"Fostering critical and meaningful responses in student seminar discussions"

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PIM Speaking, Newcastle, June 2018

Outline

- Introducing 'critical and meaningful response'

- Representation of 'critical and meaningful response' in a set of grading criteria

- Approaches and tasks that aim to foster 'critical and meaningful response'

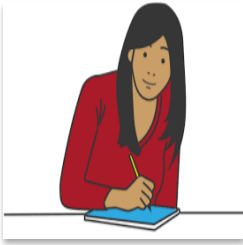## Critical Response (CR)

- ✓ Agree <u>&</u> disagree
- ✓ Question ideas
- ✓ Show awareness of multiple perspectives & complexity

Meaningful Response (MR)

- ✓ Connect <u>back</u> to what has already been said
- ✓ Add new ideas to move the discussion <u>forward</u>
- ✓ Make a focused contribution

Cathy
Nursing
CMI
Hong Kong

Prepares diligently, but mostly silent during discussion practice.

CR: Content broadly relevant, but relies heavily on factual evidence, own stance missing. **Little critical engagement with own / others' ideas.**

MR: Rarely looks at other students or connects her ideas to theirs. **Mostly reads from notes or recites.** Hard to follow.

Jo
Law
EMI
Hong Kong
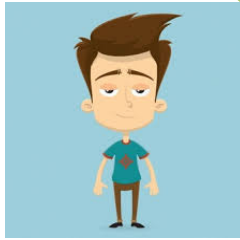
Very fluent, confident speaker. Minimal notes / evidence.

CR: Articulate but thin, **one-sided** argument. Sounds like he's in a debate rather than academic group discussion. **Fails to question own ideas or those of others**.

MR: Rarely engages specifically with ideas of others. Long turns. Considered rather dominating.

Julia
Business &
Economics
CMI / EMI
Beijing

Strong communicator & good interpersonal skills. Enjoys using English

CR: Although she has her own critical stance, she **only agrees with others. No disagreement or questioning.**

MR: Appears to connect turns to what was said before, but quite superficial. Typically she starts: *"I agree, let me add an example."* **Not adding anything new. Mostly repeating.**

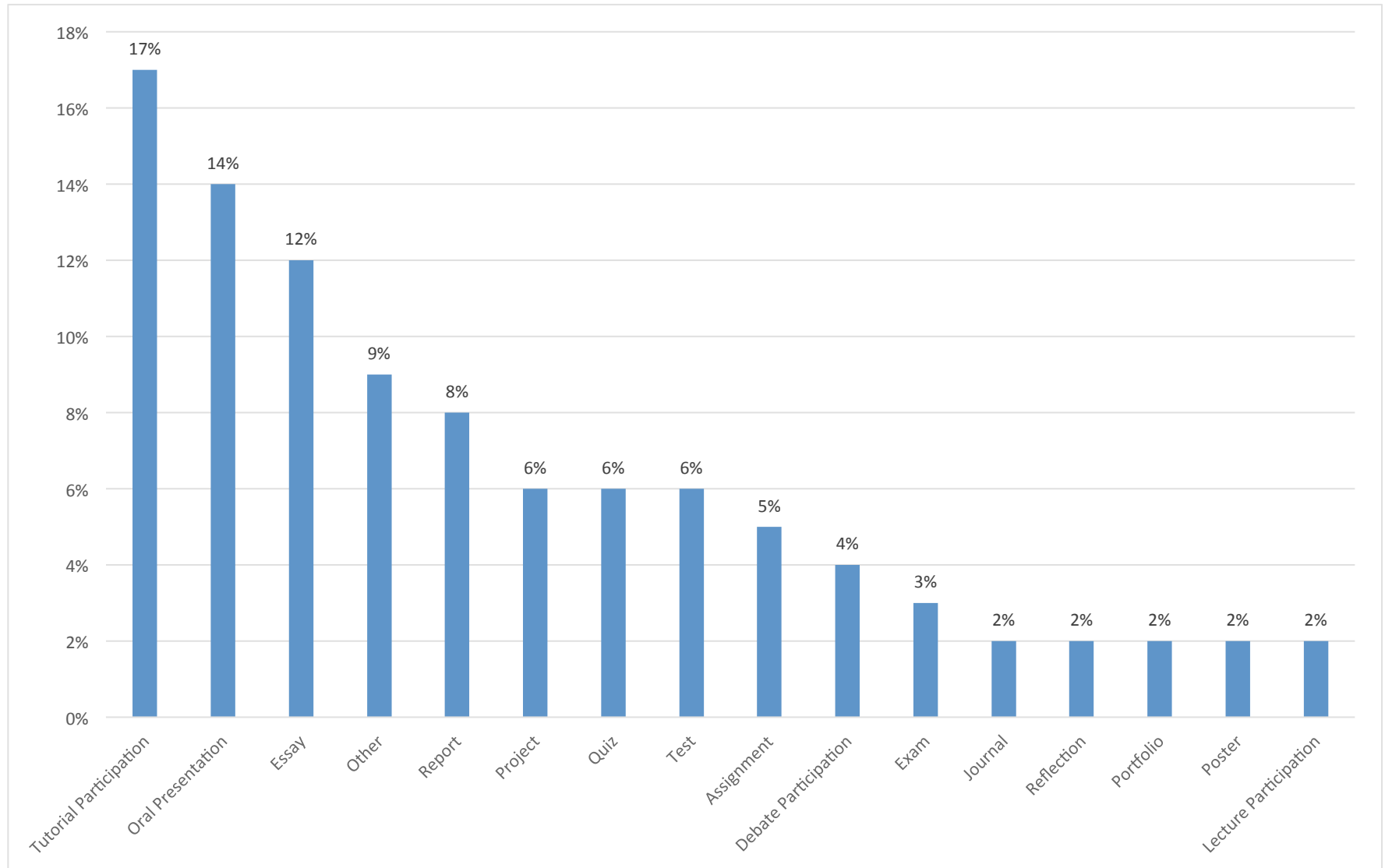# Role of traditional Confucian Learning Values?

