Cultural considerations in the assessment of class participation in international online courses

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Abstract

Universities offering blended and online delivery options have discovered that in order to instil a sense of community among members of an online class, they must take measures to ensure that learners contribute to class discussions and participate in online learning activities, and not simply complete the required assignments. To accomplish this, many universities have developed an online participation assessment rubric that indicates to the student what kinds of class participation are expected, as well as the required frequency of posts. Observed from a Canadian context, it appears that these assessment rubrics are usually developed by curriculum development experts in an institution's learning and teaching centre, with input from interested faculty members, and go through a very rigorous institutional approval process. However, in most cases they are not developed with learners from other cultures, such as overseas students, in mind. A survey of faculty members assessing online participation through the use of such rubrics suggests that any considerations due to a learner's culture of origin are ad hoc and individual.

With the continued expansion of online and blended programming in higher education it is essential that when learners in one class can represent multiple countries, cultures, and value systems, the assessment of their online participation takes into account these important differences. This paper explores the consideration of different cultures in the assessment of online class participation and suggests possible ways to respect learners' values and social backgrounds while ensuring the development of a healthy and robust learning community.

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Introduction

The marking or grading of class participation as a part of the overall assessment of learners in college or university courses has a relatively short history. Prior to the 1980s and 1990s, assessment of class participation was rarely considered, and when it was, opinions as to its value were deeply divided (Bean and Peterson, 1998; Evans, 2011). Moreover, depending on the field of study and mode of instruction, many teachers in many courses still do not assess class participation at all, instead relying solely on submitted work and examinations for evaluation (Miller 2009). In online learning however, class participation is seen by many institutions as the most effective way of instilling a sense of community among members of a class or program and is considered an essential element for individual success in such courses. Although there is on-going debate as to whether or not class participation is essential for success (Williams, 2004), there appears to be agreement that some form of interaction between participants is necessary for imparting the sense of community that often occurs in a face-to-face classroom (Chan, Chow, & Cheung, 2004).

Because of the typically asynchronous nature of the online learning experience, with learners working alone at a computer, separated by geography and time zones from their fellow students and teachers, it is not difficult to imagine class members as a group of disparate individuals with no sense of common purpose or camaraderie. When differences in language capability and cultures of origin are added to the mix, it becomes clear that some form of intervention is necessary if the institution's goal is to have online students form similar community groups as do students in traditional classrooms. Naturally, such communities of learning are more important in some courses and programs than in others. In the hard sciences and mathematics for example, it is suggested that class interaction is of less importance than it is in social sciences and humanities courses (Nathan 2008).

Once considered a second rate option for higher learning, blended and online learning options have become increasingly popular with learners on every continent. The rise of MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) has made many potential students aware of the value of distance education, but also of the limitations of the MOOC model. Many learners are forsaking MOOCS for programs that are somewhat less massive and open, and more likely to supply an achievable, accredited credential (Basu, 2012).As more universities begin to offer blended and online programming to international learners, the more important it becomes to ensure that cultural considerations are included in all scoring and grading, but particularly in the assessment of learners' class participation.

Universities offering blended and online courses have also discovered that in order to instil a sense of community among members of their online classes, they must take measures to ensure that learners contribute to class discussions and participate in online learning activities, not simply to complete the required assignments in isolation. To accomplish this, departments in many universities have made the decision to assess and provide a mark for

their students' class participation and have developed online participation assessment rubrics to indicate to students the kind of class participation expected of them as well as the frequency of interaction required to attain the full mark. The rationale behind giving marks for class participation is frequently based on research that suggests that, particularly for students that place a high value on grades, once they "see that their participation is being graded regularly and consistently, they adjust their study habits accordingly to be prepared for active participation" (Bean & Peterson, 1998, p. 33).

