

論文

Teaching Online: A Look at Student Participation

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1. Introduction

Participation by students in tasks and activities is an important element of lessons in a traditional classroom environment. Evidence of participation can come in the form of interaction with the teacher and classmates as the content of a course is explored. It can also include the completion of in-class and homework assignments.

Participation can be especially important when learning a second language. One of the objectives of lessons in many second language classrooms is to give students opportunities to generate output in the target language. As a result, there is a certain amount of pressure from peers and the teacher to make a contribution to this end.

What can be expected of participation in an online classroom? There was an opportunity to find out more about this by investigating the work of students in an EFL (English-as-a-foreign language) writing class at a university in Japan. The study will focus on the questions that follow.

2. Research questions

What were some of the participation outcomes for the online course?

What are concerns and suggestions with regard to participation in an online classroom?

3. Review of the literature

The literature suggests that there are several variables that can have an effect on participation in an online environment. The review that follows is a sampling of the research that has been written about the subject of participation in teaching and learning online.

Participation may depend upon who is enrolled in an online class. Wisan, Roy, and Pscherer (2001) used gender, ethnicity, and age data of students in face-to-face, online, and combination face-to-face and online classes to come to conclusions about participation based on ethnicity.

Davidson-Shivers and Morris (2001) did a study to determine if gender had an effect on participation. They write that the "... type of group — mixed — or same — gender — may make a difference in the types and amounts of communications between and within gender" (p. 99). They also write that "... the effect of instructor presence, gender, and teaching styles may make a difference on the gender equity in discussions with participating students" (p. 99).

Personal characteristics could have an effect on participation. In describing the common characteristics of successful online students, Valasek (2001) writes that they "... develop realistic expectations about how much time online learning will demand" (p. 11), "... keep pace with course work and assignments, logging in regularly and frequently" (p. 11), and "... participate actively in online discussions" (p. 12).

Some of the research literature has focused on the need to prepare students for participation in an online classroom. Sevastopoulos and Bruni (2002) write that "students who are prepared to communicate, exchange files and collaborate online, have better chances of succeeding

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in courses that use Web-assisted learning” (p. 1). Klemm (2000), who believes that collaboration and constructivist practices are a way to correct the problems of on-line discussion, writes:

Participants don't realize the purpose. If a discussion does not have obvious goals and requirements, participants tend to think of it as a virtual lounge. Depending on their need for socialization, they may or may not participate extensively. (p. 336)

There is a need to determine which tasks and activities will be successful online. About the problems that can be found in some online programs being used now, Brinsmead, Lang, and McTavish (1999) write:

The following are types of required assignments and learning activities that have been known to fail with adult learners: required team chats, team projects & team assignments via email attachments. In addition, first generation online courses are often packed with too many assignments ... in comparison to the equivalent in-class program. (p. 5)

Instructors should be prepared to encourage students to participate. Valasek (2001) recommends that they “... develop a “sense of community” in online classes” (p. 13), “... monitor student progress closely and make timely efforts to contact those who fall behind, using private email messages or telephone calls” (p. 13), and “... arrange informal face-to-face meetings with students, if possible, either individually or as a group” (p. 13).

As seen in the literature, there are many factors that can affect participation online. This report is an effort to add to the research on online teaching and learning in general and participation in particular.

4. The study

The setting for the study is described under the following headings:

- (a) Description of the students and the setting
- (b) Description of the coursework
- (c) Description of equipment
- (d) Data collection

Description of the students and the setting

The participants in this study are first-year students at a private medical university in Japan. There were a few students who had not entered the university immediately after graduating from high school, but the exact numbers are not known. The level of English ability of the students is not known, but it is assumed to be typical of those entering their first year at a Japanese university.

This English-as-a-foreign language course is required for all first-year students. It is a one year course, in a trimester system. Each term is eight weeks in length.

The class work for the first two terms was concerned with English for oral communication, and the third term, writing in English. The study is concerned with the work produced in the third term.

