

Exploratory Practice

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Overview

These pages give an overview of Dick Allwright's 'exploratory practice' (EP) which he presents as an alternative to action research and traditional classroom research, both of which typically use conventional research techniques. There are short descriptions of some EP projects to illustrate the approach, an eight-step guide to doing EP, and a description of the principles that underlie it.

Why EP?

EP is especially interesting given the current shift of focus towards developing the quality of teaching in universities, and the fact that the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) will henceforth include papers with a pedagogic focus as well as traditional research. EP should be of particular interest to those who want to engage in professional development activities that do not compete with the need to conduct more traditional research, because it minimises the 'parasitic' nature of classroom research, 'parasitic' because conventional classroom research takes time and effort from the real learning and teaching activities.

Key Features of Exploratory Practice

Three fundamentals

- The aim of EP is to prioritise the quality of life of our learning–teaching environment above any concern for instructional efficiency.
- EP aims to develop our understandings of the quality of learning–teaching life instead of simply searching for ever-'improved' teaching techniques.
- EP recognises the fundamentally social nature of the mutual quest for understanding, in which both learners and teachers can develop.

Why work for understanding?

Dick Allwright, who has been central to the development of EP, says of the typical approaches to quality improvement:

We have been seduced by the prevailing 'wisdom' that participant research must essentially aim to improve the efficiency of [professional practice], typically by isolating practical problems and solving them one by one. We have largely accepted that such 'improvement' will be best achieved by the practitioners themselves, addressing their classroom problems as mainly technical ones, to be solved by the development of 'better' teaching techniques.

Allwright, 2003: 113–14

Allwright rejects this notion of the aim of practitioner research, focusing instead on the social nature of teaching and the need for all participants to be aware of the processes involved:

Working for understanding life in the classroom will provide a good foundation for helping teachers and learners make their time together pleasant and productive. It will also, I believe, prove to be a friend of intelligent and lasting pedagogic change, since it will automatically provide a firm foundation for any 'improvements' that investigation suggests are worth trying.

ibid p114

Puzzles, not problems

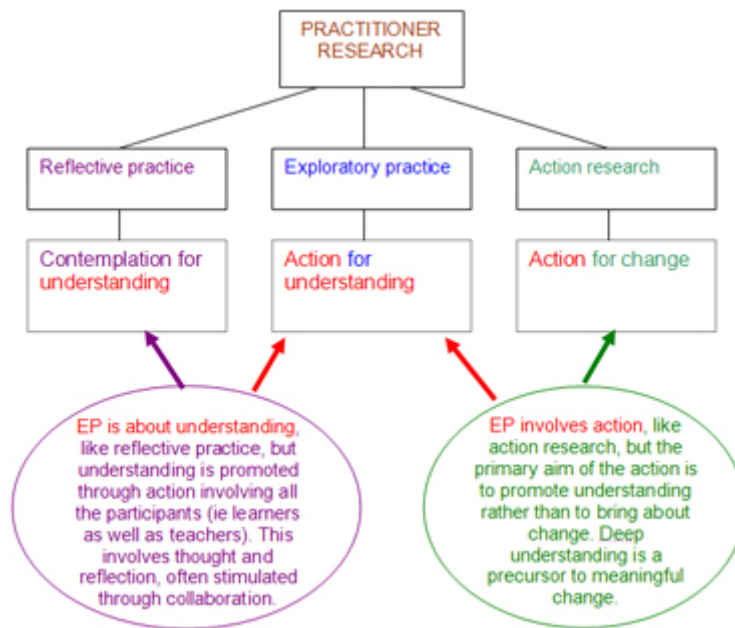
I advocate working with 'puzzles', rather than problems, partly to avoid the negative connotations of 'problem' (which may be seen as an admission of incompetence), and partly to involve areas of learning-teaching life that are not obviously 'problematic', but which we might well want to try to understand better.

ibid p117

But EP is for language classrooms

Although EP was 'initially developed as a coherent set of ideas about practices for language teaching and learning research', we (like Allwright) believe that it 'offers a set of principles for any sort of practitioner research.' (ibid p109).

Figure 1: How does EP relate to other approaches to classroom research and reflective practice?



How to do EP

Four steps

Note: these typical steps and are given only as a guide for getting started. They are not intended as a rigid prescription. The principles are more important than the steps.