These grades may go by different names in different institutions, a common one being 'contribution to the learning community,' but what they appear to have in common is a method of assessment based on what would be expected of a typical English speaking Canadian (Australian, American, British, etc.) student in a typical classroom, albeit an online one. Because many online programs delivered by western universities are promoted worldwide, and boast the availability of a first-rate education without leaving one's own location, I was curious to discover if intercultural considerations were included in the assessment of a student's online class participation. An informal survey conducted with faculty members at one Canadian university specializing in online delivery suggested that any considerations of the culture of origin in assessing class participation were ad hoc and individual (Royal Roads University, School of Education and Technology, Participation Rubric Seminar, personal communication, May 14, 2015. https://ca-sas.bbcollab.com/site/external/playback/artifact?psid=2015-05-14.1250.M.B424F81819CFCCEB18AD3CE6BE5482.vcr&aid=73694). Based on this result I was interested to discover how the existing literature has approached the inclusion of intercultural considerations in such assessments, and what is being done with it.

Assessment of learner participation

Because our field, like many others, has its own jargon and terminology, much of which may be unintelligible to others, it is important to be clear about what it is we are talking about. The term 'assessment rubric' refers to a guide for teachers and students listing the specific criteria for scoring the expected academic outcomes in a course. Usually in the form of a grid or a matrix, it explicitly outlines the range of performance expectations necessary to attain a specific mark. Assessment rubrics are valuable to both teachers and students since they allow the application of specific criteria to both quantitative and qualitative tasks and consistency in the evaluation of all class members. Teachers can therefore employ an element of objectivity in their marking, and students can know at a glance what is expected of them to achieve a certain grade (See appendix A for a sample assessment rubric in an education leadership course). Because they provide a reliable metric upon which to base scoring decisions, marking rubrics have become a very common tool at all educational levels.

Grading for class participation has become common in many university and college courses, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. The literature reveals a wealth of discussion and descriptive studies about the practice. Topmost among them are discussions of

whether or not to assess participation (e.g., Bean & Peterson, 1998; Miller 2009), and how to assess participation (e.g., Dancer and Kamvounias, 2005; Statz, 2001). Because of the prevalence and thoroughness of these discussions it would be redundant to detail their arguments here. What is important to take from this body of knowledge is that while it is not without disagreement and debate, most educators agree that some form of participation assessment is desirable.

There is also agreement that the assessment of student participation in class is difficult (Liu, 2007). Instructors struggle with questions of how to evaluate and mark a student's questions or comments in class. They wonder if there may be other forms of participation that ought to be assessed. And they ask how participation can be assessed in a fair and meaningful way without taking up an inordinate amount of time. In addition, unlike the evaluation of submitted student work, the assessment of class participation can be influenced by many subjective elements that do not present themselves in written work. It has become apparent therefore that the application of a marking rubric is necessary to ensure that class participation is graded as objectively as possible and is consistent with the stated learning outcomes of the course.

If the evaluation of class participation in the traditional face to face classroom is difficult, it is clear that it is even more difficult in the online environment. Where in a traditional classroom interaction occurs in real time and in one place; in online courses this does not happen, and there is no opportunity for the instructor to take an immediate role in leading or engaging in a discussion, and there is no body language or instant feedback to rely on to evaluate students' participation. On the other hand, while classroom interactions in the face-to-face environment are immediate and fleeting, student participation in online classroom forums or discussions are saved to the web-based learning platform (e.g., Moodle, WebCT, BlackBoard) and can be retrieved at any time, and multiple times if needed. Because of these factors, the online learning milieu is a natural medium for the application of a standardized, reliable, and transparent method of assessment that corresponds with the stated learning outcomes of the course or program.

Once the leadership in a department or program office delivering online learning decides to assess the class participation of its students, they must ensure that teachers are both able and willing to take on the task. An effective way of doing this is through the development and application of an assessment rubric for online participation that instructors can use alongside the rubrics they use for the other learning outcomes in a course. While many instructors develop their own rubrics, it has become increasingly common for programs, departments, or even entire institutions to employ a common rubric in order to provide consistency and objectivity over a number of participant groups or classes (Porto, 2006) (See appendix B for a sample *Contribution to the Learning Community* assessment rubric for a university's department of educational administration).

The development and application of a common participation rubric in a program or department has many advantages over requiring instructors to develop their own. A common rubric ensures that assessment criteria are clear to learners from one class to another. It is able

to encourage the development of a thriving learning community that extends beyond a single class.

