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Factors that Affect Classroom Participation

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Factors that Affect Classroom Participation

By

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A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science in Service Leadership and
Innovation

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to identify the factors that affect the levels of classroom participation among sophomore business students at RIT Croatia in Zagreb. While previous studies conducted were mainly quantitative in nature, this study involved in-depth interviews with ten students, gaining further insight on what impacts their participation levels. It was discovered that logistics, student traits, classroom climate, and the professor impact the level of participation within the classroom. Participation levels were identified to be higher in classroom environments that were smaller in size, provided students with support, respect, constructive feedback, and involved theory being related to real-life situations. Implications for educational institutions are discussed.

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Introduction

Factors That Affect Classroom Participation

Classroom participation has always been a critical factor in yielding positive learning outcomes for students and further developing their abilities. Participation allows students to build on their knowledge, demonstrate they have understood the curriculum, develop confidence, and apply theory. It teaches students to think critically (Garside, 1996) and engage in dialogue with their colleagues and professors by providing informed arguments based on information retained. These skills are important for their progression throughout their education and in preparing them for their careers. Rocca (2010) stated that:

> The more they participate, the less memorization they do, and the more they engage in higher levels of thinking, including interpretation, analysis, and synthesis (Smith, 1977). Students who participate also show improvement in their communication skills (Berdine, 1986; Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005), group interactions (Armstrong and Boud, 1983), and functioning in a democratic society (Girgin & Stevens, 2005). (p.188)

With so many positive benefits associated with classroom participation, why do so many students struggle with it and why is it so difficult to get them to participate in class? Students struggle with participation due to factors that relate to their personal traits, as well as the formal and informal structures of the classroom environment (Weaver & Qi, 2005).

In response to low participation rates, educators have focused efforts on implementing numerous strategies to increase student participation. These methods include but are not limited to associating grading with participation, randomly soliciting students for responses, and adjusting

lecturing methods to allow time for classroom discussion. As described in the commonly cited article by Karp and Yoels (1976), despite these efforts, only 10 out of 40 students participate in classroom discussion and of that 5 control the discussion that does occur.

Studies indicate that students continue to remain passive members of the classroom environment and as a result do not capitalize on the benefits of participation (Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Myers et al., 2009; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Students are not responding to the methods being implemented showing that an overall solution has yet to be found. Critical factors associated with classroom participation are not being addressed appropriately in order to increase student participation. Wade (1994) felt that the best classroom discussion involved classrooms where all students actively participated, learned, and listened to others comments (p.237).

Numerous studies have been conducted on the factors that influence classroom participation. Fassinger (1995) indicated that these factors include classroom size, fear, the perception of faculty authority, student preparation for class, and confidence. Weaver and Qi (2005) noted that participation can also take on other forms including "para-participation" which is a form of participation that is initiated by the student. Examples of this include students making nonverbal gestures showing that they agree or disagree with comments being made, they may sit where they are visibly seen within the classroom, or prefer to engage in informal discussions with their professors out of the classroom either during office hours or via e-mail.

Fassinger (2000) indicated that the classroom should also be seen from the perspective of the group and that these group dynamics will ultimately influence levels of participation within the classroom. Supportive and non-competitive classroom environments yielded higher rates of participation and showed trust amongst students as there was visible encouragement from peers and professors to express opinions. Fassinger noted that professors play a key role in fostering this

type of environment by ensuring cooperation through activities that create a positive climate in the classroom and ensure the dialogue is carried out with respect within the classroom.

At this stage in the research, participation in the classroom is defined as contribution to discussion and in-class group activities.

Although there have been various studies on what influences college classroom participation, the results have not been applicable to all institutions. The reason being is that the learning environment and institutions differ from one another for various reasons including size, private versus public, and geographical location, therefore, the results are difficult to apply to all colleges and universities. Also, educators teaching styles differ as does the profile of students, which need to be accounted for in order to determine proper ways to address low participation rates.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine which factors in the classroom learning environment affect student participation among sophomore undergraduate business students at RIT Croatia in Zagreb.

Students further their education in order to grow and build on their knowledge and skills so that they can ultimately apply this in their careers and succeed. In order for them to receive the best possible educational experience and achieve these goals, it is important for educational institutions and educators alike to identify ways in which they can ensure that these learning outcomes are met. This study will assist educators in determining what factors play a key role in increasing participation and provide further research on how to implement strategies in the classroom environment in order to increase student participation. Moreover, it will provide insight on how students perceive participation and provide professors with insight on how to address the

issue with their students. Finally, this will benefit students in the long run by ensuring that they are receiving the best possible educational experience and are able to apply the benefits when they enter the workforce.

RIT Croatia is a private American institution with the majority of students learning the curriculum in their second language. That in itself is a challenging task which is why participation is a critical part of their learning experience as they need to be able to express thoughts clearly and demonstrate that they understand what they are learning. Furthermore, as sophomore business students, communication is an important ability that will follow them into their careers and add to their level of employability. It is important for professors at RIT Croatia to help young students reach their full potential and guide them in this process. This is done not only by delivering lectures but also by challenging them to express their thoughts and demonstrate that they understand and can apply the knowledge. Employers are seeking well-rounded individuals, especially in the business world where competition is fierce and people seek to have their voices heard. By further examining sophomore business classrooms at RIT Croatia, professors will have the potential to understand how to help their students build confidence and engage in course material therefore positively contributing to their learning outcomes and preparing students for the future. The author will conduct semi-structured face-to-face interviews with students in order to collect detailed information on their classroom experience and highlight common themes that emerge from the data.

Research question: Which factors in the classroom learning environment affect student participation among sophomore undergraduate business students at RIT Croatia in Zagreb?