There were a total of 100 students divided into four classes. The following provides a general description of the students in each of the classes:

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	<u>male</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>female</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>total</u>
Class "A"	16	64	9	36	25
Class "B"	15	58	11	42	26
Class "C"	19	79	5	21	24
Class "D"	14	56	11	44	25
Totals	64	64	36	36	100

Class "A" was scheduled for 1:00–2:30, and Class "B" was scheduled for 2:40–4:10, both on Mondays.

Class "C" was scheduled for 1:00–2:30, and Class "D" was scheduled for 2:40–4:10, both on Fridays.

Description of the coursework

The course functioned as an online only class. Although a strictly defined online class would not require class attendance, the students were not explicitly told that attendance at the scheduled time was not required.

Class content was available on an Internet-based course management site called Blackboard (1997). All of the information needed to complete assignments were posted on the Blackboard site. The lectures and classroom activities typically found in a traditional classroom setting were not used.

Each student was given a personal username and password to access the course management site. With these, they were able to access the site at a time of their choosing.

For each class, students were asked to complete one, two, or three in-class writing assignments. They were also given homework assignments in which they were asked to write from a picture prompt

posted on the course management site.

For in-class and homework assignments, the objective was to give students an opportunity to express ideas in writing in quantity. To help them to do this, they were given a choice of assignments and various prompts. Correction of mistakes in grammar was not of primary concern in this course. The reasons for using this approach were as follows:

- (a) The students may not have had an opportunity to use English to express ideas of their own when they studied English in junior and senior high schools. It was assumed that prior experiences with writing in English were through exercises that required copying of English text or translation from Japanese to English, with an emphasis on grammar correction. For the online class it was thought to be more important that students be given a chance to use the language for expression of ideas. To emphasize this, student assignments were returned with comments by the teacher about ideas presented, and not about form or grammar.

- (b) The teacher would have liked to introduce the concept of writing as a process but because of the preceding point (a), it was thought that this was best left for another course.

- (c) Since this was only an eight-week course, the term was considered to be too short to present the concept of writing as a process. The elements of a process writing syllabus, which include steps such as getting an idea, making notes, organizing, writing a draft, editing, rewriting, checking for grammar,

spelling, and form, then rewriting again, could have been introduced, but it was thought that the elements could not be covered adequately.

Another reason was that students are used to the idea of producing an answer (a perfect written product), so it would have been an even more difficult concept for them to understand given the time constraints of the course.

In addition, one of the elements, checking for grammar, spelling, and form, would bring the focus back to grammar, something which the teacher hoped to avoid.

Another element, rewriting, would have created a potentially boring situation of having to work on only one topic, which the teacher hoped to have the students avoid at this stage in their experience as writers.

- (d) The teacher wanted the students to have the opportunity to engage in “authentic” communication. The asynchronous Discussion Board task was included in order to allow students a chance to do this.

- (e) The students in the course were studying to become doctors. Although most probably knew that having English skills could be of benefit to them in their future professional lives, it was probably of secondary concern to them at this time in their academic lives. In order to add relevance to the course, some

of the writing assignments were related to the concerns of being a doctor. Writing prompts such as photos of natural disasters or emergencies, stories about diet and health, and a health quiz were used.

In addition, topics that the teacher felt would be of interest to them were also available as choices, for example, links to movie previews.

- (f) There were 100 students enrolled in the course. This was too many students for one teacher to handle. Although peer correction and other tasks could have been included in the design of the course to deal with this, it was thought to be unrealistic to implement such tasks given time and English ability constraints. As a practical matter, it was simpler to focus on giving the students a chance to present ideas and for the teacher to comment on them.

Students were asked to post messages to the site “Discussion Board”, an area on the course management site where students could communicate asynchronously with each other and the teacher. New questions were posted periodically by the teacher. The students were required to make at least three postings per week to the Discussion Board, either a direct answer to the questions posted, or as a reply to other students.

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Description of equipment

There were two computer labs available for students to use at the university. There were enough computers so that students could use computers individually.

Most of the computers were configured to the Windows operating system, Japanese version, and were connected to the Internet. They were also connected to a centrally located bank of printers. The students were allowed to print copies as necessary and without charge.