- a The puzzle (cf identification and refinement of a set of research questions)
 - o Identify a puzzle area.
 - o Refine your thinking about the puzzle area (discuss with colleagues).
 - o Select a particular topic to focus on.
- b The method
 - o Find appropriate classroom procedures to explore it (eg, group work discussion, survey, role-play, diaries, poster session).
 - o Adapt the classroom procedure to the puzzle you want to explore.
 - o Use the procedure in class ('data collection').

- c Reflection and interpretation
 - o Interpret the outcomes.
- d Implications
 - o Decide on implications and plan accordingly.

Adapted from Allwright, 2004.

The dual processes of EP

(Note: the two sets of processes given here are inter-related and often concurrent; a chronological sequence is not intended by the order in which they are presented).

The processes are:

- taking action for understanding: this focuses on the processes themselves
- bringing puzzling issues of classroom life to consciousness.
- thinking 'harder' with other practitioners (peers and/or co-participants) inside and/or outside the classroom
- looking/listening – attending more intensively to what is going on, as it is going on
- planning for understanding by adopting familiar pedagogic procedures to help develop participant understandings
- working with emerging understanding: focus is on the content of the process
- reflexively expressing and appraising personal/collective insights
- unpicking and refining common notions of 'change'
- discussing potential personal or collective moves
- sharing personal understanding of processes as a way of supporting others and of inviting others to join the EP community of practice.

Seven Principles of EP

Why seven principles?

We need fundamental global principles for general guidance (eg, bringing people together is more fruitful than pushing people apart). We must then work out the implications of these for our everyday local practice ('How can we get our students to work together in our particular context?'). Thinking about acting locally in a principled way generates more thinking about our global principles, and helps us to develop these. 'Think globally, act locally'.

The principles

- Put quality of life first.
- Work primarily to understand classroom life (cf action research, which aims to solve problems).
- Involve everybody (ie, learners are co-researchers).
- Work to bring people together (atmosphere of collegiality).
- Work for mutual development.
- Integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice (EP should not be 'parasitic').
- Make the work a continuous enterprise.

Find out more about EP

The Exploratory Practice Centre has further information and articles – see www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/crile/epcentre/epcentre.htm.

Allwright (2003) is an introductory article on EP in a special issue of *Language Teaching Research*. Volume 8(3) (September 2004) of the same journal has further material.

Example 1: Group work

Setting: Language students at the European Business School, London

Source: Slimani-Rolls (2003)

Puzzle

Three colleagues met to discuss 'puzzles' in their teaching, and agreed that group work was an area that did not work well with their students as some students claimed to finish the task far earlier than expected and needed prompting to keep on task.

- Some did not listen to the results of their group-mates.
- Some disturbed the overall management of the class by only settling down to work when their classmates were already making their final oral or poster presentations.
- Some did not use the target language during group work.
- Only a few used the language taught to them during the preparation stages leading to group work.

To cast light on the students' behaviour during group work, the three teachers decided to investigate the learners' perceptions and feelings about:

- working with their classmates
- their teachers' attitudes and behaviour in the classroom.

Method

To ensure that the investigation did not involve significant extra work on the part of the teachers, they integrated into normal teaching routines EP principles 3, 4, 5 and 6.

One teacher selected some diary entries from a study into students' perceptions of group work. The teachers agreed that when a group work activity next proved disappointing, they would present these diary entries for their learners' written reactions. The aim was to stimulate brainstorming from the students, during normal class time, which might give insights into their behaviour and their thinking during group work.

Slimani-Rolls (2003) cites samples from the diary entries from Cherchalli's (1988) study.

Learners' feelings and perceptions of their fellow classmates included:

- When I work in a group my friends help me, encourage me, but when I'm alone I'm lost.
- Sometimes I feel like asking the teacher a question, but just realising that perhaps the rest of the class understand, I hesitate.

Learners' reactions to the teacher's actions and attitudes included:

- Sometimes we're blocked by a word. While we're thinking about it, the teacher goes on talking about other things and we can't follow any more so we switch off.
- We're never asked why we made a mistake. We're told that we're wrong then we're given the correct answer and that's all.

Reflection and interpretation

The written reactions were collected and the teachers gave themselves a couple of weeks to find time to read these before meeting to discuss them.

This face-to-face meeting allowed the teachers to comment on the students' reactions by situating them in the context that might have triggered them.

They also found the learners' responses revealed personal insights into their views about their classmates and about the teachers' ways of conducting the lessons.

