

Making Room: Improving Students' Opportunities for Participation

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ABSTRACT

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I. Introduction

Active participation in the classroom is known to be a powerful tool to increase the motivation of students, help them develop important skills, such as critical thinking, and overall improve their learning outcomes (Rocca 2010). Thus, it is beneficial for universities and teachers to work to ensure the active participation of their students, in order to reap these benefits. However, this is no simple task – generally, students tend to behave according to the social norms of the classroom in order to fit in (Bager & Herrmann 2013). This means that participation is shaped by the dynamics and expectations of the classroom, created by both students and teachers. Participation can vary from student to student depending on how well they are able to interpret and adapt to these norms and expectations – usually the students who are best able to participate comes from more privileged backgrounds (Thomsen 2022). For example, students from homes with well-educated parents and with a higher social class tend to be better able to adapt to social norms and expectations of the classroom, because they are already familiar with the dynamics of the educational system (Ladson-Billings 1995). In contrast, students from less privileged backgrounds can experience more difficulties during their university studies (Herbaut 2020; Thomsen 2022). Therefore, the aim of this inquiry is to explore how social norms in the classroom shapes opportunities for participation for students, and how this knowledge can help to develop a pedagogical practice, that improves the overall participation for as many students as possible, leading to better learning outcomes.

II. Key Theoretical Concepts

Central to this inquiry are the concepts of *sense of belonging* (Halse 2018; Tinto 2017) and *position* (Maher & Tetreault 2001). They provide a framework for understanding how students experience being at a university and what influences their behaviour in the classroom.

Sense of belonging describes the integration of a student in to the daily life of their study programmes and the university in general (Halse 2018; Tinto 2017). It concerns both the social ties a student has, such as friendships or study-groups, and the student's attachment, such as their interest and motivation, to their specific field of study. Secondly, the concept of *position* considers implications of the social position a student has in the classroom (Maher & Tetreault 2001). It describes how students are placed in a hierarchy in the classroom based on their background, such as gender, ethnicity, social class and more, and how these positions come with better or worse opportunities for participation (Maher & Tetreault 2001). Another central concept is of course *participation*, which is here defined as active partaking in classroom activities, such as discussions, group work, presentations and so on (Biesta 2016). Because this inquiry aims at creating opportunities for participation for as many students as possible, a democratic model for participation is used – this underlines the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion within the classroom (Biesta 2016).

III. Research Set-up

This inquiry was designed to uncover the dynamics in the university classroom, and how students are able to participate and interact with their peers and teachers. Therefore, two different methods were combined, ethnological observations and research interviews, to gain insight in to both the classroom dynamics and how students experience and navigate these (Lamont & Swidler 2014). The observations were carried out during regular teaching sessions and focused on the different ways students are invited to participate in classroom activities by both teachers and other students, and how these interactions shape participation. The

interviews were carried out after the observations, and the questions were built on what had been observed in class. The interviews focused on exploring students' sense of belonging and how it shapes their positions and opportunities for participation in the classroom. The data-collection was carried out on two bachelor's programmes, an engineering and a social science programme, at Aalborg University in the spring of 2022.

IV. Analytical Insights and Pedagogical Implications

The empirical inquiry confirmed that students' sense of belonging affects their position in the classroom, and in turn, this affects how they are able to participate. Students with a greater sense of belonging were more involved and active in the classroom. They also tended to be in more privileged positions among their peers, having many positive interactions and relationships at their study programme, which gave them a better ability to participate in the classroom. The analysis also points to the importance of how materials and concepts are presented by the teacher. For example, presenting theoretical concepts in an objective or indisputable manner limited how students could engage in discussions about said concepts.

Based on the analytical insights, four pedagogical initiatives are suggested to improve opportunities for participation for as many students as possible. Here it is of course important to consider the context they are to be used in, so they may be adapted accordingly. They are:

1. *Support the students' belonging*: showing interest in students can help them to develop a stronger sense of belonging, which impacts their position in the classroom, and enables them to participate more actively.
2. *Use a variety of teaching methods and activities*: this creates many different opportunities for students to participate, so it accommodates a variety of individuals. This also legitimizes different ways of participating, and can thus create space for students to develop their own, more active study practices.
3. *Encourage critical reflection and discussions*: by encouraging students to engage in this way with the content of their courses, teachers can help students to develop deeper understanding and their own perspectives.
4. *Involve the students*: recognizing and including the needs and interests of students when teaching can strengthen their motivation and participation. This legitimizes students' perspectives and helps to develop a less hierarchical classroom.

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