January 2017

Participation in Academic Life Inside and Outside the Walls

Elisa Borgato
University of Padua

Valentina Fazzuoli
University of Siena

Claudia Lazzaro
University of Ferrara

PARTICIPATION IN ACADEMIC LIFE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE WALLS

Elisa Borgato, Education Services Management and Continuous Education student, University of Padua, elisa.borgato.1@studenti.unipd.it

Valentina Fazzuoli, Education Services Management and Continuous Education student, University of Siena, elisa.borgato.1@studenti.unipd.it

Claudia Lazzaro, Law student, University of Ferrara, claudia.lazzaro@student.unife.it

Elisa, University of Padua

Participation is deciding to say "yes" when they ask you to be part of the Accreditation and Evaluation Group in your study course, having the possibility of working for the improvement of the course and being a voice for the students: this is a continuous opportunity for growth for me. I also believe that it is essential to take part in activities outside the university, to share experiences and feel free to state your own ideas. This way, every person can be a stimulus for others and for the construction of new processes and projective thought dynamics. Non-participation, on the other hand, is following the course in a passive manner, enduring new features, not taking part in discussions and not contributing to improving teaching and learning.

Valentina, University of Siena

In my personal experience, actively participating is living within the *governance* of my department, being active in decisions that concern my degree course, taking part in research activities to improve my studies and those of others and organising department events to bring students, and others, closer to campus life. In brief, participating is being an active player and the creator of your own learning. To the contrary, non-participation is not wanting to go outside the box; it is following the group, without wanting to question yourself and not wanting to become a purple cow amidst so many black and white cows.

Claudia, University of Ferrara

Non-participation is the rule too often: not asking questions, not taking part, not intervening for fear of being judged by teachers and other students. However, actively participating means making the most of opportunities provided by the university, for example conferences and visits to interesting places for your course, but also asking questions in the classroom, clarifying doubts, asking teachers for practical advice and allowing someone to help you in finding your own path.

"Learning requires active participation from the pupil's minds."
J. Bruner

This is the quote that guided us towards the essence of active participation in our various university experiences. We met with different views, as the contexts we come from are also different, both in the sense of university paths, and of cities: Elisa studies Educational Services Management and Continuous Education at the University of Padua, Valentina studies Education Science and Pedagogical Consultancy at the University of Siena (Department of Arezzo), and Claudia studies Law at the University of Ferrara. This very fact was the strength of our meeting, as these diversities and distances allowed us to achieve a

holistic view of active participation inside and outside university, what we called "inside and outside the academic walls." We have defined them as *walls* as they are often a protection, but can also become a barrier to the outside reality that the University aims to prepare you for.

Active participation "inside the walls," therefore within the university context, means, in our view, intervening, expressing your own opinions so they can be a stimulus for yourself and others, but it also means doing research together, going beyond what is written in books, asking questions of yourself, working in a team, feeling at ease and free to express yourself.

Active participation "outside the walls," therefore outside the classroom, means going outside the box, being curious, leaving a track that others can be inspired by, taking part in conferences, creating events, as a social meeting place where new dynamics can be tried out and to change the way of approaching the academic world. University is not just a place where you go to passively listen to lessons and then return to your own life; it is your own life, it is a part of your path of personal and professional growth.

It would therefore seem that there are only positive sides to participation: but if participation is only positive, why are there so few students who are active at university? We believe it is because, in spite of the positive aspects, actively participating carries a cost in terms of both time and effort. This cost could be limited by intervening on the university environment and organisation, through modes of participation and the players in the learning process.

Our analysis concentrated on three macro areas as, in our experience, they are the realms where active participation can be improved through suitable intervention. Our path begins with the analysis of the "setting" as classroom space and organisation can be easily changed and has a significant effect on the way in which the student approaches his lessons. Using "methods," we move from the space to the hub of the lesson, as learning devices play an essential role in the way that lesson content is transmitted to the student. Lastly, we concentrated on what, in our opinion, is the most difficult, delicate challenge: intervening in the relationship between the learning players, i.e. the students and teachers, as this requires constant effort and personal involvement.