The detailed findings are too many to report here; see pp. 227–236 of Slimani-Rolls (2003).

Implications

However, as Allwright (2001) notes, when they get together in the classroom they seem unable to behave as intelligently as they would think they know how.

Learners made it apparent for themselves that they need to show responsibility towards their learning and that of their group-mates.

Teachers could also see that aspects from their basic professional training and day-to-day experience can indeed get lost in the rush to cope with the demands of the programme. Each party seems to live in a paradoxical world, sending out unintentionally to the other party messages that do not reflect their true position.

Specific implications were as numerous as the findings, for example a need to regularly recycle teaching items, but the main point emerging from the discussions was the learners' responsibility both towards their own learning and also towards the advancement of the group.

The teacher's position in relation to ongoing group work also became prominent in the debates. Should she, as some suggest, stand as the sole active agent, responsible for guiding the learning process during group work? The learners' age, the status that they acquired as university, rather than high-school students, made apparent to everyone the paramount importance of individual accountability at this stage in education. Moreover, expecting the group to be there to offer them positive support, individuals must contribute, in return, to the learning of their group-mates, by displaying a positive attitude and contributing constructively to the advancement of the group's interactive processes. Slimani-Rolls notes Murphey's (2000) observation that the

discussions about the combination of individual accountability and positive interdependence on the group brought to the forefront the learners' responsibilities both towards themselves and towards the group. (*ibid*: 232).

Example 2: Student (non-)participation in whole-class discussion

Setting: A class of 25 MA English language teachers (mainly international students from China, Korea and Japan)

Source: Edwards(2005)

Puzzle

Whenever I addressed a question to the whole class, very few volunteered to answer. I thought this strange in a class full of experienced teachers studying at Master's level, even after reflecting on possible reasons, such as different cultural norms. I felt their reluctance to speak in public was preventing them from sharing views or comparing experiences. I wanted their views and explanations. An EP principle is that the focus should be on exploring puzzles rather than solving problems; although my puzzle was also a problem in my view, my aim was to discover why it was occurring, rather than to move straight to seeking a solution.

Method

During the last five minutes of class, I distributed Post-it notes, asked my question, and then asked students to write answers on the note, which they should leave unsigned. They stuck completed notes to a sheet of paper as they left the room at the end of the session. A principle of EP is that it should be conducted through normal teaching activities: I regularly use mini-Post-it notes to gather ad-hoc student feedback on ongoing course satisfaction, things students would like to ask or tell me etc, so these students were familiar with the technique. Furthermore, as it took only five minutes of class time, it did not distract us significantly from the main business of the course.

There were several repeat responses, eg 'I think that my opinion might not interest my classmates.' I grouped these and typed them up to return to the students, adding comments and extra questions of my own. The whole thing fitted onto two sides of A4 paper and took me about 30 minutes. (See the Appendix to this document for examples of Post-it note feedback.)

I distributed the collated comments before break for further discussion and Post-it note feedback. Then something unexpected happened: After break, I had anticipated discussing my further questions, but this was pre-empted by one of the students immediately saying, 'We've just been discussing the sheet you gave us', and another interrupted and said, 'Yes, and personally, I think it's important to speak out in class, it's just that I felt embarrassed to, because we aren't used to doing that back home.' A third chimed in, 'Yes, it's the same for me, and to be honest, when I read these comments I was really surprised to find so many others felt the same way as I did. We were talking about that,

and we've agreed that we should make an effort to speak out. Now we know we are not alone in our feelings, somehow it makes it easier'. It suddenly felt as though a cloak of tension had been lifted from the group. The awkwardness we had all felt had evaporated. By involving the students, the problematic aspect of the puzzle had been resolved.

Reflections and interpretation

The understanding gained was not just the relatively superficial one that 'I am not alone in my anxieties about speaking out in class', but the deeper one that it was OK to talk about the classroom processes that were all participating in, and that doing so somehow broke down the conventional social barriers between teacher and students; a new sense of openness and mutual trust improved the quality of classroom life for all of us, and the remainder of the course was far more relaxed, and discursive, than the initial sessions.

Implications

Open discussion of classroom processes among student teachers in a culturally diverse classroom (possibly initiated through a non-threatening medium, like the Post-it note written feedback) is a powerful tool in promoting understanding of our own classroom and classrooms in general, not only in terms of the specific process explored, but because through the very act of exploring a process, we are confronted with the benefits of involving all participants in exploratory practice.