Literature Review

Classroom participation has become an increasingly important aspect of engaging students in higher education. Current students in higher education are of the Millennial generation and are constantly seeking interaction (Roehling et al., 2011). As educators struggle to find the appropriate mix of strategies in order to raise participation levels in the classroom, it is important to look at existing research in order to gain an understanding of what defines participation as well as factors that affect participation both directly and indirectly in the classroom.

Defining and evaluating participation

Participation has been defined in a number of ways including "the number of unsolicited responses volunteered" (Burchfield & Sappington, 1999, p. 290), the "extent of participation in class discussion" (Weaver & Qi, 2005, p. 581), and "any comments or questions that students offered or raised in class" (Fassinger, 2000, p. 39). The above mentioned definitions focus primarily on quantitative measurements of participation and do not take into account the quality of the responses given from a student. This is likely due to the difficulty in evaluating what a quality response consists of for all disciplines and because the result may be subjective.

Participation can also be viewed as part of an overall student engagement process as defined by Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) who divided this process into five separate categories: preparation, contribution to discussion, group skills, communication skills, and attendance (p. 448). This definition is more holistic as it includes the quality of discussion as well as respect within the group which Weaver and Qi (2005) indicated was a direct factor that affected levels of class participation.

Evaluating participation can be done by the professor, by peer evaluation, as well as self-evaluation. What has been noted throughout several studies, is that by using self-evaluation and

peer evaluation methods, students tend to award themselves and each other, with higher grades than the professor would allocate (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005; Gopinath, 1999). Fritschner (2000) explains that this is due to professors and students having different understandings of participation and that these nuances would lead to a difference in grading criteria resulting in different overall results. While there are others that can be included in rating student participation, such as tutors and observers, this is not common (Armstrong & Boud, 1983).

Benefits of participation

Crone (1997) noted that if you engage a student in participating in an active learning environment, they have the opportunity to become critical thinkers and in turn will be less passive. Garside (1996) defined critical thinking as:

(a)Thinking that is clear, precise, accurate, relevant, logical, and consistent; (b) thinking that reflects a controlled sense of skepticism or disbelief of any assertion, claim, or conclusion until sufficient evidence and reasoning is provided to conclusively support it; (c) thinking that takes stock of existing information and identifies holes and weaknesses, thereby certifying what we know and don't know; and (d) thinking that is free from bias, prejudice, and on-sidedness of thought. (p. 215)

The above definition shows that critical thinking is an important ability that student's need to develop as it will carry them both through their education, no matter what the discipline, and careers.

Other benefits of participation for students include less memorization, as they are able to learn through discussion and synthesize the information more effectively (Smith, 1977), they are more motivated (Junn, 1994), improve their ability to communicate orally (Dancer & Kamvounias,

2005), build confidence, and learn by being able to apply theory to their own lives (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Although based on existing research there are numerous benefits to participation, there are still very few students who do participate and an insufficient amount of class time is devoted to classroom discussion (Fritschner, 2000). Both students and professors recognize the benefits or classroom participation however, Wade (1994) indicated that students would like the opportunity to be able to participate more in their classes in order to capitalize on the advantages. Over half of students do not participate and the few that do are the ones that do so repeatedly indicating that they dominate the discussion. Karp & Yoels (1976) characterized this as the "consolidation of responsibility" (p. 429).

Factors that Affect Participation Levels

Numerous factors determine participation levels in the classroom and need to be taken into account when determining a strategy that will encourage an active learning environment and therefore raise levels of participation.

Student traits. As individuals, we differ in personalities and not everybody is the same. Confidence is a key trait that students struggle with and has a direct effect on participation (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Students deal with fears of not being smart enough to address their class and therefore holdback on providing insight on subject matter due to intimidation (Karp & Yoels, 1976). Anxiety and nervousness, independent of classroom logistics, inhibit students from communicating instead of building their confidence through participation. Research has shown that this is linked to classroom apprehension which is defined by Neer (1987) as the "avoidance of participation prompted by evaluation apprehension or expectations of negative outcomes associated with participation" (p. 157). Wade (1994) noted that students will only engage in class

if they feel that what they have to say is important and interesting. Neer and Kircher (1989) added that students dealing with classroom apprehension felt more comfortable participating only when they became familiar with their peers and therefore felt more comfortable in expressing themselves. The authors explained that classroom apprehension can be mitigated by allowing students to prepare for discussion prior to class. By doing so, they become more comfortable with the subject matter and can organize their thoughts so that they would be able to participate in classroom discussion. This can be done through homework (Fassinger, 1995), readings (Cohen, 1991), role play with classmates, and brainstorming. Furthermore, students who are not native English speakers are less likely to participate in classroom discussion in English due to a lack of confidence in their language abilities thus lowering the level of participation in the classroom (Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Tatar, 2005).

Preparation for class. Fear is an issue many students face as they may not have sufficient knowledge and may be dealing with insecurities in the classroom (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Research shows that some students reported to not be participating in classes if they did not prepare on the subject matter prior to coming to class, therefore did not feel comfortable engaging in discussion (Howard et al., 2002). Students worried that they would be criticized by both their peers and professors, for not being well informed on the subject matter. This ties in with confidence and therefore students who do prepare for class tend to be more confident and as a result participate in discussions (Reinsch & Wambsgnass, 1994).

Classroom size. Logistics of the classroom do matter and affect classroom participation. Classroom size has shown to have a direct and indirect impact on participation (Weaver & Qi, 2005). In small classroom, higher levels of participation have been recorded due to the student being more comfortable in an intimate classroom setting and therefore having less anxiety (Myers

et al., 2009). Larger classrooms promote anonymity among students and raise the level of fear as they now have to contribute in front of a larger crowd which could result in a larger amount of disapproval from peers (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Auster and MacRone (1994) argued that classrooms with over 40 students had low participation rates. This was later supported by Weaver and Qi (2005) by adding that classrooms with over 40 students did not have a sufficient amount of time allocated to discussion due to lectures and therefore limited the extent to which a student could contribute to discussion and ultimately raise participation levels.