In many Canadian institutions, participation assessment rubrics are typically developed by curriculum development experts in an institution's learning and teaching centre, with input from interested faculty members, and go through a very rigorous institutional approval process. This process allows for the development of high quality, pedagogically robust evaluation tools that can be applied similarly across many courses in a program. However, in most cases rubrics are not developed with learners from other cultures, such as overseas students, in mind. The situation is not surprising, as the majority of an institution's instructional design practitioners would not be expected to have international or intercultural learning experience.

The reality however, is that more and more frequently online courses are being taken by students from outside the countries offering them. For example, at Royal Roads University in Canada, a special purpose, public institution offering predominantly post-graduate social sciences programming, the percentage of online international students, while still lower than that of on-campus international students, has increased from 5% to 8% between 2007 and 2015 (Pedro Marquez, Vice-president Global Advancement, Marketing and Business Development, personal communication, June 25, 2015).

Assessment and evaluation processes, in English (or occasionally French in Canada), are based on western cultural norms & ways of learning and participating. They do not take into account any differences in subtleties of language usage that may be unfamiliar to non-native speakers, differences in the classroom experiences of students exiting secondary education, or different levels of comfort or discomfort with ambiguous or rhetorical directions or instructions.

While individual teachers can and should be aware of the differences in learning styles that exist between members of different cultures in their classes, and take measures to address them, it seems that it would be advantageous if the common marking rubrics were also to take these differences into account, particularly those rubrics assessing class participation.

Uncertainty avoidance and ambiguity tolerance

It is well known that non-native speakers in any language will often have some difficulty with nuances, subtleties and rhetorical devices when writing academic papers in that language. Even speakers of the same language can experience this, for example English speaking Caribbean Islanders studying in Canada frequently have trouble with the language norms expected of them in their written work. Many universities have writing centres and language help centres, both face-to-face and online, to assist learners with such problems.

What is surprisingly less well known to many teachers and instructional designers without intercultural experience is that the classroom culture and personal communication styles between students and teachers varies from country to country. From facing learners reluctant

to ask questions in class for clarification or discussion purposes, to others confused about engaging in pair or group work, instructors of students from another country may find their regular range of teaching methods unexpectedly challenged. Many institutions provide workshops for teachers of international students to provide ideas, techniques, and resources to assist them to cope with those challenges. Such workshops typically take as their starting points a need for cultural sensitivity on the part of instructors, and include guidelines and behaviours to take on in order to ensure a welcoming environment for their international students. Instructors are encouraged to make their expectations far more explicit than they may think is necessary, to represent learning material in multiple ways, to provide a wide-ranging array of procedures for student-student and student-faculty interaction, and to model the kinds of behaviours they want in their students (e.g., TRU World, 2007).

Understandably, such workshops, resources, and guides tend to be based on individual behaviours and situational concerns in classrooms or online. But with the recent trend for institutions to employ common class participation assessment rubrics, an individual behavioural based approach to intervention may not be the most consistent, effective, or sustainable conceptual foundation upon which to base an evaluation tool. Because a common assessment rubric must be grounded on factors that can be measured across groups, instructional designers may wish to build mitigations for cultural differences into the tool itself.

In online learning, where interactions are asynchronous and usually, but not always, in writing, the related concepts of *Ambiguity Tolerance* and *Uncertainty Avoidance* have begun to emerge as important factors to consider when contemplating the assessment of class participation. Originally introduced in the study of child psychology in the middle of the last century, and applied to higher education in the 2000s, *ambiguity tolerance* is defined as the measure of ones tendency to perceive ambiguous situations as threatening, desirable, or neutral, and is usually applied on individuals rather than groups (Clark, 2010). From its beginnings as a means to measure children's susceptibility toward authoritarianism and prejudice, the concept of ambiguity tolerance has evolved over time to include a more broad range of attitudes and behaviours over a multitude of organizations and institutions.