Setting

COME FACILITARE LA PARTECIPAZIONE?
\SETTING

GRUPPI RISTRETTI (ENTRO LE 20 PERSONE)

GESTIRE BENE GLI ORARI DELLE LEZIONI (EVITARE LEZIONI DOPO PRANZO)

AULE LUMINOSE E PREDISPOSTE ALLO SPOSTAMENTO

PREVEDERE PAUSE COSTRUTTIVE, SIGNIFICATIVE CHE PERMETTANO CONDIVISIONE E CONFRONTO TRA DOCENTI E STUDENTI

SPAZI D'INCONTRO DOCENTI-STUDENTI FUORI DALLA LEZIONE (BAR ALL'INTERNO DELL'UNIVERSITÀ)

2

HOW TO AID PARTICIPATION? \SETTING
SMALL GROUPS (FEWER THAN 20 PEOPLE)
MANAGING LESSON LINES WELL (AVOIDING LESSONS AFTER LUNCH)
BRIGHT ROOMS THAT CAN BE MOVED AROUND
PLANNING OF CONSTRUCTIVE BREAKS SIGNIFICANT ENOUGH TO ALLOW SHARING AND DISCUSSION BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS
TEACHER-STUDENT MEETING SPACES OUTSIDE THE LESSON (BAR INSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

With regard to organisation, it is necessary first of all for the student groups to be small, about twenty people, in order to create a familiar environment, with mutual respect and a desire to discuss, making it fertile for collaboration. If there is a large number of students, we think it is necessary to divide them up into groups, adapting the number of teachers or alternating lesson times so that each student has the possibility of being central, regardless of the number of students that have chosen the same course. Active participation requires classrooms that can be moved around, in order to aid *face to face* dialogue, reducing the distance between student and teacher, which favours teacher facing students lessons.
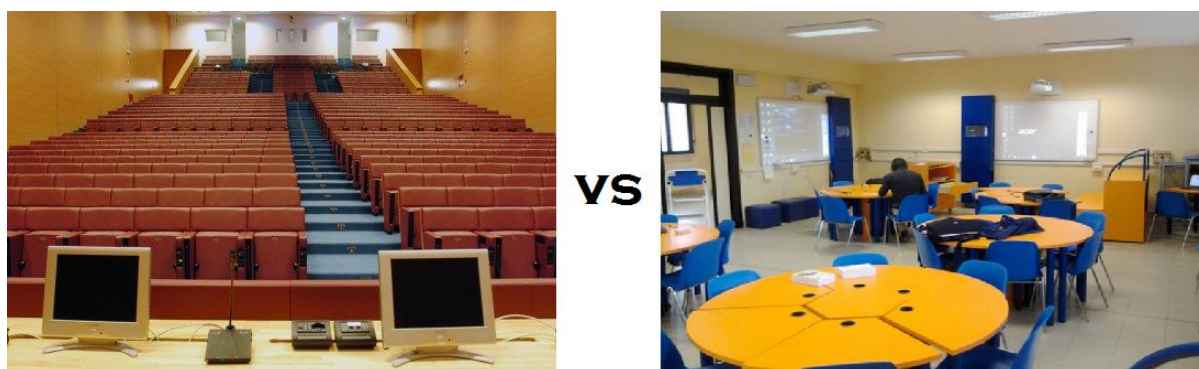

Figure 1 - Difference between a classroom set up for traditional teacher facing students lessons and a participatory lesson.

Another aspect of aiding dialogue and communication between students and with the teachers, especially during the initial phase of each lesson, would be planning significant breaks during the lesson, to get to know each other and share experiences and opinions, in order to feel at ease when speaking during the lesson. This encourages those who are less inclined to take part in this type of teaching to be a part of the group and speak up, without the fear of being judged. As physical meeting places are essential, each department should increase meeting spaces for teachers and students where they can share ideas that are not necessarily connected to classroom lessons. They may instead be useful for the student to look deeper into topics that he is interested in or to emphasise the personal identity of his own path.