There usually was a computer technician available to handle technical problems or questions. As a result, problems that students and the teacher encountered were usually handled quickly and efficiently by the technician.

Data collection

Student assignments (in-class, homework, and Discussion Board) are a source of data. Information regarding the number of assignments submitted by each student was compiled. Student comments thought to be relevant to the study were extracted from assignments and reported as data.

Excerpts from journal entries, which are observations and recollections written during the course by the teacher/researcher, are also used as data for the study.

The selection of student comments from student reports, the Discussion Board and the teacher/researcher journal are subjective and therefore subject to a variety of interpretations. As a result, the research data presented here is qualitative in nature, and not subjected to quantitative measures of validity and reliability.

5. Analysis

Procedures

Assignments that were submitted by each student were collected and counted. This includes “in-class” and “homework” assignments. The data was compiled into four tables.

Individual student contributions to the Discussion Board were counted and the data compiled into three tables. Repeat comments made by the same student in consecutive messages were not counted as a contribution to the Discussion Board quantities. They were considered to be computer operation errors.

Student assignments and teacher journal entries were analyzed for comments relevant to the study. Excerpts from these sources are listed as data.

Findings

Table 1 Student completion rate of in-class assignments by class

% completion	22	28	33	38	39	44	50	56	61	63	67	69	72	75	78	81	83	88	89	94	100	Totals	
# of students-Class A				1	2	3	5		2		3		2		1		1			2	3	25	
# of students-Class B						3	1					4		3		4		7			3	1	26
# of students-Class C	2	1	1		2	1		4	2		3		2		2					1	1	2	24
# of students-Class D	1		1		2	2	2	6	4				1		1		3			1		1	25
Total # of students	3	1	2	1	4	5	8	16	6	2	3	7	3	5	3	5	3	8	2	6	7	100	

According to the data in Table 1, 84 out of 100 students submitted 50% or more of the required in-class assignments. Thirty-nine of the students submitted 75% or more of the assignments, and 15 submitted 89% or more.

Table 2 Completion rate of in-class assignments per class

Class	A	B	C	D	Total
# of assignments due	400	416	432	450	1698
# of assignments completed	271	324	262	268	1125
% of assignments completed	68	78	61	60	66

According to the data shown in Table 2, the highest completion rate of in-class assignments was 78%, by Class B. The next highest was 68%, by Class A. The overall in-class assignment completion rate was 66%.

Table 3 Student completion rate of homework assignments per class

% completion	0	13	25	38	50	63	75	88	100	Total
# of students-Class A	2	4	2	6	2	2	3	2	2	25
# of students-Class B	5	5	1	2	3	2	7	1		26
# of students-Class C	2	2	3	6	4	6	1			24
# of students-Class D	7	4	4	2	1	3	2	2		25
Total # of students	16	15	10	16	10	13	13	5	2	100

The data in Table 3 reveals that 43 students submitted 50% or more of the assignments, 20 submitted 75% or more, and 7 students submitted 88% or more.

Table 4 Completion rate for homework per class-year

Class	A	B	C	D	Total
# of assignments due	200	208	192	200	800
# of assignments completed	92	84	78	63	317
% of assignments completed	46	40	41	32	40

Table 4 shows that the highest completion rate of homework assignments was 46%, by Class A. The next highest was 41%, by

Class C. The overall completion rate of homework assignments was 40%.

Table 5 Number of Discussion Board Contributions per Class

	# of students	# of contributions	Average per student	Average per student per week
Class A	25	648	26	3.25
Class B	26	656	25	3.125
Class C	24	500	21	2.625
Class D	25	643	26	3.25
Totals	100	2447	24	3.0

Table 5 shows that the greatest number of contributions to the Discussion Board was 656, by Class B. There were 648 by Class A and 643 by Class D. In comparison, there were 500 contributions by Class C.

The overall average per student per week was 3.0 contributions, matching the requirement for the course.

Table 6 Range and Median for Discussion Board Contributions per Class

	Range	Median
Class A	4–44	27
Class B	1–52	26
Class C	3–44	23
Class D	9–49	27
All Classes	1–52	26

Table 6 shows the range and median for Discussion Board contributions per class.