Grading. Grading is an effective method that can be used to increase levels of participation. If participation has a positive impact on a student's grade, they are more likely to participate in classroom discussion (Fassinger, 2000). Boniecki and Moore (2003) suggested that offering extra credit might be a better way to reward participation versus giving it a separate grade, their findings supported this argument. In determining how often to assess a student's participation, Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) found that a mid-semester grade would be most effective in providing students with a concrete performance indicator in terms of their participation. This would allow them the opportunity to take action and improve for the rest of the semester.

Role of faculty. Faculty play an important role in engaging students in their classroom. Given that professors are seen as the leaders of authority within the classroom, the way they build their relationships with students is critical in getting them to participate (Karp & Yoels, 1976; Wade, 1994; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Faculty authority can hinder participation and studies have shown that effective ways to deal with this include, learning students' names, creating a climate of respect and openness, and allowing students to refer to them by first names (Fassinger, 1995; Nunn, 1996). Classes with higher participation levels perceive their professors to be approachable, inclusive, promoters of discussion, and supportive (Fassinger, 2000).

A professor's tone with a student is also of importance when looking at classroom participation. If professors are constantly negative towards students, criticize them, and ignore them, students are less likely to participate within the classroom (Wade, 1994). This can be tied into having a direct negative affect on a students' confidence levels and instilling fear in students which as a result, causes low participation (Rocca, 2009). Myers and Rocca (2000) stated that when professors challenge students verbally, students perceive this as looking down on them and in turn become defensive which hinders their willingness to participate.

Faculty, as the role of authority within the classroom, are able to manage the dynamics of discussion. Fassinger (2000) indicated that classroom norms play an important role in facilitating a classroom climate that promotes participation. The findings show that when students were clear on who should speak in class, an environment of respect is created and therefore students did not feel as though they had to suppress their opinions in front of their classmates. Auster and MacRone (1994) noted that if students felt as though faculty perceived their input into discussion as important, and encouraged them to express their opinions, they would participate more within the classroom. Hyde and Ruth (2002) argued that professors could increase levels of participation by providing positive feedback to students and ensure that the dialogue within the classroom allows students to be critical with one another in a respectful manner.

Weaver and Qi (2005) suggested the following ways to promote faculty student interaction:

Faculty can initiate interaction in various ways. For instance, they might encourage students to visit them in their office, to exchange e-mails when students have questions or problems, or to discuss issues concerning students' graduate school applications or career opportunities. Where possible, faculty may include students in their scholarly work or take students on field trips or to academic conferences. (p. 574)

This is important as the results concluded that faculty-student interaction has the largest direct effect on participation. This type of relationship between the professor and student will create an environment where the student will feel more comfortable in receiving criticism from professors, increase their confidence, and learn to communicate in a professional manner (Tinto, 1997).

Other Forms of Participation

Student participation is not limited to the conventional definition of student engagement within the classroom through discussion. Students differ in personalities and the way they choose to participate in the classroom. This can be seen through other forms of participation that exist and compliment conventional methods of participation such as raising one's hand in class (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Weaver and Qi (2005) coined the term para-participation which is defined as an alternate form of communication that is initiated mainly by the student. Examples of para-participation include speaking with the professor informally after class with regards to the class lectures, and to gain feedback on their work. It includes when students sit in seats that make them visible to the professor within the classroom and show agreement and disagreement by facial expression and gestures even though they remain silent during the class. (p.577) This does not mean that this para-participation replaces the more conventional method however, the results indicate that this should also be considered as participation. Para-participation is a way for the student to show interest in the subject matter without having their voice heard in the classroom due to fear of judgment from professors or peers or perhaps due to confidence issues. Weaver and Qi (2005) argued that para-participation is complimentary to conventional methods of participation and has a positive direct effect on participation.

Summary

Participation is an important piece in a student's education and the achievement of positive learning outcomes. The benefits include developing their communication skills (Fassinger, 2000), becoming critical thinkers (Wade, 1994), demonstrating that they understand the curriculum, and can develop valid arguments in dialogue with their peers (Rocca, 2010).

Numerous factors influence student participation both directly and indirectly including student traits, classroom structure, the role of faculty, classroom climate, and confidence (Weaver & Qi, 2005). It is paramount that educational institutions and educators focus on determining what factors will positively affect levels of student participation within the classroom. This ensures that all students receive equal opportunity in developing their communication and demonstrating their knowledge as they progress through their education. it Meyer (2015, para. 1) said that "communication is the key to personal and career success" therefore educational institutions have an obligation in assisting students in becoming successful communicators through participation. Participation will not only help students progress in their education but more importantly in their careers by demonstrating that they can develop arguments, communicate thought, and interact in discussions with their colleagues. As Tinto (1997) noted "involvement matters" and educators need to ensure a sufficient amount of class time is devoted to developing these skills within students.

Given the current situation in the classroom with little time devoted to classroom discussion and the focus being on lectures, students are faced with little opportunity to engage with their peers and develop their critical thinking abilities (Rocca, 2010). Educators have an obligation to help their students not only further their knowledge base but also their ability to apply this knowledge.

Methods and Evaluation

Research Design

The research design used for this study was qualitative in order to identify which factors affect the rates of participation in the classroom (Creswell, 2014). This investigation was developed as a narrative research with a constructivist philosophical worldview. The inductive research approach enabled the author to gain an in-depth understanding of how students view participation in the classroom and allowed the author to analyze the results for common themes and ultimately have a detailed understanding of what drives and impedes classroom participation levels. This method allowed the author to capture the emotional behavioral aspect of students' responses.