Example 3: Written feedback

Setting: Academic Writing in English as a Foreign Language class, Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Source: Perpignan (2003)

Puzzle

- What kind of feedback, if any, did students consider most useful for learning?
- To what extent was the feedback, as it was intended by the teacher, comprehensible to the receiver?
- After receiving feedback, what strategies did students use in order to plan and produce future writing?
- What were the students' attitudes toward the feedback, the feedback giver and the process of holding a written dialogue through feedback about their writing?

EP principle 2: What began as a quest for a theory that could inspire guidelines for teacher effectiveness became a quest for an understanding of the conditions under which effectiveness could best be achieved. In EP terms, these conditions represent life in the classroom and the quest illustrates the aim of teacher research: to strive toward improving the quality of the life that

will enable more effective use of the feedback dialogue as a crucial element in the writing process.

Method

The method adopted:

- use of data 'already in' (as a result of the original aims of the study)
- a data-generated questionnaire probing the learners' preferences for feedback content, type and intent, in retrospect
- a questionnaire-based activity which attempted to capture the nature of the residue of the feedback several months after it was experienced
- a 40–50 minute semi-structured interview conducted at the end of the course.

Two further techniques based on EP principle 6 were used:

- the 'Matching Game', devised to observe the cognitive processes used by the teacher and the learners respectively in formulating and interpreting the feedback through use of converse questions. For example, the teacher answers the question 'What is the main weakness of this piece of writing?' and the learner answers the question 'What was your teacher's strongest criticism of your writing?' so responses can be matched
- the 'Z Activity', administered during the first half of the course, devised to help students make the requests for feedback that would be most useful to them, in the most useful way to the teacher, using the same mutually comprehensible language.

Reflections and interpretation

A wide range of preferences was manifested for the feedback contents (eg, 'ideas'), types (eg, positive comments) and intentions (eg, giving more or less independence to the learner); some kinds of feedback enjoyed high consensus of preference (eg, organisation), some low (eg, question form), but rarely was there total agreement.

Misunderstandings were many; these stemmed from diverse sources, varying with the individual ability and beliefs of the learners, but through the dialogue initiated by the feedback, it was possible to create better conditions for understanding by the receiver.

In the face of puzzlement or misunderstanding, students mostly tried to cope somehow; they attempted revisions even when they did not understand, leading to the conclusion that the dialogic situation is *per se* an incentive toward change, perhaps independent of the comprehensibility of the content of the dialogue.

Students used various strategies that cannot be disconnected from the input they received in the classroom as well as from factors outside the classroom.

There was wide variation among students in their use of feedback for revision. There was no sign that the use of feedback depended on how it was written or what was written, but rather it seemed highly dependent on their beliefs about learning and about the role of the teacher in this learning.

How learners judge the salience of feedback varied greatly among subjects. Manners of dealing with the teacher as authority through the feedback tended to vary greatly among students, and within individuals, over time.

The variation seemed to be a factor of personality and learning style, but also of learners' expectations, which changed with a growing understanding of the role of feedback in their own learning process, of the teacher's pedagogical principles and personal strengths and weaknesses, and of their (the learners' and the teacher's) joint goals.

Implications

It is not the mutual understanding that has the greatest potential to promote learning, but rather the knowledge by both parties that efforts are being made toward such understanding. It is therefore not the explicitly conveyed messages and their encoding that should be focused on by teachers and researchers in order to generate better conditions for feedback effectiveness, but the intentions that inspire them and the means that promote them.

Written feedback is a powerful tool in learning to write, not so much through the messages it conveys as through the very act of conveying these messages. This leads to a focus on the part of the writer of feedback not on finding ways to transmit these messages but rather on finding ways to make them more meaningful: to transmit saliency, tone, intention, empathy and, above all, to keep feedback up as a subject for discussion in itself, couched in an open-ended dialogue.

Appendix: Post-it Note Feedback

Example 1: Post-it note feedback: voting for topics

Thanks for all your comments – I had 18 Post-it notes back from you, which have proved to be very interesting and enlightening. I've decided to reproduce the comments here, grouped into rough categories, as your own words say far more eloquently what your reactions are than any summary I could make. (There are more than 18 comments here in total, because some people managed to squeeze a whole list of points onto their Post-it note.) The points you raised are set out below under general headings.