Never question or contradict your fellow students. (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Jackson, 2002)

Rote learning and memorisation are an important part of academic life. (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006

'Maxim of modesty' - better to be silent and avoid showing off (Liu and Littlewood, 1997)

*Learning cultures are **changing** in schools and universities in China. The student body is **increasingly diverse** (Jin & Cortazzi, 2008).*

Most Commonly Used Assessment Types in First Year Common Core Courses at the University of Hong Kong, 2012

Assessment Type	Percentage
Tutorial Participation	17%
Oral Presentation	14%
Essay	12%
Other	9%
Report	8%
Project	6%
Quiz	6%
Test	6%
Assignment	5%
Debate Participation	4%
Exam	3%
Journal	2%
Reflection	2%
Portfolio	2%
Poster	2%
Lecture Participation	2%

Speaking Assessment
"Core University English - CUE"

20-minute Seminar Discussion (groups of 4). Based on a current, controversial topic. Students research the discussion topic before the exam using academic sources to make notes. They may refer to these notes during the exam.

	A+, A, A-	D+, D
Ability to explain academic concepts and argue for a stance supported by sources (40% of grade)	You can **always** clearly explain academic concepts. You are **always** able to argue for a critical stance with the support of valid academic sources where appropriate. You show an **excellent** ability to critically respond to / question other students' stance.	**Only some evidence** of ability to explain academic concepts, usually unclear. Stance is **almost always** simplistic and uncritical, not supported by sources. **Limited** ability to critically respond and question others. **Mostly silent.**
Ability to interact with others (30% of grade)	You **never** dominate the discussion. You **never** read from your notes when expressing your stance. Your contributions to the discussion are **always** naturally linked to what has been said before. You **always** use active listening skills (nodding, eye contact etc.) as appropriate.	You **often** dominate. You **often** read from your notes when expressing stance. Your turns are **only sometimes** linked to what was said before. You **only sometimes** use active listening skills
Ability to communicate comprehensibly and fluently (30% of grade)	You are **always** comprehensible. Mistakes with grammar / vocabulary are **infrequent** and **never** interfere with understanding. You are **always** fluent.	You are **only sometimes** comprehensible. Mistakes with grammar / vocab occur **throughout**, interfere with understanding **in multiple places**. **Only sometimes** fluent.

Extract from Discussion Assessment Criteria (A & D bands) CUE, University of Hong Kong, 2016-17

Explaining Key Terms

To "critically respond" includes the ability to:

✓ Challenge another student's stance (in a statement or question).

