

On PAR Assessment: Using Participation, Attendance, and Reflection in the Flipped Classroom

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Abstract

Higher education uses active learning models like the flipped classroom to foster deeper engagement and real-world skill development. However, traditional assessment methods may not capture the collaborative and process-oriented nature of these learning environments. The Participation, Attendance, and Reflection (PAR) framework is an assessment approach designed to align with the goals of flipped pedagogy. Drawing on the author’s experience implementing PAR in an undergraduate public relations course, the article illustrates how this model promoted student accountability, critical thinking, and professional growth. Implementing the framework encouraged consistent participation, reframed attendance as a professional responsibility, and leveraged reflection to deepen learning. Additionally, the article discusses the transferability of PAR across disciplines, course sizes, and delivery formats. By centering assessment on student engagement and reflective practice, the PAR framework offers a practical, inclusive approach to evaluating learning in the evolving academic landscape.

INTRODUCTION

Picture a student walking into class after a late-night shift, juggling their cell phone and coffee with a tuition bill weighing on their mind. This is not an exception; it is the norm for many of today's students who have jobs, family responsibilities, and financial stress. These students are also trying to navigate a digital environment that competes constantly for their attention. While students may be stretched in many directions, they are also outspoken in their desire for relevant, applied learning experiences that connect to their future.

Against this backdrop, higher education is undergoing a transformation, not just in terms of pedagogy, but also within a broader sociopolitical context. Amid ongoing discussions of academic freedom and the value of higher education, as well as an increased scrutiny of institutions across the country, colleges and universities are being called to adapt their teaching and assessment practices (Fischer, 2024). For this reason, many instructors at all levels of higher education are reexamining how learning is defined, measured, and demonstrated in ways that reflect disciplinary standards, the political landscape, and the realities of today's students. One area receiving particular attention is the growing use of active learning strategies, which not only reshape how content is delivered but also challenge conventional notions of assessment (Fischer, 2024).

Flipping the classroom is an active learning strategy that has gained traction in many disciplines, from communication and education to business and STEM fields. The flipped approach shifts the delivery of content outside the classroom, creating space during class time for hands-on application of course concepts and theory to support critical thinking and deeper engagement with the material and among peers (Kuh, 2008; Låg & Grøm, 2019; Lo, 2020). However, traditional forms of assessment, such as exams, essays, or research papers, may not be the best tools for capturing the skills and competencies developed in a collaborative environment. This gap between what students is asked to *do* in active learning spaces and how they are ultimately *measured* calls for new ways of thinking about evaluation. One such approach that aims to bridge the gap is Participation, Attendance, and Reflection (PAR), a process-based, holistic framework that helps instructors evaluate how students show up, contribute, and grow throughout the semester.

ASSESSMENT IN THE FLIPPED CLASSROOM

Applied learning is recognized as a key pedagogical tool because it fosters student engagement, improves knowledge retention, and prepares students for future success in their careers (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015; Kolb, 1985; Låg & Grøm, 2019). For this reason, the flipped classroom approach has become a go-instructional model in higher education in disciplines that emphasize skill development and applied knowledge (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Cheng et al., 2020; O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). By inverting the traditional course structure, flipped learning can empower students to engage deeply with the content through peer discussion and collaboration, case study analyses, group projects, and real-world problem-solving (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015; Cheng et al.,

2020; Lo, 2020).

However, assessment strategies that effectively capture all facets of learning in these environments may be challenging for instructors who may rely on traditional modes of assessment, as traditional assessment models typically focus heavily on final deliverables over the developmental process.

Participation, although valued, may be less structured and difficult to evaluate with consistency. Further, attendance can be treated as a binary metric, rather than as a contributor to collaborative learning and accountability. Finally, reflection, while recognized for its role in metacognition and knowledge integration is sometimes underutilized (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Moon, 2013; Van Sickle, 2016).

These challenges highlight a broader issue: the disconnect between innovative, student-centered pedagogies and the conventional tools still used to evaluate learning. As educators increasingly embrace active learning models like the flipped classroom, there is a growing need for assessment strategies that align more closely with the goals of engagement, collaboration, and continuous learning. One such approach is the PAR framework, which is rooted in an established body of scholarship that calls for more integrative, process-oriented approaches to assessment in applied and experiential classrooms (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Cheng, 2020; Freeman et al., 2014; Låg & Grøm, 2019). By incorporating participation, attendance, and reflection as central components of the grading system, PAR may bridge the gap between flipped pedagogies and traditional assessment frameworks.