The greatest number of contributions was 52, and the least number was 1. The overall median was 26.

Table 7 Discussion Board contributions per assignment

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	Total											
Class A	177	122	43	27	124	94	7	3	32	19	648											
Class B	152	81	33	57	121	78	3	56	36	39	656											
Class C	70	92	57	15	66	64	2	58	28	48	500											
Class D	63	155	94	19	124	70	4	59	32	23	643											
Total	462	19*	450	18*	227	9*	118	5*	435	18*	306	12*	16	1*	176	7*	128	5*	129	5*	2447	99*

Discussion Board Topics:

- (1) Write a self-introduction (- 11/24/02)
- (2) What did you do yesterday? (1st set posted 11/18 - 12/3/02)
- (3) What did you do yesterday? (2nd set posted until 1/14/03)
- (4) What is your favorite place at the university? (posted 11/18 - 12/3/02)
- (5) What would you like to do during summer vacation? (posted 12/1 - 12/10/02)
- (6) What is the best club activity at the university? (posted - 12/19/02)
- (7) Class cancellation (posted 12/9 - 12/19/02)
- (8) Merry Christmas and Happy New Year
- (9) What have you accomplished in your first year at university?
- (10) What are your goals for this year? (posted - 1/14/03)

Table 7 shows the number and percentages of the total contributions that came from each assignment per class.

The data indicates that assignments #2 and #3 combined, #1, #5, and #6, in that order, attracted the most contributions. Assignment #7 drew the least amount of contributions at 1%.

Excerpts from Discussion Board entries

The following are Discussion Board entries written by three students. They are reported as written, without correction of grammar or spelling.

Two of the entries (November 27) are in regards to an open meeting between students and faculty to discuss the operations at the university.

The third entry (November 25) is about one student's preparation for participation in a traditional Japanese ceremony that celebrates a person's twentieth birthday.

1. November 27

TM: I attended the School Discussion about lesson. It was interesting. I thought we must take our opinion. Only a few number of students said students' opinion. But I was glad to here creative opinions from teacher.

This was followed by 5 replies.

2. November 27

YH: Yesterday, after class we had a devate. The theme of the dabate was how to make our university a better one. The number of the participants was about three hundred or more. The number of teachers was about one hundred. I had interested in the topic of a state examination, which is the license to practice medicine. In the debate, I felt the teachers in this univercity are in cooperation with us students.

There were 5 replies to this.

3. November 25

MI: I went home for preparing for coming-of-age day. I chose accessories to put on my hair and scale my hight to make Kimono length to be just the size. It was fun. I think the cultural event is good time to feel ourselves as Japanese! Especially, for girls wearing Kimono is such a exciting thing!

This was followed by 2 replies.

Comments by students about participation in the course

The last classes of the year were not held in the computer room because of a scheduling conflict with another class. The students therefore met in a traditional classroom setting, and were given the assignment of writing on a topic of their choice, in class, using the traditional pen and paper. Twenty students made comments related to the English course. Eight of the 20 students made comments that were considered to be relevant to this report and used as data. The following are excerpts from the reports and are presented as written, without correction of grammar or spelling. Student initials have been changed.

1. Comments made by BL

In this class, we studied easy and basic but important English. Only this class keep my knowledge of English. And English using computer is my first experience. This will my good.

Researcher comment: The student had a new experience of using computers for English study.

2. Comments made by PI

I studied English communication through this year. I could not speak English well. And I could not write English well. Now, I can speak English a little, and I can write English a little. In Japan, we have been taught English grammer in junior school and high school. But we have not been taught speaking English and writing English. In this class, I was very happy and enjoyed to study English communication. Because it was a

first time that I talk with foreigners. In April, I was very nervous in class, but now, I get used to speak and write English.

Researcher comment: The student had a chance to use English for communication, rather than for study of grammar.