Research question: Which factors in the classroom learning environment affect student participation among sophomore undergraduate business students at RIT Croatia in Zagreb?

Strategy of Inquiry

In-depth interviews were used as a strategy of inquiry for this research study (Creswell, 2014). This allowed the author to gather detailed answers, first-hand, from the participants and allowed flexibility in probing for more detailed information. The qualitative approach enabled the author to understand student experiences and evaluate the data by identifying major common themes that affect participation. The focus of the study was on how students view participation within the classroom environment.

Participants

Data was collected from sophomore students in the International Business program at RIT Croatia in Zagreb between the ages of 19-21. Sophomore students were chosen as they would have already completed one year of the American educational system and have a solid

understanding of the teaching methods. Also, sophomore students would still be completing core business courses at this point in their studies which are key for completion of their diploma and expected learning outcomes. This site was chosen due to the researcher's relationship with the institution. The sampling design for this population was a single-stage sampling as it was possible for the author to obtain names from the student database with approval from administration and students were selected at random based on their University Identification Number (UID) (Creswell, 2014). Random sampling was chosen as it provides equal opportunity for all students in the population to be chosen and participate in the sample. Students were incentivized to participate and received a free lunch from the on-campus restaurant. The sample consisted of ten students, evenly split between males and females, whose native language is Croatian and the language in which they completed their high-school education. As the majority of the student body consisted of native Croatians, this identified whether or not Croatian being the native language would hinder participation by affecting student traits including confidence and their ability to communicate effectively in a second language.

Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on factors that affected participation based on the literature review as well as allowed for enough flexibility for new ideas to arise. With a semi-structured interview, consistency can be difficult to achieve, however, the interviewer attempted to mediate this by asking similar probing questions independent of the response in order to gather as much detail as possible through concrete examples (Creswell, 2014). The interviewer provided the interviewees with the questions (Appendix) in advance so that they could reflect on them, prepare examples, and be relaxed in the interview as they knew what to expect. Initially, the questions were more general and inquired on their backgrounds however, as the interview progressed, questions became more specific to classroom participation. In order to ease the

interviewee, the interviewer did not set a time limit to the interview and allowed the time to flow. The interviewer did not interrupt the interviewee and allowed the conversation to flow using probing questions only to guide the direction of information and clarify any uncertainties.

The author reached out to administration for approval and explained the goal of the study and how the information would be shared and why it is useful in helping educators raise participation levels in the classroom. This cross-sectional study was conducted in an RIT Croatia classroom used for business courses in order to allow the students to better visualize their classroom experience when describing participation. All of the interviews were conducted by the same facilitator to ensure consistency and continuity. All participants signed a consent form at the beginning of each interview and interviewees had the opportunity to ask the facilitator questions. The consent forms included instructions for the interview, the objective of the study, and the responsibility of the participant including the benefits and risks. Furthermore, participant anonymity was protected by providing each interviewee with a pseudonym during the research process in order to protect their privacy and encourage freedom of speech without them being worried about the consequences of their honesty.

An issue the interviewer may have encountered when conducting the interviews was that what interviewees would say they do and what they really did would be two different things. When needed, this was moderated using probing questions in the semi-structured interview as the interviewer was looking for examples to support the claims. Furthermore, the interviewer knew the students personally and had developed relationships with the majority of them. The interviewer provided the interviewees with information on the study and most importantly explained the goal of the research project to them with the goal of enhancing their classroom experience so that they

could get the most out of it. It was believed that if the interviewees felt that their contribution lead to improvement, than they were more inclined to provide insightful information.

The interviews were conducted over a three-week period in the middle of the semester in order to ensure that the courses they were enrolled in were well underway and the students had had the opportunity to participate in discussion based on course materials. Interviews were recorded using an iPhone for future transcription and analysis. Having an audio device did not create any inhibitions as there was not distracting lighting and the phone was turned over so that the interviewee could focus on the interview. The interviewer explained to all interviewees that the purpose of the audio recording was to ensure that she had accurately collected the information. Moreover, the interviewer explained that that audio recording allowed the information to be properly transcribed for interpretation, coding, and allowed for the use of direct citations. This ultimately provided better results.

Data Analysis

The data analyzed in this study was primarily from the interviews conducted with the sophomore students. The qualitative data analysis was conducted using the iterative process outlined by Creswell (2014) and was reviewed multiple times in order to ensure the information was properly understood for interpretation by the author. The process included the author listening to all of the interviews the same day as they occurred in order to take any notes that she could recall from the interviews such as expression, tone, and gestures in order to avoid subjectivity or misinterpretation of data. Within one month of the interviews being carried out, the author transcribed each interview word for word in order to further avoid subjectivity and ensure all responses were accurately interpreted. The author than verified the transcribed in interviews by listening to each interview again to ensure that everything was detailed as per the audio recording. Finally, the author used

the member checking method identified by Creswell (2014) by checking the transcripts with them by e-mail to ensure that they felt that the descriptions were accurate.

Once the author completed the above steps, she went through all of the transcribed interviews to add the notes collected from the initial audio recordings as well as to start creating an initial list of codes by highlighting passages with key factors that related to student participation in the classroom. Once a short list of codes were created, the author went back to highlight passages using a color coding system in order to clearly identify within the interviews which passages addressed the emergent theme to address the research question and compare the information to the literature reviewed.