Related to ambiguity tolerance, but not synonymous with it, is the concept of *uncertainty avoidance*. Developed and described by Hofstede (1980) who also developed an index to measure it, uncertainty avoidance measures the degree to which people feel comfortable in situations where outcomes and conditions are unknown or unpredictable. Hofstede based much of his concept on the earlier ambiguity tolerance literature in an attempt to expand the narrower term *ambiguity* to the more wide ranging *uncertainty*. He also took what was a measure of an individual's relationship with *ambiguity*, and broadened it to measure a society's or culture's relationship with *uncertainty* (Furnham & Ribchester, 1995). Consequently, the two concepts tend to be applied interchangeably, particularly in the education field, and suggestions for interventions by instructional designers and teachers of international students originate from both (Tapanes, Smith, & White, 2009).

Bentley, Tinney & Chia (2005) argue that as increasing numbers of international students choose to take online courses, institutions will discover that such students will select those that are more congruent with their cultural expectations. While students going abroad to study expect and anticipate an instructional style and evaluation regime that is different from the one they are accustomed to, students choosing online learning may not realize that they are, in effect, studying in another country even though they are staying home. At the same time, instructors and students from the country in which the course originates may not be aware of the differences in educational norms and academic discourse that the international online student may be facing (Bentley, Tinney, & Chia, 2005). In the case of a common assessment rubric, it is therefore up to the instructional designer to be aware of these differences and to somehow mitigate for them in the development of the evaluation instrument. This does not mean that content must be watered down, standards lowered, or different sets of performance criteria be required of international students and domestic students. Institutions are obligated to set and maintain the highest standards for all students.

Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance index identifies "the extent to which a culture feels threatened or anxious about ambiguity and how hard individuals will work to avoid it. These variables focus on how cultures adapt to change and cope with uncertainty" (Downey et al., 2004, p. 973). Countries with a low uncertainty avoidance index include the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and most of Western Europe. These countries tend to offer what we call a western-style education (Bentley, Tinney, & Chia, 2005). Those countries from which Canadian institutions receive the highest number of international students, both face-to-face and online, however, are those with a higher uncertainty avoidance index. These countries include Japan, China, Korea, Latin America, the Middle East, and Vietnam.

While it is folly, and ethically troubling, to suggest that all members of a society or cultural group behave the same and have identical levels of ambiguity intolerance or uncertainty avoidance, it serves the instructional designer well to consider applying the principles of ambiguity tolerance and uncertainty avoidance to the assessment of online class participation. If the rationale behind assessing participation online is to instil a sense of community among a group of learners, it is sensible to ensure that all learners understand and feel comfortable with what is expected of them and the method by which they will be assessed. For learners from countries identified to have a higher uncertainty avoidance index this would mean that the educational values of the institution should be made explicit in the marking rubric, and actions that constitute class participation should be made perfectly clear. The reduction of communicative uncertainty will go far to ensure a more equable learning environment for all students whatever their national origin.

It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a checklist of design elements to include in an assessment rubric, but to point interested educators to the existing literature and to suggest ways that a culturally appropriate method of assessment can be developed. The literature on the application of ambiguity tolerance and uncertainty avoidance to the online education field is relatively scant, therefore a suggestion for further research might be to conduct an action

research project to measure the results for teachers and learners prior to the inclusion of a rubric based on these concepts and after its application.

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Appendix A

Sample assessment rubric in an education leadership course

HEAL 501: Assignment 4 – Leadership, Learning and Change: Why Academia? (Individual)