Benefits of voting: democratic, fair, needs/interest-based

- It's fair and democratic.
- Quite democratic.
- Good idea and fair.
- Very flexible.
- Interesting, liberal, encouraging.
- Found ourselves respected as the participants of this class.
- Gathering opinions is very useful for designing syllabus.
- It's a good way to let everybody choose what they like to learn.
- Voting for topic can present the idea of 'needs analysis'. I like it.
- I suppose satisfaction for this module will be high since it reflects a kind of needs analysis.
- Learners' interest is reflected.

These are the sorts of benefits I had anticipated and hoped for, especially the reflection of needs and interests.

Queries

- Is it important to know learner's needs?

Well, I believe so – if we covered a lot of topics that were not related to your needs, then I think you might not find them very interesting or useful.

- Did everyone understand what they were voting for?

See comment in next section.

- Why hasn't what to do in this class been decided beforehand?

I wanted to feel some degree of confidence that we would cover topics that are useful and interesting for at least a majority of the class, and to put into practice some learner-centred principles. By offering a menu of topics from which to choose, I am trying to compromise between giving a completely free

choice (which in my experience, is not usually welcomed by course participants) and an entirely fixed programme.

Problems and negative aspects: disappointment, voting for the unknown

- It's a little disappointing if the topics that you want don't come out
- Didn't like it. Only got one topic that I was really interested in.
- A pity not enough people want to do my choices! However, the subjects we've covered are interesting.
- Some people who voted in the first class don't come to class afterwards.
- Difficult to know which topics are the most important at first (and the most relevant) before doing any reading ourselves.
- If we know the content and what the goal would be like, it would be easier to decide which one is most appropriate for each of us.
- Maybe good to vote for half the syllabus but not the whole, as we do not have the experience to tell which things are important

I wonder if I'd chosen all the topics whether anyone would have felt disappointed, or whether by not telling you what you might have missed, you'd all have felt quite satisfied! No way of knowing really. If any of you want outline notes or set readings for a topic that we have not voted to do in class, please ask me – there is no reason why you shouldn't spend your reading time on your own choice of topic, and even write about this in your assignment or dissertation.

People dropping out of class – I'm not sure what to do about this, although not that many have gone, and we do vote for many of the topics halfway through the course when the class membership has stabilised, so I hope it isn't distorting the picture too much.

The point about not being sure what the topics are you are voting for is a more serious one. Would it help if you saw all the possible session outlines before voting, rather in the way that you are given option course outlines before you choose these?

Suggestions for further topic choices

- Workers and salarymen versus craftsmen
- Cultural aspects relating to project work
- Various ways of training pre-experience teachers.

I was a little puzzled by these – maybe some of you thought I wanted more topic suggestions. If that is what these are, I'm not sure I understand the first one. We'll be doing something on culture in one of the upcoming sessions – did you want a project set on a culture-related topic too? And we may yet vote

for something on pre-service training, or you can read the relevant section of Roberts if this is of particular interest to you.

Follow-up questions

- There are some questions included in the italicised sections above – please check.
- On the whole, do you think I should use the topic voting system in future teacher training courses? Can you suggest a better alternative?

If you've got answers to any of these questions please tell me, or write me a note. Thanks.

Example 2: Post-it note feedback: answering questions addressed to the whole class

Thanks for all your comments – I had 15 Post-it notes back from you, which have proved to be very interesting and enlightening. I've decided to reproduce the comments here, grouped into rough categories, as your own words say far more eloquently what your reactions are than any summary I could make. (There are more than 15 comments here in total, because some people managed to squeeze a whole list of points onto their Post-it note.) There were a couple of comments that said nice things about the classes in general – thank you for these. But I haven't included them here, as I want to focus on the specific issue of whole-class questions and answers. The points you raised are set out below under general headings.

Confidence, shyness and embarrassment with language

- I have no problem when you ask questions but sometimes I'm afraid to express my opinion because I feel I'll make mistakes when speaking. I don't want to feel embarrassed.
- Lack of confidence to speak L2 in front of native speakers.

I'm sorry that some of you are not proud of your English. I've been nothing but impressed by this – and you certainly all speak English far better than I can speak French, which is the only other language I can really communicate much in.