The coding process was further developed using the HyperRESEARCH 3.7.3 software program where all student interviews were uploaded and re-read so that the author was able to highlight the key passages and assign the appropriate code to each interview section. Once completed, the author than ran reports based on the codes which she then reviewed. This enabled the author to review the data collected in a more organized manner based on the codes input as well as all associated passages to the code. The reports further assisted the author in defining a set of codes and removing ones that did not have a sufficient amount of evidence to support them. Finally, the codes were categorized into themes and sub-themes, which were linked to the research question of factors that affect student participation and can be seen below in Figure 1.
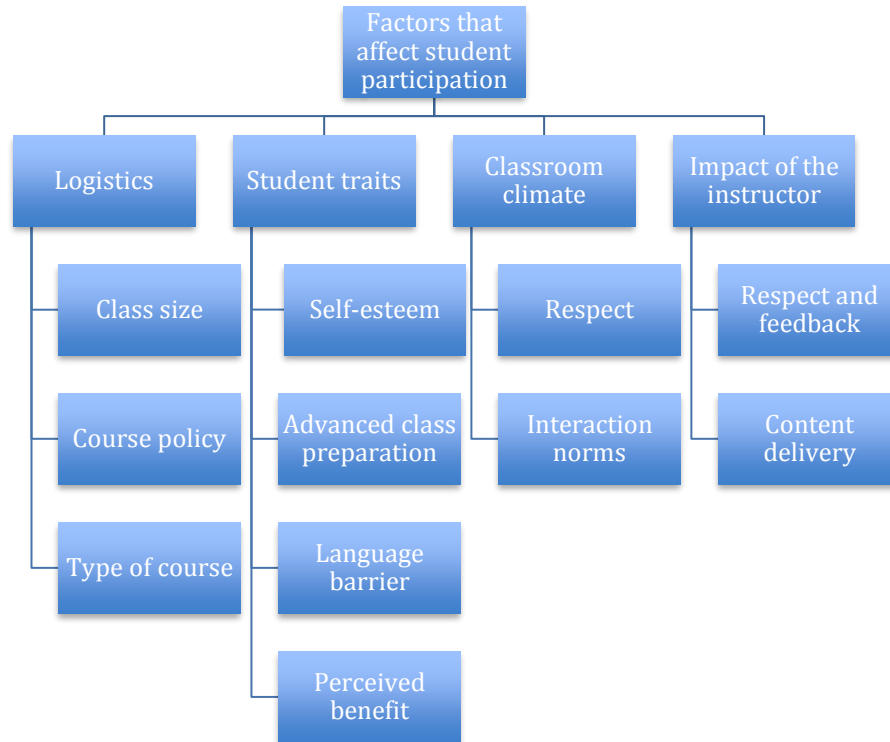
Figure 1: Data Analysis Codes and Themes

Role of the Researcher

As qualitative research is subjective by nature, Creswell (2014) indicated the importance of reflecting on oneself and the inherent biases brought to the research as this is a core characteristic of qualitative research. Keeping in line with a constructivist worldview, it is important to recognize that different people have different perspectives that arise from life experiences. My goal was to be as objective as possible while collecting, analyzing, and reviewing data from my research and minimizing my bias. By recognizing these biases, I was better able to minimize them in the research process. I am implicated heavily in my research not only as a graduate student in this program but also as an student affairs administrator. I am able to see the different perspectives of classroom pedagogy and the way classroom participation is

applied within different courses. As a Student Affairs administrator at RIT Croatia, I am committed to ensuring students gain the best possible educational experience with our institution. I am not only have a vested interest in RIT Croatia but also in learning more about the student experience with us. As a student, an important part of my ability to learn is facilitated through valuable discussions that I have experienced within the classroom. I am an extrovert and enjoy these discussions and am better able to learn and apply subject matter as a result. When I was an undergraduate student, I completed a year abroad in Vienna, Austria in the German language. This was a difficult period for me as I found it extremely difficult to express myself in a foreign language and therefore was not able to participate as actively as I would have in my native language which is why I decided to conduct this research.

What is important to note in terms of the validity and reliability of this research was that I was aware of these inherent biases prior to commencing my study and therefore took this into account from the onset especially as I selected my sample and determined my interview questions. My biases would influence my role in the research project as I believe that participation is a critical past of a students' educational experience and assists in them being able to learn concepts more effectively through active dialogue by enhancing critical thinking skills and their ability to communicate orally. I want to be transparent in noting that given that I work and study at RIT Croatia this may have influenced my interaction with students, analysis, and interpretation of the data.

Findings

The previous section described how the data was gathered and analyzed through interviews with students. In this section, the researcher describes the results of the interview data including

emerging themes that were identified in the coding process in order to respond to the research question. This section focuses on the students' perspective of participation within the classroom and will provide detailed accounts of their experiences within the classroom setting. This section will highlight the students' account of the benefits and challenges associated with classroom participation.

Course Logistics

Classroom size. Classroom size impacted the levels of participation with a classroom. Six out of ten students noted that in larger course sections, with more than thirty students, there was not a sufficient amount of time to have the opportunity to participate. Student #3 noted "too many students want to talk and there is not time for everyone to say something". Due to the volume of students wanting to participate and the length of their comments there was an insufficient amount of time available for students to participate. Six students also noted that in their courses with larger sections, there was less time allocated to discussion in general and more lecturing occurred. Student #7 indicated "It is mostly, professor talks 90% of the time, and then asks one or two questions". Furthermore, students indicated that they participated more in smaller course sections with less than thirty students, where they knew their classmates and more time was allocated to discussion. Student #2 indicated that "Professor starts class with discussion about the readings and asks examples and challenges us to see how much we know" and "I feel better when I know everyone and it feels like we are just talking so it's not formal". Student #5 further noted that "I feel more comfortable when I see the classroom has around twenty people. You can listen to everyone and there is nobody behind your back talking or distracting because the teacher sees everyone". The findings indicated that more intimate classroom sizes with less than thirty students showed a higher level of participation due to both opportunity and knowing the other students.