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria

PLO (1) Communicate ideas, issues and conclusions clearly to students, faculty, staff, government and interests groups, to promote student learning and institution-wide improvement.	
(1.1) Produces effective written material for a specific audience	• Organizes thoughts and writes coherently and concisely • Ensures that text is legible, accurate (spelling is correct) and conforms to the style, grammatical and formatting conventions that match the purpose of the writing (APA standards for formal writing). • Uses a structure that makes it easy for the reading audience to identify main points and to follow the sequence of ideas. • Provides attribution in accordance with APA citation specifications where material is copied from published and unpublished sources, including copyright approval where appropriate. • Proof-reads, re-drafts, and edits documents to ensure accuracy
PLO (2) Engage in meaningful self-assessment and self-awareness to enhance leadership skills, positive relationships, and professional goals.	
(2.1) Engages in reflection on self as individual leader and self as leader of others (teams).	• Reflects upon decisions, actions and choices with a sincere desire for self-improvement. • Seeks feedback and objectively considers both praise and constructive criticism. • Recognizes superior abilities in self and in others and works with that knowledge to better own performance and performance with others. • Assesses impact of self as leader on others as leaders and/or followers with intention to continuously improve leadership skills.
PLO (5) Apply systems thinking, change theories and organizational improvement strategies to support student learning and institutional growth.	
(5.1) Applies theories in leadership, learning and change to constructively build and enhance a positive culture that supports student learning and institutional development.	• Recognizes different leadership styles in self and others and uses that knowledge to cultivate positive environments and productive teams. • Demonstrates an appreciation of different leadership styles.

	• Applies current leadership, change and learning theories to self in real-world situations. • Finds connections and patterns across theories that apply to self and others. • Recognizes how individual understanding of change theory and learning theory contributes to leadership success.

Marking Rubric – Assignment 4

	4	3	2	1
Context and Purpose of the Writing *Includes consideration of audience, purpose, and the circumstances around the writing task(s).*	Demonstrates a thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose that is responsive to the assigned task(s) and focuses all elements of the work.	Demonstrates adequate consideration of context, audience, and purpose and a clear focus on the assigned task(s) (e.g., the task aligns with audience, purpose, and context.	Demonstrates awareness of context, audience, purpose and to the assigned task(s) (e.g., begins to show awareness of audience's perceptions and assumptions).	Demonstrates minimal attention to context, audience, purpose, and to assigned task(s) (e.g., expectation of instructor or self as audience.
Content Development	Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to illustrate mastery of the subject, conveying the writer's understanding, and shaping the whole work.	Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to explore ideas within the context of the discipline and shape the whole work.	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop and explore ideas through most of the work.	Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop simple ideas in some of the work.
Genre and Disciplinary Conventions	Demonstrates detailed attention to and successful execution of a wide range of conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing	Demonstrates consistent use of important conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s), including organization,	Follows expectations appropriate to a specific discipline and/or writing task(s) for basic organization, content, presentation.	Attempts to use a consistent system for basic organization and presentation.

	task (s) including organization, content, presentation, formatting, and stylistic choices.	content, presentation, formatting, and stylistic choices.		
Sources and Evidence	Demonstrates skilful use of high-quality, credible, relevant sources to develop ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing.	Demonstrates consistent use of credible, relevant sources to support ideas that are situated within the discipline and genre of the writing.	Demonstrates an attempt to use credible and/or relevant sources to support ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing.	Demonstrates an attempt to use sources to support ideas in the writing.
Control of Syntax and Mechanics	Uses graceful language that skilfully communicates meaning to readers with clarity and fluency and is virtually error-free.	Uses straightforward language that generally conveys meaning to readers. The language in the piece has few errors.	Uses language that generally conveys meaning to readers with clarity, although writing may include some errors.	Uses language that sometimes impedes meaning because of errors in usuage.

Source: HEAL 501, Royal Roads University, Master of Arts in Educational Administration and Leadership.

Appendix B

Sample Online Class Participation Assessment rubric

Assessment of Your Contribution to the Learning Community

While your instructor will discuss key ideas and raise important issues, parts of this course will be guided by dialogue, discussion and inquiry. Think about this course as a guided conversation that begins on the first day we meet and ends on the last scheduled day of class. In order for this learning experience to be beneficial and worthwhile to everyone, it is imperative that you read the assigned material, contribute to the discussions, and participate in all class activities. Conversations and ideas develop best when everyone has read the assigned material, reflected on their relevance and meaning, and/or contributed to the class discussions. Participation should be **thoughtful, meaningful, timely,** and **relevant.** Participation should also provide active support to the learning community, by attempting to motivate contributions, acknowledging alternative viewpoints, and supporting others.

