

7. Description of Decision Process for Class Participation Component of Final Grade

I have been experimenting with giving students the power to determine how the “class participation” component of their grade should be decided. After briefly discussing the different pieces that make up class participation (attendance, preparation for and participation in class discussions [including “active listening”], co-facilitation of class discussion on assigned days), I leave the room and tell them to come up with a plan that they and I can live with. Here are a couple of excerpts from student interviews describing the process when I taught the class in fall, 2003:

“For our class participation grade, Dr. Battistoni came in and said you guys are going to decide how you’re going to be graded for class participation grade. We are so used to the teacher coming in saying this is how it’s going to be that we don’t know how to do any of that ourselves. He said, I’m going to leave the room and go down to the lounge and you guys are going to come up with a rubric or a way to decide your class participation grade and then tell me when to come back. So he left and we all looked at each other like we don’t want to do this. We started talking and from the beginning there were a few leaders that emerged in the group even though it was all of that were supposed to be deciding. There were one or two of who were the outspoken ones. OK let’s do this systematically and the class let them take the lead. So we came up with this plan that was mostly by these few people. Most of the class was being passive and I wasn’t one of the leaders but I kept proposing ideas and so a couple people came up with an outline and let’s vote on it. So everyone who wants this plan raise your hand and almost everyone

raised their hand. There were a few who said no. I just figured that it was the end of it because we are so used to majority rule and when you vote and the decision is made then that's it. But then one of the guys leading said OK, everyone who said no explain why you said no. Explain what you'd want to change and what you can't live with. I was just so surprised because no one had ever asked the dissenters in my memory of every time I've ever taken the vote about anything. And he asked them and they were taken aback too. And what was amazing was that after the dissenters explained what they didn't like; the entire class agreed with them that their ideas were right. So then we reworked the plan and came up with a new one. OK let's vote again. Can everyone live with this and everyone said yes. That's amazing to me because that is how I think decisions should be made. Granted it may take longer. Because we asked the dissenters why and included them in the consensus we came up with a better plan for everyone."

"I had classes before where class discussion was in a circle and it was mostly students that wanted to speak but it never worked out that way, it was just those people presenting on the days they were assigned and it wasn't engaging for the rest of the class. If it wasn't your week to speak in the class you would probably fall asleep in the class. But in this class I think the reason everyone did participate in the discussions and the reason why Rick didn't have to talk all the time was that he let us determine our own grading system. One part of it was that we decided to grade each other on how we lead discussions. We all had to do the reading in order to have everyone participating so we sat as a class and made a pact; well you know if my reading and my discussion is going to be graded on

how you participate then I want you to do the reading. And getting to know the people in the class, we thought, 'I should really do the reading because I don't want this person to get a bad grade for the discussion of the day.' We came up with this elaborate system for discussions and stuff but it really did bond us together as a group and say, 'Well I got your back if you got mine; do the reading.'"