Course policies. Course policies including participation in the grading affected the level of participation within the classroom. All ten participants interviewed noted that they were more likely to participate if it affected their grade. Student #1 said that "if there is a big percentage of the grade that is participation, then people participate, if it is not then nobody speaks". Student #9 indicated that "I mostly participate because in many courses participation is an element of the grade and I really do not want to lose points because of this. Losing 15% of your grade can change if you will pass a class or not". If the students felt as though classroom participation directly affected their grade than they were more likely to participate in order to gain points based on the findings.

Type of course. Course content influenced the level of participation from students as they were more willing to participate if they were interested in the subject matter being delivered. Student #8 said that "Participation is higher if I find the class interesting, so for example in my marketing class, the topics are always interesting and relevant. If the class is boring and dull I won't say anything". Student #10 agreed and said that "When you look at statistics and finance courses, only a few and the same people talk each class because it is boring and dry. Teacher always has to ask for volunteers because nobody puts their hands up in these classes". Student #9 indicated that "Classes that involved discussions where you challenged opinion were the most fun. Then the majority get involved in debate. One of my professors always gives double-edged topics where people can be conservative or challenge. This makes me want to join discussion". Courses that were not related to number calculations garnered more willingness on the students' part to participate as the discussion was less dry, offered dialogue, and were of more interest to the students.

Student Traits

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was indicated by the students as a factor that affects their willingness to participate. Student #2, student #4, student #7, and student #9 all said that they would not participate if they felt as though they were going to be made fun of for their opinion or if they felt inadequate in front of the other students. Student #2 said that "sometimes I feel intimidated if I don't know the right answer, I don't want people to laugh at my ideas". Student #9 said that "sometimes it can be stressful to participate because I am not as smart as the others in certain subjects and if I am not sure of the answer, they might think that I am stupid and I don't want that so I stay quiet". Students would not want to participate if they felt that their peers or professor would deem their answer as inadequate and therefore would not want to be perceived as having inferior knowledge. Student #10 noted that "my professor is a master in his area, and when he asks my opinion, I don't always feel comfortable saying it especially when I know he might think my answer is wrong or not what he is looking for. I am worried I might lose points like this in my grade and the way he sees me". Student #4 indicated that "sometimes I think, who cares about my opinion and what I think anyways? So I just don't say anything at all". Fear of being perceived as unintelligent directly affected students' willingness to engage in classroom discussions even when asking for opinion based answers and not technical responses related to subject matter. Student #1 and Student #3 both indicated that they had high levels of confidence which would make them want to participate in all classes. Student #1 noted "when I have something to contribute and share my opinion, I feel proud and I don't want to just sit there and be quiet". Student #3 indicated "I think it is just a matter of personality, it is really who you are. Some people just like to express their opinion because they are outgoing and don't feel ashamed to do that. Others are shy and worry about consequences and what others will think of them so

they are quiet all of the time. They just don't feel comfortable". Confidence reduced the level of anxiety related to being criticized for their opinion.

Advanced class preparation. Students who prepared for class by completing readings and reviewing material being discussed were more likely to participate in class. Students noted that they felt more comfortable providing answers and opinions if they had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with course content as they were more confident in what they were talking about. Student #1 said that "for me, when I read something then I try to write my own summary and that's how I prepare for class. That makes me comfortable and I am not afraid if I'm going to say something right or wrong. Then I like to discuss because my professor can correct me". Students noted that in preparing for classroom participation, this helps them prepare for exams and is a great study mechanism which is a motivator for doing so. Student #3 said that "I don't like to memorize but if I review that day and participate in class this is very beneficial for me and I get to study less at home". Student #4 specified that "when professors give us homework with questions or readings it makes it easier to participate in class because we know what we are talking about and it helps us study better". Five out of ten students noted that advanced class preparation not only gave students more confidence in the subject matter resulting in higher participation levels but also helped them retain information.

Language barriers. Five out of the ten students indicated that with English being their second language they did not always feel comfortable expressing their thoughts. Student #2 said that "everything here is in English and sometimes I am worried about my level of English and how my thoughts will come out". Student #9 recalled that "I struggled with my English a lot and did not participate at all in my first-year because of this. It is better now but it still make me anxious and I really think about my answer. By this time somebody else already said something and I miss

my chance". Student #8 said that "my English is a bit shaky when I have to think on the spot and don't want people making fun of me so I don't talk unless I am sure of what I am saying and my words". Students described that it would take them time to formulate their thoughts so that they would feel sufficiently comfortable to share their opinions in English as they were inclined to think in Croatian. They all indicated that it was better now given that they had been in an English school for one year and they felt more comfortable expressing themselves than they did when they were freshmen.

Perceived benefits. Students that see the benefits in participation are more likely to participate in the classroom. Seven out of the ten students indicated that participation helps them study and verify their level of knowledge on the subject matter and makes their class time more interesting. Student #6 said that "I hate it when class is boring and if students participate and share opinions this makes it interesting and we build communication". Student #5 noted that "it helps with studying because I can see if I understood the subject by giving my opinion which is great. Also, when I hear others talk in class I learn other perspectives or add to the information that I already knew". During her interview, student #10 expressed that "you remember easier when you participate because you will remember the time in class that it was discussed which means you were paying attention". Hearing a range of perspectives, building their communications skills, preparing for exams, and interesting dialogue were all indicated in the interviews as benefits related to participating in class and motivated students in wanting to do so.