IMPLEMENTING PAR IN THE FLIPPED PR CLASSROOM

Because students are often encouraged to take risks, share ideas, and provide feedback to their peers, building a culture of accountability and reflection in the flipped classroom is essential. The PAR framework can foster this culture by making participation visible, framing attendance as a professional responsibility, and encouraging students to articulate and evaluate their own learning journey. To illustrate how PAR functions in practice, the following case study will explain how PAR was applied in a flipped public relations course taught in the Media & Journalism department at a public university in the Midwest.

The foundational, three-credit course met Monday, Wednesday and Friday for 50 minutes. It was comprised of 15 – 25 students from a variety of majors including communication studies, sport marketing, media and journalism, business, sustainability, and others. Students completed readings and video lectures outside of class, freeing up in-class time for applied learning activities, such as case study evaluations, press conference and crisis simulations, event planning exercises, campaign development, and mock debates. The three pillars—participation, attendance, reflection—allowed students to actively apply course concepts in a low-stakes, peer-supported environment, which mirrors the collaborative problem-solving environment that is required in the workplace.

Participation

In the flipped PR Principles course, students engaged in a variety of in-class activities that simulate real-world public relations scenarios: case study analysis, campaign planning, mock press conferences, debates, and crisis simulations. These exercises encouraged students to apply theoretical knowledge in dynamic settings, requiring them to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate communication strategies in real time.

Participation was not relegated to simply speaking in class—it was about being mentally present, contributing ideas, collaborating with peers, problem-solving under pressure, and other behaviors the instructor could observe. Additionally, when working in groups, students were required to designate a leader who would turn in their notes at the end of class. Because a higher level of involvement counted toward their participation points, they took ownership of their ideas and were invested in the success of their teams.

Attendance

In the PAR framework, attendance goes beyond just being present in the room. It was framed as a professional behavior that supported accountability, reliability, and team collaboration—essential traits in any communication career. Students were expected to attend class consistently, not only for their own learning, but to support their peers in completing shared tasks.

To promote a more empathetic and real-world approach, the course instructor introduced the concept of Personal Time Off (PTO). Students were allotted a small number of flexible class absences they were required to ask for in advance. This flexibility mirrored workplace norms, giving students more accountability for their absences and removing the punitive tone that can be associated with attendance policies. At the end of the semester, any unused PTO was converted into extra credit, providing an incentive for consistent attendance while respecting students' personal needs.

Reflection

The third pillar of the PAR framework is reflection—an essential but sometimes underutilized aspect of assessment. After completing major activities, students were asked to reflect on what they learned, how they approached a problem, what strategies worked and which ones needed to be refined, and how their understanding of PR concepts evolved through the activity. The reflections were guided by prompts and shared in weekly writing assignments, in small group discussions, and through in-class activities and role-playing. The goal was to encourage metacognition (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015) and help students draw connections between theory and practice. By making their learning visible, the instructor observed that as the semester progressed, students developed a deeper understanding of public relations principles and gained confidence in their ability to apply them.

In the PR classroom, participation, attendance, and reflection created a cohesive framework that was more than the sum of its parts. Participation

fostered active engagement, attendance ensured accountability, and reflection helped students connect experience to theory. These elements reinforced one another, producing a richer learning environment that cultivated both academic growth and professional readiness.

Tracking PAR Tasks

Throughout the semester, students completed a variety of PAR-related activities tied to in-class learning objectives. Student participation and reflection were tracked in different ways, including instructor observation, in-class activities, and discussion and activity notes. These deliverables provided evidence of how students were processing the material and contributing to the learning environment. Moreover, attendance was recorded for each class session, but with an emphasis on presence as contribution rather than physical attendance.

Grading & Weighting

To promote fairness and reduce anxiety, only a subset of PAR activities was used in calculating the final grade. At the end of the semester, 10 to 15 tasks were randomly selected from the full semester's log for each student. This method ensured that students who were consistently engaged performed well, while reducing the pressure of perfection for every single class. It also discouraged strategic attendance or participation for only “known” graded days, encouraging steady effort. PAR tasks collectively made up 10 to 15 percent of a student's overall grade for the course. This weight signaled to students that how they showed up (e.g., prepared, focused), collaborated, and reflected was a pathway to successful completion of the course.