3. Comments made by BZ

I had first “English communication class” in last April. And, third term, the “English communication class” change to “English written class”. Then, I was surprised and confused. Because, I forgot english grammer, word and writing. At first, work of writing english sentence was very difficult. And I was annoyed by work of typing. But, this class was funny. Because, I learn a little way of English conversation, writing english sentences, and a little english specialization.

Researcher comment: The student had to deal with a variety of issues, not only the study of English.

4. Comments made by ST

I think now that English composition capability was markedly alike and improved by the lesson of English communication of a term. Although it was serious that I made both a subject and homework finish it as a lesson at each time, when it got used, the English composition became pleasant for me. If English power was extended in this way only by one lesson

every week, I thought that I could touch more English from now on. Since I like a movie, I think that I will read the original of the movie that is popular in foreign countries as much as possible. I think that I will do my best so that I can read it more.

Researcher comment: The student had to decide on a subject and finish writing about it for every lesson. The student got used to it and writing in English became “pleasant”. The student also seemed to be feel that the movie prompts were interesting, and thinking of doing more with them in the future.

5. Comments made by ML

This year, in this school, I never enjoy at study. It's simple and easy reason, “I hate work”. So, I often escape or truant from classes. I always feel weariness from studying. Of cause, this English class are differ from it. I like this class and I miss this English class have been finished today.

At any rate, I know by myself that I must be change. If everyone escape from that something he don't want to do, this society have been into a panic. So, I need to be strictly to myself.

Why I wrote these things and why I feel so, in this English writing class, we have a chance to read a sentence and we get a time to think about it. At those time, I notice how I

am silly.

For me, this class are very useful by all mean. I want use these things, what I can learn in this class, in my school life and life in future.

Researcher comment: The course content was a chance for reflection and introspection.

6. Comments made by RT

I entered this school one year ago. It is thanks to this class that I enable to make friends. I have passed good time in this class. The third term's class is good for me. Because I could have oppotunities to consider a lot of things. I was fogetting how I become a doctor. This class gave oppotunities to remember it.

Researcher comment: The format of the class allowed the student to make friends. The content was a chance for reflection and introspection.

7. Comments made by UY

I bought a computer in November last year. I have use that to make documents, get information from the internet and play games. At first, it was too difficult for me to type the keyboard. But As more time when I tiped it, I typed it smoothly without looking for keys. So I could do blindtouch. I think that most of the people who don't like to use computer

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keyboard can't type keyboard smoothly because typing with looking at both the keyboard and display gets them tired.

Researcher comment: The student seems to have developed pride in newly developed touch-typing skills.

8. Comments made by KM

To speak English is very difficult for me. To write English is very difficult for me, too. So, my English sentences have many mistakes. You have ever read my childish sentences, thank you. Today this writing class is finished. The days which I don't write English sentences come again. But I think it is very bad.

Researcher comment: The student appreciated the teacher's efforts to read the English that was written.

Teacher journal entries about participation

The following are excerpts from entries made by the teacher/researcher during the course. The comments are reported without correction of grammar.

1. November 18

The students knew how to create and save an MS Word file, although some had difficulty finding it once it was saved.

Researcher comment: Lack of computer skills become a time factor.

2. November 29

All people really thinking about their English and how to put their thoughts into words. You can also see the characters of the students –some are procrastinators, some plunge in, some move very carefully, others are impatient; some are very good typists, others are slow to type; in this type of classroom there are a lot of different variables affecting the language produced – and all more obvious than in a regular classroom.

It is now 2:20, and for this class, they are still concentrating on completing their work. It is unbelievable to me that no one has fallen asleep yet! Such great, independent effort!

Researcher comment: At the beginning of the term, it was relatively easy to keep the students motivated, as they learned the system.

3. November 29 (2nd class)

Whereas some in the other class were concerned about the length of the story to read, the students in this class did not express any strong feelings about it.

Researcher comment: Some students chose to read the story attached to the photograph before beginning to write. Others chose to just write from the photograph.

4. December 2 (1st class)

They are helping each other understand the stories.

Researcher comment: Students were always helping each other as they worked in English. They also helped each other with computer-related problems.