In responding to your colleagues, you should feel free to suggest that they explore appropriate websites or resources to expand the discussion to a deeper level. However, please do ensure to provide explanations on why such resources are relevant and interesting to the rest of the class and provide an accurate reference to the resource. For example, the response "In the document that I am attaching, Joe Scholar gives examples of cases where technology brings people closer together and argues that empathy matters more than technology" is a much better response than "Please see the attached document for a different perspective."

In responding to others, strive to work towards a culture that is collaborative, respectful, encouraging, and supportive. You should be receptive to change and use conflict resolution techniques when required. Posts that show evidence of ongoing negative behavior, that impede the flow of discussion, and seem unaware of or uninterested in responding to others without being prompted degrade the learning experience and do not advance opportunities for everyone to learn from each other.

Also, please consider how your contribution will advance and extend the discussion. For example, in your response, you can

- draw from the assigned readings, concepts and perspectives introduced in the course, and outside readings
- pose constructive questions,
- reflect back to your own experiences,

- connect to a course reading/assignment,
- ask for clarification,
- build connections between your thoughts and other students' perspectives, and/or
- offer alternative perspectives

When responding to your classmates, you are expected to respect others' values, perspectives and experiences. Use good netiquette and care.

The following rubric can help guide your participation in the activities. The rubric will be used by your instructor to assess your contribution to the learning community.

Contribution to the Learning Community Rubric

	Excellent Contribution (A+ to A-)	**Good Contribution (B+ to B-)**	**Poor Contribution (F)**
Critical Thinking	Consistently provides posts that are analytical and that demonstrate the author's insights, observations, and reflections; includes relevant examples; offers substantive questions and suggests ideas to enhance further discussion; includes citations to external materials of high academic quality; provides ideas, alternatives or actions not previously identified.	Provides some posts that are insightful and reflective but usually offers only a surface level analysis that lacks insights, observations and reflections; provides some follow-up questions that are cursory and unsubstantive and do not help move the conversation forward; rarely includes citations to external materials of high academic quality.	Provides post(s) that lack analysis, insights, observations and reflections; does not provide follow-up questions for the group to consider.
Response and Synthesis	Consistently provides responses to colleagues that include a thoughtful treatment of the original post; provides responses	Occasionally will synthesize others' posts and current information and share this in a way that contributes to the	Provides responses that offer minimal analysis, lack depth, and do not advance the discussion.

	that demonstrate the student's ability to synthesize information and share this synthesis in a way that deepens the class's collective understanding and move the discussion towards a thoughtful conclusion; provides posts that demonstrate application of learning and are based in the course readings, conceptual materials presented, outside reading and experiences.	class's understanding; provides some contributions that lack connections to the responses from others and do not represent intentional, synthesized thought or advance the discussion in a substantive way.	
Communication	Provides timely individual postings that are well-written and succinct (2-3 paragraphs on average), on topic, and written in a style appropriate for the particular kind of activity or exercise; uses appropriate grammar; spells correctly; and shows consistent evidence of appropriate proof-reading.; provides excellent constructive feedback and seeks feedback from others; comments and questions are excellent, on topic, original and contribute to moving the discussion forward.	Provides posts that contain some spelling, grammar and punctuation errors; lack brevity; or distract from the comments or questions made by others; provides some good feedback and sometimes seeks feedback from others; comments and questions are usually relevant and sometimes contribute to moving the discussion forward.	Provides contributions that contain numerous grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors; shows evidence of a style of writing that consistently fails to facilitate communication. Rarely provides relevant input or feedback in a timely or constructive manner.
Professional Knowledge	Consistently provides excellent responses in posts that demonstrate a breadth and depth	Provides responses in posts that demonstrate some breadth and depth of understanding,	Provides minimal, if any, demonstration of application of learning, contribution of

	of understanding, integrates course materials, are analytical and makes linkages to professional practice; solve problems using principles and educational theories; includes citations to external materials of high academic quality.	integrates course materials, are analytical and makes some linkages; identifies principles and educational theories for problem solving; includes some citations to external materials of high academic quality.	facts, theories and principles in discussions.

Source: School of Education and Technology, Royal Roads University