Methods

COME FACILITARE LA PARTECIPAZIONE?
\METODI

PROPORRE PROGETTI, RICERCHE E DISCUTERNE IN GRUPPO

UNIRE RIFLESSIONI DEL DOCENTE E DEGLI STUDENTI ALLE SLIDE NORMALMENTE PROPOSTE

APPROFONDIMENTI DELLE LEZIONI TRAMITE STORYTELLING

CREAZIONE DI COMUNITÀ DI PRATICA

USARE METODI PRATICI COME ROLE PLAYING E ANALISI DI CASO

CHIEDERE FEEDBACK DURANTE IL PERCORSO E MONITORARE FREQUENTEMENTE

PREVEDERE USCITE CHE STIMOLANO L'APPRENDIMENTO ESPERIENZIALE

HOW TO AID PARTICIPATION? \METHODS
PROPOSING PROJECTS. RESEARCH AND DISCUSS IN A GROUP
JOINING TOGETHER THE TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' THOUGHTS ON THE SLIDES NORMALLY PROPOSED
FURTHER STUDY OF LESSONS THROUGH STORYTELLING
CREATION OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
USING PRACTICAL METHODS SUCH AS ROLE PLAYING AND CASE ANALYSES
ASKING FOR FEEDBACK DURING THE COURSE AND FREQUENT MONITORING
PLANNING VISITS THAT STIMULATE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

As far as university teaching methods are concerned, we found many ideas, both positive and negative, from our different experiences. This is because negative feedback can lead to corrections and innovative proposals.

The teachers often accompany their lessons with presentation slides that do not always make the lessons easier to understand and follow. For this aspect, it may be useful to make the slides available before the lesson, as they are created in order to provide added value to the lesson, and not just be a "prompt" for the teacher. In order for them to become central to the lesson and the teacher-student, or student-student exchange, it would be suitable if they could be changed and used depending on the flow of ideas that may emerge during the lesson.

It is important that the teacher proposes projects and research on the topics discussed, or welcomes proposals from the students on the topics, so that they are encouraged to reflect, following a personal path, and not just based on what the teacher says during the lesson. Discussions in the classroom after presenting results will be an opportunity for more study for everyone and will allow the students to feel they are part of creating new knowledge.

4

During our university career, we often met teachers who used teacher facing student lessons to complete their educational task. The advantage is that this type of lesson requires less time both in preparation and in explanation, as there are no interruptions by students; there is also no personal involvement. We believe other less common techniques to be better performing, such as *role playing* and case analysis, that we loved and that allowed us to actively participate in our experiences. These can be offered in the classroom as a space for initial reflection, to prepare for the accepted role, and a space for final sharing, to sum up the experience in the context that was handled.

Another method that can be used to encourage participatory and collaborative education is *storytelling,* through which the student tells a personal story that becomes the basis for starting a group discussion on the case to be analysed.

Using these techniques, which stimulate learning and active participation, creates a relationship between teacher and student, which makes it easier to ask for and obtain honest, substantial feedback: without these characteristics, feedback would have little use and a lack of suitable motivation would not encourage the student to understand his own errors and improve. It is also important to have an immediate response about your own work and, long-term, to recalibrate your own methods or even create new ones.

All these suggestions enhance a type of experience-providing, participatory, collaborative learning that is higher performing, as, in this way, the *learner* learns the knowledge, the how to do and how to be, doing, feeling and experimenting new knowledge on themselves.

Trips that teachers can plan to add to or substitute their lessons, or as occasions to be offered as extra to the course itself, are very useful for this style and for going beyond the walls. This may be participation in conferences at the university or elsewhere, or visits to places of interests that are consistent with the topics being taught and the study courses, investing more energy in education.

All these techniques and the opportunities that can be welcomed help the creation of a community of practice, small groups of peers who exchange ideas on topics of common interest, and move towards continuous learning through awareness of one's own knowledge and that of others. However, according to Wenger (2006), "a community of practice does not need to be depersonalised as such to be a community: this in fact, becomes a part of the participants' experience through their effort" (p. 84). Practices are also considered as "learning stories." Learning implies continuous negotiation of the meaning that takes place in carrying out and acquiring practices.