5. December 2 (2nd class)

Most are hard at work. The files keep popping into the Digital Drop Box. Most of the files are right at the 100 word mark. Is that all there is?

Researcher comment: Word minimums can have a negative effect on participation.

6. December 13

One student was trying the “health quiz”. He had a question about one of the questions (What does “4 or 5 smaller meals” mean?). From this example, I would say that students can get reading practice, and they also can get a chance to interact with the teacher 1-on-1 on a meaningful subject, for authentic communication.

Researcher comment: The student initiated the interaction generated by the prompt used for a writing theme.

7. December 16

Students have more choices —for example, with the S. Claus quiz, some tried the quiz then wrote about it or Christmas, while others chose to skip the quiz (maybe too difficult reading) and just wrote about Christmas. The same thing happened with the health quiz.

Researcher comment: The students had a choice to write on a general theme (Christmas) by choosing either the theme prompt or the quiz prompt.

6. Discussion and implications

The data suggests that this was not a particularly successful course with respect to participation, when measured by the number of assignments submitted. When students attend class in a traditional classroom, the teacher will usually be able to collect some work from each one of the students. This is more difficult to do online, where students submit assignments to an electronic mailbox. In this online classroom there was a low 66% completion rate of in-class assignments and an even lower completion 40% rate for homework assignments.

In spite of the low completion rates, the students could have been making a good effort to do the assigned work. The data “Comments by

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students about participation in the course”, comments #1-#4, and #7, and “Teacher journal entries about participation”, entry #1-#4, and #7, are indications that students had to make some adjustments as to how they approached the study of English in this unfamiliar learning environment.

The student comments and teacher journal entries suggest that the act of writing becomes more complicated when adding in the factors of a computer, the Internet, a web course site, and a word processing program. Students would probably have had to do the following in order to complete an assignment:

- (a) Connect to the Blackboard course management site
- (b) Select the appropriate category from the site menu
- (c) Look at the choices for assignments
- (d) Enter the url address or click on the link to view information related to the choices on the Internet
- (e) Read the information related to the choices
- (f) Select one of the choices
- (g) Write

The procedure used during writing would include composing thoughts and ideas, putting them into English, typing, saving the information being typed to the computer, and sending and/or printing the completed assignment.

- (h) Repeat the procedure for other required assignments

In addition to this, when using a computer there is a “wait time” while the request is processed and a search is made for the information. There are also times when the computer fails to process the request

because of human error or technical problems. Considering the number of steps it takes to complete an assignment, there may not have been enough time to do them all.

In the data “Comments by students about participation in the course”, comments #5 and #6 are indications that the topics used for online assignments can have a motivating effect. In this case, two students felt that they had a chance to reflect on their goals in life while participating in the course.

There could simply have been too many assignments. There were both in-class and homework assignments as part of the syllabus. These types of assignments could be considered remnants of a traditional classroom-based course and may not have been appropriate for use in this online course. The use of both may have been an effort by the teacher to give the appearance that the academic standards of a traditional classroom-based course were being maintained.

The data “Comments by students about participation in the course”, comment #8, and “Teacher journal entries about participation”, entry #10, are indications that the teacher has a role to play in encouraging participation, either directly or indirectly. The teacher will have to make a determination as to when and how to become involved in the proceedings of the online classroom.

Each student was required to submit three messages to the Discussion Board per week. Overall, the average number of entries to the Discussion Board per student was 3, which matched the requirement exactly. [The data “Teacher journal entries about participation”, entry #5, is an indication that minimum requirements should be set with care.] Three of the four classes were above the requirement, while the third class was below it. The highest number of contributions was 52,

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which over an eight-week period averages to 6.5 per week. It was hoped that there would be more participation on the Discussion Board by each student. Although the site always seemed to be alive with active participation, it was just an illusion created by the fact that there were four classes of students posting to the same Discussion Board.

Most of the questions used on the Discussion Board were kept simple in order to generate interaction and communication between students rather than encourage serious discussion of issues or events. As a result, they may have lacked substance. In the end, the most successful topic was the one that asked the students to write about their daily activities. This was probably the easiest to write about, and could have had more immediate relevance than the other questions.