ALIGNING CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES WITH PROFESSIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Implementing the PAR framework enhanced student engagement, accountability, and skill development in the flipped public relations classroom. While no formal study has been conducted to date, anecdotal evidence and instructor observation indicated more consistent participation, demonstrating a deeper understanding of course concepts and greater confidence in applying communication strategies in a collaborative environment.

Similarly, through recurring practice and feedback in simulations and projects, many students demonstrated improvement in their public speaking, strategic thinking, and collaborative problem-solving, which are key to success in professional environments. Further, the introduction of PTO also shifted classroom dynamics. By giving students control over their absences without fear of penalty, the policy reinforced mutual respect and real-world responsibility. At the same time, the PAR framework promoted consistency. Because students were aware that random participation and reflection tasks were graded, they were motivated to stay engaged throughout the semester, not just when a major

assignment was due.

Finally, the reflection component provided some of the richest insights into student learning. Many students wrote candidly about what they struggled with during an activity, how their understanding of a concept shifted, or what they would do differently next time. These moments of metacognition revealed growth that might otherwise go unnoticed. These insights can be invaluable for the instructor in determining what activities are working and which ones need further refinement.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

Although the PAR framework aligns with inclusive teaching practices and creates room for student autonomy, there are some limitations to its implementation. One concern for instructors may be an increased workload, as monitoring participation, taking attendance, and reviewing reflections can be a time-consuming process. Another challenge for instructors may be perceived subjectivity. Because participation and reflection are less quantifiable than exams or quizzes, students may perceive grading is inconsistent or biased. This risk can be mitigated by clearly communicating expectations and including them in the course syllabus. It is also possible students may resist participation-based grading. Gaining buy-in requires explaining the purpose of PAR, designing flexible opportunities for contribution, and making class time fun. Finally, issues of scalability and fit must be acknowledged. While PAR is highly effective in small to medium-sized classes, applying it in large lecture courses may require more thoughtful adaptation. Likewise, some disciplines with long-standing reliance on standardized exams may view process-oriented assessment as a departure from accepted norms. In these cases, PAR can still be applied, but instructors may need to integrate it slowly alongside traditional assessment methods. Even small shifts in assessment practice can make a profound difference in how students engage, collaborate, and see themselves as capable learners who are ready for the workforce.

EXPANDED APPLICABILITY

Although the PAR framework was developed within the context of a flipped public relations classroom, its core principles—engagement, accountability, and reflective practice—are applicable across a wide range of disciplines, class sizes, and course formats. For example, in a biology course participation might involve lab work or data analysis; in a finance course, participation could mean working collaboratively to analyze investment scenarios or present financial recommendations. In classes with many students, instructors may use polls, clickers, or quick-response apps (e.g., Kahoot, Mentimeter) to capture participation, or digital tools (e.g. discussion boards, pre- or post-class posts) found in a learning management system. In smaller classrooms, participation can be evaluated through participation in discussion and in-class group work. Whether the course is face-to-face, delivered online, or hybrid, the most value for students comes from the application of course concepts in real-time,

collaboration, and meaningful assessment.

Similarly, when attendance is framed as professional accountability rather than as a punitive measure, the concept of PTO can bring value in virtually any classroom and can be beneficial to students entering the workforce. Whether students are working on studio critiques in an art class or troubleshooting supply chain challenges in case-based exercises in an operations management course, showing up consistently and contributing to group processes remains essential. The PTO concept is also scalable, requiring minimal administrative burden while offering students a real-world approach to time management. It is an easy policy to implement in large classes, hybrid formats, or courses with rotating attendance schedules.

Reflection also transcends disciplines. It helps students in all fields develop self-awareness and deepen their understanding of how they learn. Reflective prompts can be tailored to focus on technical skills, ethical reasoning, or creative processes, depending on the course objectives. The use of technology can also be incorporated into the reflection component when students are encouraged to deliver their reflections using short audio or video clips, blog posts, infographics and more.

In conclusion, the PAR framework is an assessment strategy that can be both rigorous and responsive, honoring the complexity of learning while adapting to the realities of today’s students. With it, instructors can create a more authentic, process-based approach that cultivates engagement, accountability, and self-awareness across many disciplines and formats. Though challenges exist, PAR offers a practical path toward assessment that mirrors the collaborative, adaptable, and reflective skills students need in their professional and civic lives.

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