Person

COME FACILITARE LA PARTECIPAZIONE?
\LA PERSONA

STIMOLARE UN CLIMA DI SCAMBIO E NON DI COMPETIZIONE

PASSARE DALL'ESSERE PERIFERICO ALL'ESSERE CENTRALE

RESPONSABILIZZARE LO STUDENTE, STIMOLANDO GLI INTERVENTI IN UN'OTTICA DI APPROVAZIONE

CREDERE IN QUELLO CHE SI STA DICENDO E AVER PARTECIPATO ALLA CREAZIONE DI SAPERE E VALORE AGGIUNTO

ESSERE FACILITATORI DEL PERCORSO DI APPRENDIMENTO E CERCARE QUESTI FACILITATORI

ESSERE ACCATTIVANTI, RISONANTI, RISCHIARE

HOW TO AID PARTICIPATION? \THE PERSON
STIMULATING A CLIMATE OF EXCHANGE AND NOT OF COMPETITION
CHANGING FROM A PERIPHERAL BEING TO A CENTRAL BEING
MAKING THE STUDENT RESPONSIBLE, STIMULATING INTERVENTION WITH A VIEW TO APPROVAL
BELIEVING IN WHAT ONE IS SAYING AND HAVING TAKEN PART IN THE CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND ADDED VALUE
BEING FACILITATORS OF THE LEARNING PATH AND SEARCHING FOR THESE FACILITATORS
BEING CHARMING, RESONATING, RISKING

Lastly, we believe that the basic element and perhaps, the most difficult to change, is the player in learning himself, whose participation is inherent in the very world. To make a student truly participate, it is not necessary just to focus on him, but also to make sure that the people around him make him feel so.

Which techniques could support a student's active participation? We are proposing some that we have experienced during our university careers and that had the effect on us of making us feel more involved:

● Encouraging a climate for the exchange of ideas and opinions without judgement and without competition between students. In our experience, activities such as *brainstorming* or other ideas such as *icebreaking* were useful for making us and our fellow students at ease, as well as making the *setting* comfortable and less formal.

● Enhancing the student's centrality in each process he is involved in, therefore bringing him from the outskirts to the centre of his own learning. During our path, there were several opportunities for direct experience where we "learnt by doing" via analogical educational mediators that are expressed via simulation games such as *role-playing*, *case studies* and *storytelling*, as already stated.

6

- Making the student responsible, stimulating interventions in two directions: on the one hand the ones that clarify, asking for explanations and more information, on the other the ones that invite reflection and ideas for starting a discussion about the topic. Our attention is focused on the importance of the latter as they are the ones that lead to the creation of new common knowledge, allowing the student to participate and be active in creating his own flow of knowledge.

- Those that accompany students on these learning paths must become motivation facilitators and mediators during the journey towards knowledge, taking them by the hand and leading them towards knowledge.

We realise that in order to lend value to these suggestions, we must be ready to take risks and always search for new opportunities to push ourselves, on both sides, in three words to be: captivating, resounding and above all courageous.

Let's imagine participation

We tried to translate what *participation* and *non-participation in university life* means to us into images.

After a debate, we depicted *non-participation* with a path where a straight road is chosen, avoiding several diversions. This road is the easiest one, the fastest one, where you reach the destination first, but you lose everything that is typical, special and hidden in the side roads. Therefore, the student who lives university life only as a place where he goes to lessons, listens to one-directional words from the teacher and then returns home, without taking part in initiatives that the department offers, decides to learn without risk, but also without being central to his own path. Therefore, by not participating, he puts to one side a value that we believe to be so important to university life: a student's active responsibility, as the creator of his own path.

Figure 2- Image of "non-participation"

In brief, for us non-participation means: deciding to achieve one's own goal, one's destination by following a straight, familiar, simpler road, without looking at other possibilities, which perhaps require more effort. However, the best places are always the ones that are more difficult to reach.

If we go back to our original idea of walls, of a perimeter, of closure, that it is necessary to leave in order to fully take part in university life, the image we chose to identify *participation* is the remote "*mind the gap*" voice that always reminds you to pay attention to the distance between platform and train at the station. This distance produces a dual responsibility: it must be respected as a boundary and at the same time it must be overcome to board or leave the train and reach the desired destination. This space is a metaphor for the concept of distance, on a macro scale, between university and real life, while on a micro scale, it is a metaphor of the distance between students and teachers. Therefore, we believe that participation means overcoming this distance, that exists and must be respected, in order to continue responsibly and consciously on your life path, including study and growth.

7

Figure 3- Image of "participation"

Reference

Wenger, E. (2006). *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cortina, Milan.

8