Weakness in "critical response":

○ Students mostly agree, lack of critical questions or justification of another stance.

Adapted from: Core University English, HKU

Explaining Key Terms

"Naturally link to what has been said before" includes ability to:
- ✓ First agree / disagree, then elaborate with new information
- ✓ Make a meaningful connection to a new topic

Examples of "weakness in linking":
- ○ Saying 'I agree', then discussing something unrelated
- ○ Just repeating, no new information

Adapted from: Core University English, HKU

Demands of Tutorial Discussion Practice

Cognitive Overload

"Distinction between Problem Solving & Acquisition of Strategies"
Problem solving involves heavy cognitive load and may divert attention away from the acquisition of new strategies (Sweller, 1988).
➢ **Separate the main discussion task from the acquisition of new skills.**

"Significance of Preparatory Attention"
Preparatory attention lowers cognitive load. (Schmidt, 2001)
➢ **Don't underestimate the value of planning & engagement with the topic prior to the discussion.**

"Attention is Selective"
If we focus on too many competing cognitive demands at once, we become overwhelmed. (Schmidt, 2001)
➢ **Break skills practice down, focus on 1 sub-skill at a time.**

'How': Critical Response

3 Strategies	Some language tools
1. Use **hedging** to soften a challenge	• *Really? That may not always be true…* • *I wonder if that's actually the case, maybe….*
2. Change the challenge into a **question**	• *Have you thought about….?* • *Is it possible / likely that…..?* • *Could it be that….?*
3. **Politely acknowledge** before disagreeing	• *Yes, I think you are right about…….but what about…….?* • *Yes, I see what you mean, but….*

'How': Linking Turns

5 Strategies	Some language tools
1. Respond with agreement or disagreement	• *You are quite right……* • *Interesting, but I suspect this may not always be true.* • *I partly agree with this…*
2. Refer to an earlier point	• *That's a good point and it reminds me of what Sam said earlier about……*
3. Moving on to a new issue	• *Perhaps we've said enough on this and can move to the next question.*
4. End turn with a question	• *Wouldn't you agree? Don't you think?*
5. Short comments	• *'True, quite, right, absolutely, well, so, really?' etc.*

'Noticing': Links in a Discussion 'Chain'

Scaffolded Practice: "Comment + Elaborate"

1. Previous speaker said…	2. Add a short comment	3. Elaboration: follow-up comment / question
I think that those who can afford it should pay higher medical contributions.	*Really?*	• *But how to decide who can afford it?* • *I think that this might be very unpopular with a lot of older voters.*
It's time that more low cost housing were built in our cities.		
There is too much assessment at universities nowadays.		

"2-minute challenges"

Roles (switched for each new topic):

Student 1: expresses stance on the topic & responds to challenges

Student 2: challenges each argument by asking a question / disagreeing

Student 3: listens and gives feedback on the quality of response

Benefits:

✓ Intensive practice in both CR and MR.

✓ Teacher feedback: focuses students on a different aspect of CR and MR slot after each topic (e.g. *questioning, hedging, degree, body language, politeness, intonation etc.*).

✓ Short time span = better focus.

✓ Activity moves fast and is motivating. New strategies added with each practice.

> **Example Topic:** *"Regular salary increases are the best way to keep staff motivated."*
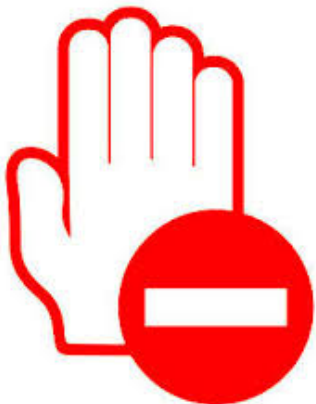

Original activity idea from Miranda Legg, University of Hong Kong.
Published in: *Academic English Skills for Success*, 2017, HKU Press (pp83-84)

Immediacy of Feedback

Teacher initiated

Interruptions

Teacher initiated

Post-it comments

Final thoughts……

- Tutorial discussions are complex and demanding events. Not same as a general discussion.

- Most students respond well to focused practice tasks, with immediate feedback. Some strategies, e.g. asking questions, may take longer to integrate.

- Focussing on student response can be challenging, but very rewarding too.

References

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