Classroom Climate

Respect. Students noted that respect from their peers directly influenced their willingness to participate in class. Communication apprehension increased if students felt as though their peers would criticize them for their opinions. In her interview, student #4 said that "sometimes people

act like we are in elementary school, one time I said my opinion on a topic and they just started laughing". Student #5 indicated that "I raised my hand to give my opinion and saw people rolling their eyes and one student said that I was dumb. This made me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed so I did not participate there anymore". Students felt uncomfortable when their peers would make fun of them or make negative comments on their opinions which made them not want to participate in class. Student #3 said that "generally I think people are not rude when we are participating and I like when we share different ideas and there is a real discussion that is developed. We all learn this way and gain new perspectives which is great". In my interview with student #1, she said that "people listen when I speak and don't make rude comments but will either be nice and say they agree or disagree and add their own thoughts and opinions which is why I like discussion". Students indicated that they would participate more when their peers were respectful and did not criticize them but rather added to the conversation or said nothing at all.

   Interaction norms. All students noted that they felt more comfortable participating in classroom discussions when the classroom interactions were free flowing and were not limited to only a few students speaking. Student #1 said that "I really don't like when the same people speak all the time and they dominate the class. I get annoyed and will not participate because there is no point". Student #7 indicated that "I like when we don't feel pressured to speak and have free-flowing conversations throughout the classroom especially when the topic is controversial". Student #10 said that "I like when we don't interrupt each other and can just talk openly about the topic. People really listen then and engage in the topic. You do not feel pressure to be the smart one and are not discouraged because you are having a conversation." All students noted the benefit in having an open discussion on subject matter rather than having a question-answer format of participation. The majority of the students indicated that sharing ideas and respectful dialogue by

taking turns to speak and including all students, increased the level of participation in the classroom.

Impact of the Instructor

Respect and feedback. In their interviews, the majority of students said that when they felt their professor would criticize their comments, make fun of them, or put them down they would not participate. Students indicated that this made them feel bad and lowered their confidence levels. Student #2 said that "my professor talks a lot and is constantly looking for the right answer. If you say something wrong he will roll his eyes and ask you if you even looked at the book. I never participate in his class unless he asks me directly because I do not like this". Student #5 said that "I like when my professor adds to the dialogue, it makes it more fun. People talk more and are not afraid to share their opinion because he will compliment good ideas or guide the student to the right answer by asking another question". Student #4 noted "most professors at our college are approachable which makes it less scary to talk in class. You can contradict opinions and they usually are ok with this and welcome the debate especially in our business classes". All students indicated that they participated in classes where they would get constructive feedback from their professors and were not faced with criticism but felt supported.

Content delivery. Students indicated that the manner in which the subject content was delivered affected the level of participation in the classroom. Seven out of ten students said that when the professor would relate the theory to real life examples and move to discussion they would participate. Student #2 said that "when we get case studies to discuss this is great. This is a real example and we can show how we would apply what we learned. The discussions are more fun and the professor keeps challenging you to push your thoughts". Student #9 said that "I love it when we watch TED Talks. My professor will play the video and ask us what we think and people

would share different ways of looking at things. The professor just lets us talk and ties it together at the end which is great or asks us more when we give our opinion". Student #6 indicated that "I like it when the professor gives us an example from his past experience that is related to the subject then asks us how we would solve the problem. We tell him our solutions and talk about strengths and weaknesses and then he tells us what happened in the end. It makes it interesting and not boring". Students were more willing to participate when they had the opportunity to apply their knowledge in the classroom and relate it to real-life examples.

Discussion/Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine which factors in the classroom learning environment affect student participation among sophomore undergraduate business students at RIT Croatia in Zagreb. The researcher conducted ten in-depth interviews with undergraduate sophomore business students from RIT Croatia in Zagreb and recorded each one, transcribed the results for analysis, as well as reviewed the literature related to factors that affect classroom participation. Logistics, student traits, classroom climate, and the impact of the instructor had the most significant impact on the level of participation in the classroom.

Consistent with the literature and findings of both Fassinger (1995) and Rocca (2010) and based on the interview findings, classroom logistics impacted the level of participation in the classroom. Students noted that classroom size affected their willingness to participate as smaller sections with less than thirty students provided a more intimate environment making it more comfortable for discussion. Students were more familiar with one another and would engage with more ease. Educational institutions may want to consider the benefit of smaller sections to increase student participation and allow for insightful discussion within the classroom. In addition, larger sections with over thirty students were too big to manage discussions and therefore more of a

question and answer format would ensue and professors would focus more on lecturing. Professors who have larger section sizes may want to consider using discussion time to break the students up into smaller groups to allow for intimate discussion and act as a facilitator versus focusing on lecturing.

Participation as a component of the students' grade impacted heavily on the level of participation within the classroom as was confirmed by the literature (Fassinger, 2000). Students would participate more in classes where they knew it would affect their final grade and was indicated in the course policy. Professors may want to consider incorporating participation into their course policies as a part of their grading scheme or as a form of extra-credit which is recommended by Boniecki and Moore (2003) in an effort to stimulate participation. If participation is incorporated as a component of their final grade students will be more inclined to be insightful and participate during their classes. Participation rules should be clearly defined and understood by students and can take many forms. Seven out of ten students further noted that they were more willing to participate in courses that were not related to math or finances. As these courses may not be conducive to discussion-based participation, professors may want to consider breaking the class into small groups to work on small assignments or provide math challenges to solve on the board so that the class can discuss and assist with solving problems.

Student traits revealed to be the most significant indicator of participation as the majority of interviewees raised this as an issue in their responses. Fassinger (1995) noted that advanced classroom preparation as well as a student's level of confidence would determine their willingness to participate within the classroom, which was consistent with the students' responses in the interview. Students noted that self-esteem played a major role in their willingness to participate and contribute to classroom discussion. Students would be more willing to engage in discussion if

they did not feel that their peers or professor would ridicule them or if they had something intelligent to contribute. Professors should ensure that the classroom is perceived as a supportive environment for students by not allowing for disrespectful exchanges and encouraging different opinions. In addition, advanced class preparation was important to building student confidence in the subject matter and therefore making them more inclined to participate when in the classroom. This is consistent with the literature including Weaver and Qi's (2005) findings indicating that students would participate if they had something important to say and if they prepared in advance. Professors can assist students in preparing by providing readings to complete in advance as well as discussion questions they can prepare prior to arriving to class. This allows them to build ideas and familiarize themselves with the content thus building their confidence in the subject matter and helping them retain information.

