and the length of the "uncomfortable silence" pauses that followed a question.

Thanks to her keen observations, we quickly noted that the students were somewhat reluctant to interact with each other unless they were specifically asked to do so (e.g. through activities such as "think-pair-share" or imposed partner work). Did they feel the need for validation from the professor? Were they afraid of hurting a classmate by criticizing his/her ideas? Were they simply not yet comfortable with our setting? What's more, students insisted on raising their hands and being called upon rather than voluntarily offering comments during open group

discussion. I felt that this tendency, while not altogether wrong, undermined my desired atmosphere of active exchange. Each raised hand broke the flow and also meant that all conversation was (sometimes) unnecessarily filtered through the professor, rather than passing directly from student to student.

At her own initiative, my student consultant began categorizing and mapping students' participation, both among each other and with me. She was a bit apprehensive about keeping up during especially active moments and logging students on the map, but she nonetheless thought this could be useful for our class. Because assessing classroom performance is highly subjective, I was interested in what kinds of insight I might gain from such a map.

The maps worked like this:

First, my consultant diagrammed our classroom setup and noted where each student was situated. Each time a student addressed another student, my consultant would draw a line between them to indicate this exchange. Next, my consultant recorded color-coded hash marks to indicate in what ways students were interacting. Blue was involuntary participation, violet was voluntary, black was asking the professor a question, and red was directly addressing each other. There were no lines drawn between the professor and students, and my "participation" hash marks were not noted because we were more interested in the students' contributions and interactions. (In the future, I would like for my consultant to track my "teacher talk" as well so that I might become more aware of the (im)balances in class discussion.)

**(View attached PDF for example of a Participation Map.)**

The students generally turned more toward me for questions (black marks), and so my goal became to see more student-student engagement, to have them field each others' questions and react to each others' comments *sans* professorial filter (more violet and red).

My immediate post-lesson review of the maps with my consultant was productive both in making visible these patterns and in helping me think about how to address them. By juxtaposing my lesson plans with her observation notes and participation maps, I had the perfect log to ascertain which aspects of the lesson elicited the desired types of interaction, and from which students, which in turn helped me plan the next lessons. For example, if Jane Doe had five marks of involuntary participation and never directly addressed another student, then I would do my best to craft in-class activities or homework to facilitate her voluntary participation. In so doing, I hoped that she would be compelled to actively participate more often and consequently gain confidence in using the French language to articulate her views.

Moreover, having the maps as a point of reference made it easier for me to facilitate the class *and* assess student performance because I was not forced to do both concurrently. Over time, I could trace patterns in students' engagement, note who commonly responded to whom, and even anticipate the types of in-class work that would best engage this group. That said, part of a classroom dynamic is also left to chance. Gloomy days, midterms, lack of interest in a particular text, or even a single student's attitude can quickly alter the spirit of a close-knit class on a given day. On such low-energy days my consultant and I tried to account for students' interactions—

was it the lesson or the weather?—, and I noted these possible causes for future planning reference.

In addition to the more imminent assessment purposes, I anticipate referencing these maps when I next teach this course. I have attached each map and its matching observation notes to its respective day in my lesson plan. Along with my post-class notes (successes, failures, better options for next time), this log will enable me to reflect upon students' engagement in the classroom as a direct result of my facilitation.

### **Conclusions and Plans Going Forward**

I am taking a number of lessons away from my work with a student consultant and, in particular, the participation maps she created. First, I will be more clear and upfront with the students about participation guidelines, possibly even sharing a rubric with them. At the same time, my goal is to keep discussion lively and natural, so I would not want to stifle their impulses by creating a canned setting. I'll need to find a balance between articulating clear expectations and inviting students to take the initiative in their learning.

Second, I plan to continue working with a student consultant and the maps next semester, but with a few changes from the outset. I will consider having my consultant note not only the type of participation (voluntary, involuntary, toward another student, question to professor), but also to distinguish between basic, proficient, or distinguished reflection. This, of course, would be subjective to the consultant's understanding of the topic at hand (and of course the language), but could nonetheless be interesting to chart.

Finally, as I continue with the mapping process, I would like to occasionally survey students about how they feel about their own involvement in class. Ultimately, for a language course whose goal is to develop students' capacity to think critically, and especially in an intimate and supportive classroom environment, students' active involvement in their own learning is key. Participation mapping has helped me to motivate students during in-class interactions, which has consequently led to students taking on more responsibility for their own learning, and I want to build on that going forward.