One student's attempt to start up a dialog about a traditional event celebrated by many of the first year students resulted in only two replies (see "Excerpts for Discussion Board entries" #3). It was surprising that this topic, seemingly relevant and important to students, produced only two replies. This would seem to indicate that even the simpler topics do not always generate interest.

There were three questions posted on the Discussion Board that did not generate the quantity of responses that the simpler ones did. These questions (What is your favorite place at the university? What have you accomplished in your first year at university? What are your goals for this year?) may have been too personal to encourage discussion. Because of the nature of the responses, it was probably difficult for students to reply to a posting.

Although the three questions mentioned in the previous paragraph were not successful in generating a significant amount of participation, there is an indication that students could be willing to comment on

topics of substance. There were two students who contributed entries about a subject that could be considered “serious” (see “Excerpts from Discussion Board entries” #1 and #2). These conversation start-ups each received five replies.

There is anonymity when communicating from behind a computer screen, but this does not necessarily mean that there will automatically be more participation. The following factors could make participation even more difficult.

- (a) Some students may be reluctant to participate knowing that their messages will be viewed by many more than a classroom of students.
- (b) There is no immediate paralinguistic feedback, which may feed insecurities about the validity or type of reception that their messages are receiving.
- (c) If there is no reaction to their comments in the form of a return reply, this could affect motivation and self-esteem, resulting in students becoming even more reluctant to make any further attempts to communicate.

Although the online class in the study used a course management site and sources of information found on the Internet, the method and syllabus used had the qualities of a traditional classroom-based course. Assignment topics were prepared in advance by the teacher. The assignments were to be submitted to the teacher. Students had some freedom to interact on the Discussion Board, but topics were selected by the teacher.

The discussion suggests that participation in an online course is not

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something that happens automatically. The following are concerns and suggestions with regard to participation in an online classroom.

(a) Revise and review course and syllabus design

There is a wealth of resources available for use with computers and the Internet. There are also opportunities for interaction different from those encountered in a traditional classroom. A course design that takes advantage of these unique qualities would feature student participation as an essential element.

When developing the syllabus for an online course, those new to online teaching will have to resist the temptation to use every interesting source of information that they come into contact with on the Internet.

To maintain the perception that the online course is as academically challenging as a traditional classroom-based course, the online teacher may overload the students with assignments.

Using a computer and the Internet to do assignments could take more time, not less. When deciding on the quantity and type of tasks, consider the amount of time each task will take.

The online syllabus designer should think carefully before establishing minimum participation requirements. They could become a limiting factor with respect to student participation.

The teacher may want to give some thought as to the type of presence he or she will maintain in the online classroom.

(b) Set-up class management procedures

Depending on the course design, it could be more difficult for the teacher to gauge the extent and quality of participation by each student. Some thought should be given as to how student participation will be tracked and assessed.

(c) Support the students

Working online, though convenient, can be difficult for students. It is important for the teacher to have in place a system to provide continuous support and encouragement.

Students should be made aware that the teacher is available to give support and assistance. This would mean establishing a system that would allow the teacher and students to exchange information as the course progresses.

7. Conclusions

In a traditional classroom setting, students are encouraged to participate by acting upon the cues provided by the lesson format and content, their peers, and the teacher. The paralinguistic as well as direct or indirect verbal or written messages that are constantly being produced during a lesson serve as the impetus for making a contribution.

With limited access to the face-to-face factors that help to promote

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the interaction found in a traditional classroom, the online teacher must give more thought as to how to generate, maintain, and encourage participation. This would include careful consideration of course and syllabus design and class management procedures.

Online students are faced with the task of working within the unique confines of a virtual classroom. They must have the self-discipline necessary to keep up with the required work and be prepared to deal not only with lesson content but also with any computer-related technical problems that may arise. To encourage continued participation, teachers should give careful consideration to when and how support will be provided.

The matter of participation is in many ways more difficult in an online classroom. Both teacher and students are faced with new challenges to overcome in order to maintain the participation standards that are usually present in a rich learning environment.

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