Half of the students interviewed indicated that the fact that English was not their first language impacted their willingness to participate as this made them feel uncomfortable. This is consistent with studies done by Kao and Gansneder (1995) and Tatar (2005) which indicated that participation is related to a students' confidence and therefore if they do not feel confident in their language abilities they are more unwilling to participate thus reducing overall participation levels. Institutions with ESL students should look at offering English tutoring or English conversational tutoring to their students in order to build their confidence in discussion through practice. In their interviews, seven out of ten students noted that due to the benefits of classroom discussion, they were more willing to participate in class in order to help them study and make the class time more interesting.

Classroom climate was an important factor in determining the level of participation in the classroom. When students felt supported, respected, and were not criticized by their peers they

were more inclined to participate in the classroom. They also noted that they felt more comfortable in engaging in free-flowing dialogue that would build from one comment to the next and was respectful in nature. This is consistent with the literature and the findings of Fassinger (1995) and Rocca (2010).

Finally, the professor is also a critical factor that affects the level of participation within the classroom. The majority of students indicated that they are more inclined to participate in the classroom when they know their professor is supportive, open to ideas, and will not criticize them. Rocca (2009) indicated that when professors make negative comments towards students this can lower participation levels and Fassinger (2000) indicated that students were more inclined to participate if the professor was approachable. Professors should aim to ensure that the classroom environment is on that commands respect by all participants and in their dialogue with one another. Professors need to ensure that dialogue is managed in a way that facilitates open discussion among peers and supports the importance of differing perspectives. The feedback they provide students is critical in ensuring they have properly understood concepts, can retain information, and therefore should be constructive and not seen as a form of criticism so as not to damage confidence. Furthermore, students noted that the way the professor delivered classroom content affected their willingness to participate as they would be more engaged in classes where the theory was related back to real-life situations, which would give them an opportunity to apply their knowledge.

Student participation is a critical part of their development as an active learning environment stimulates the ability to think critically (Crone, 1997). Through the student interviews that were conducted, it was clear that as a result of participating in the classroom they felt they were better prepared for examinations and had a better grasp of concepts as participation would assist in clarifying their knowledge. Participation also developed their confidence by being able to

express opinions and interacting with their peers. Educational institutions should consider focusing on the importance of these benefits and implement mechanisms for their students to capitalize on them. This will allow them to develop their students for their career paths, ensure knowledge is being appropriately transmitted and understood, as well as build student confidence through communication. Ultimately, it will provide students with a well-rounded educational experience that will lead them into future success.

The purpose of this study was to examine which factors in the classroom learning environment affect student participation among sophomore undergraduate business students at RIT Croatia in Zagreb. The researcher was able to outline specific areas that highlight the benefits and challenges associated with classroom participation with students who are studying in higher education in their second language. Given that most studies conducted thus far on classroom participation are quantitative in nature, we were able to gain detailed accounts of students' perception of classroom participation. This study also highlights detailed information on how students view participation within the classroom as they live through their own experiences. Furthermore, while previous studies were more focused on implicit and explicit interaction norms within the classroom, this study highlighted the importance of discussion content in stimulating the levels of participation within the classroom. This is important given that educational institutions are continuously looking to attract and retain high-quality students and help them achieve positive learning outcomes and prepare them for the real world. By understanding the student perspective on participation, higher educational institutions are better able to structure their courses in a way that will increase participation levels and engage students in discussions thus contributing to their learning outcomes and development.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study included the sample not being sufficiently diverse. If the sample was more diverse and included multiple schools it could have resulted in the findings being more applicable to a broader group of students. Participant honesty and interest in participating were also limitations as some students did not always feel comfortable enough to provide detailed feedback that involved their professors as well as other students in their classroom or they simply were not interested in the study therefore unwilling to provide detailed accounts of how they view classroom participation. Finally, the study focused solely on the student perspective and leaves opportunity for further research to incorporate the educator's perspective and gain a more complete understanding of how participation unfolds within the classroom.

The above mentioned limitations provide an opportunity for future studies in other institutions and countries as well as further development of the existing study at hand. It would be beneficial to incorporate the professor's perspective in order to have a more comprehensive study in the future, which can provide both viewpoints and a more complete picture of the factors that affect classroom participation. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to include a component of classroom observation in order to better understand the classroom dynamics and have a first-hand account of classroom participation by means of observation.

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Appendix A

Interview Questionnaire

1. Describe what classroom participation looks like in your classroom?

   Possible follow up questions include:

   a. What kind of discussions are they?

   b. Is it respectful dialogue?

   c. How much time is spent on discussion?

   d. How do students get chosen to speak?

   e. How often do you participate if not called on?

2. What do you think influences the degree to which a student participates in class?

3. Do you think it is important to participate in class? Why or why not?

   Possible follow up questions include:

   a. What are the benefits?

4. Tell me about a time when you were asked to participate in class and you wanted to.

   Possible follow up questions include:

   a. What did that feel like?

   b. What did you do?

   c. What did you say?

5. Tell me about a time when you were asked to participate in class and you didn't want to

    Possible follow up questions include:

    a. What did that feel like?

    b. What did you do?

    c. What did you say?

6. What makes you feel most comfortable when participating in classroom discussion?

    Describe.

7. What do you think would encourage students to participate more in class?