

Equitable assessment of participation: what, why, and how?

Introduction

Welcome to this audio recording about equitable assessment of participation, brought to you by McGill's Teaching and Learning Services in partnership with the Equity Team, from the Office of the Provost.

This recording focuses on the “what,” “why,” and “how” of equitable assessment of participation. Specifically:

- What is it?
- Why does it matter?
- How can we foster it?

What is equitable assessment of participation?

Equitable assessment of participation refers to the variety of ways in which students' contributions to a course are measured or determined, with the goal of engaging all learners (Bondura, 2023; PASL, 2022). It recognizes that the student population is not a monolith. Students do not all start from the same place in their learning journeys (Faculty Learning Hub, 2023), and often have different strengths and needs (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Equitable assessment of participation can help address persistent barriers to learning opportunities. It considers the learning process and ways to encourage “meaningful student involvement” (Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). It involves developing intentional and context-specific assessment tasks. Finally, equitable assessment of participation involves clearly expressing expectations and giving opportunities for feedback and improvement throughout a course (Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

These definitions draw on recent assessment literature as well as McGill's definitions of equity and assessment (drawn from the EDI Strategic Plan and the Policy on Assessment of Student Learning, respectively). For full citations and references, consult the transcript.

Why does equitable assessment of participation matter?

Giving students options for participation can help them contribute more fully and demonstrate their learning more effectively. What participation is and how it should be approached may seem obvious, but can actually be culturally and socially specific (Bondura, 2023). Participation that requires prolonged eye contact, speaking loudly and oral fluency can sometimes exclude students, particularly those whose identities have been marginalized (for example, English-language learners or first-generation students). This can put them at a disadvantage (Dolmage, 2023; Levin-Banchik, 2022). Given limited class time – and perhaps large class sizes – it may not be possible for every student to contribute verbally in a given class.

How can we foster equitable assessment of participation?

Here are three ideas, as potential starting points:

1. Identify what participation means to you, in relation to your learning outcomes and disciplinary conventions. Are there opportunities for students to participate in a variety of ways in your course? For example, could your course's learning outcomes be supported by student's participation in:
 - small group discussions
 - discussion forums
 - social annotation to provide feedback on one another's ideas
 - reflective activities and self-assessments
 - a collective note-taking document, or
 - short written responses during class?

2. Consider how and where you currently communicate your expectations for what participation means. Including the criteria for how participation will be assessed in multiple places – such as in your course outline, on myCourses, and in class – can help ensure that students access those criteria. You may wish to have a class discussion where students can describe the circumstances under which they feel more (or less) able to participate. That way, you and the students can keep these in mind, contributing to a classroom environment conducive to participation. If you like, these can be formalized in community guidelines for the classroom.
3. Revisit when students get feedback on their participation. Before the course gets too far along, could you let students know the extent to which they are meeting the participation criteria so far? This gives students an opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings about what is expected, and if needed, to realign their participation with the expectations during the remainder of the course.

Ultimately, equitable assessment of participation asks us to imagine and reflect a diversity of student needs through practices such as listening, processing information oneself and with peers, as well as reflection. It seeks to promote clarity in grading and center learner’s ideas and contributions. It does not aim to upend expectations, but rather to examine our processes for any unintended barriers (Dolmage, 2023; Levin-Banchik, 2022; Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, 2024).

Reflection questions

Now that you’ve had a chance to listen to the “what”, “why”, and “how” of equitable assessment of participation, we’re inviting you to consider three reflection questions:

1. How are you currently assessing participation in your class?
2. What aspects of your course context inform how you assess students’ participation? [and]
3. If this recording sparked something for you, what is one shift that you could make to incorporate an idea or suggestion that you’ve heard?

Thanks for listening.

Resources

- Bondura, V. (2023). What is a participation grade? Inclusive strategies for engaging students and assessing participation. In K. L. Armstrong et al., [Teaching gradually: Practical pedagogy and classroom strategies for graduate students by graduate students](#) (pp. 236–242). Routledge.
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- Dolmage, J. (2015). [Universal design: places to start](#). *Interventions in Disability Studies Pedagogy*, 35(2).
- Faculty Learning Hub. (2023, October 17). [Ideas for encouraging equitable participation in class activities and discussion](#). Conestoga College.
- Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning. (2024). [Fostering and assessing equitable classroom participation](#). Brown University.
- Levin-Banchik, L. (2022). Inclusive assessment of class participation: students’ takeaways as a one-minute paper. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 55(1), 171–175. doi:10.1017/S104909652100086X
- Montenegro, E., & Jankowski, N. A. (2020, January). [A new decade for assessment: embedding equity into assessment praxis \(Occasional Paper No. 42\)](#). University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- Office of the Provost & Vice-Principal (Academic). (2020). [Equity, Diversity & Inclusion \(EDI\) strategic plan 2020-2025](#).
- [Policy on assessment of student learning \(PASL\)](#). (2022). McGill University.
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