Whether response will be valued

- Sometimes I am not sure whether my opinion is valuable, so I will wait until other students have given their answer and get some inspiration.
- Maybe I am afraid of the evaluation (on myself) from others.
- Shy because of lack of relative experience.
- Some people lack confidence, sometimes I don't think my answer is interesting enough.

It's interesting that even at this stage of the programme you are quite worried about whether others will think your contributions are worthwhile. Maybe you

should ask yourself: ‘Do you find your classmates’ opinions worth listening to?’ Do you or your classmates or other teachers ever dismiss or disapprove of the contributions that others make, or are they generally interested and positive about these? If you think that the class responds positively to the opinions of others, then why should they react any differently to yours? I’d love to hear your ideas, and I’m sure other people would too.

Shy personality

- Being shy in the class depends on cultural contexts and personalities. Thus the teachers should try to know students’ characters in advance.
- Sometimes it’s easy to answer your question, but sometimes I feel shy.

Of course, if you are just shy by nature, that’s different. Anyone who doesn’t feel comfortable speaking in front of the class shouldn’t be forced to, although I hope that the times when we do group work give the less extrovert class members a chance to say something.

Hesitant with or lack of ideas

- Sometimes, simply because of lack of ideas to give you, or few examples of what you want.

Of course, I no one expects you always to have ideas. As long as you sometimes do, that’s fine.

Problems understanding the question

- Sometimes I don’t understand clearly what I’m expected to do.

If this happens, please ask me to clarify. You probably aren’t the only one who’s confused. One person asked: ‘Would calling on students by name be effective, or more intimidating?’ I’m not sure I know the answer – in fact I think I’ll ask you next week.

Also, one of the comments above suggests that it might help if ‘teachers ... know students’ characters in advance’. I tend to agree, and I’d welcome any ideas for how we could achieve this, given the fairly limited time we have together in class (maybe we need more social events).

Previous experience and background

- When I was in primary and secondary school, I had to say the ‘right’ answers to teachers when nominated. So normally, we hated to be nominated. I think that’s why I still feel uncomfortable when I have to say something in front of all my classmates.
- Cultural difference: people from some countries are more conservative.

As we’ve learned on this course, previous experience and cultural expectation are hugely influential. I think that if people from some cultures appear to be more conservative, it’s because their society has taught them to be like that – it’s not a genetic characteristic. And negative experiences in school can be just as powerful in affecting how you are as a student and teacher. Perhaps

by being aware of these reasons for your current way of reacting to whole-class questions and answers is the first step towards changing this (assuming you want to).

Group work

- I like the group activities.
- The group work you give helps me to realise what I think and what I haven't noticed.

These two comments weren't accompanied by anything about whole-class questions and answers, so I'm taking this as a very tactful way of saying that you prefer groupwork to whole-class questions and answers. Don't worry, we'll keep doing group work, and it's good to know that some of you find it useful.

Positive views of whole-class questions and answers

- Personally, I'd like to talk and give my opinion about different subjects
- Good interaction. The whole-class questions help you to think about and personalise issues.
- Questions are usually open-ended, addressed to the whole class. I like it because you always have the time and chance to answer. But sometimes they are very specific and very much terminology is used. This can be helpful but also limiting.
- I think asking the whole class to answer gives every student a chance to hear what others think – that's great.
- Actually, I have tried to be an active participant in the class. More practice is expected.

The first comment is hard to interpret. I'm not sure if you meant that you are happy with the way I invite you to give your opinion, or whether you would like to have more invitations to talk on other subjects too. Maybe you could tell me.

The last comment here made me realise that another question I should have asked you was: 'Are you happy with the amount you contribute in class, especially in response to my whole-class questions?' (I was tending to see relatively low levels of responses – especially those times when I ask a question and no one volunteers an answer – as a problem, but maybe it isn't.) Am I just putting pressure on you to live up to my expectations of classroom interaction, instead of me living up to your expectations? Which of these two approaches do you want me to take?

Follow-up questions

1. Are you happy with the amount you contribute in class, especially in response to my whole-class questions? Or would you like me to do something to help you to contribute more? What?
2. Would you like me to nominate people to answer questions? Please explain how this would work for you.
3. Have you got any suggestions for helping everyone to get to know each other better, to reduce the embarrassment factor and to help me appreciate individual personalities better?
4. What is your reaction to me asking for this kind of feedback, and responding to you with this kind of summary and comment? Would you like to do more of it? Please explain your views and reasons.

If you've got answers to any of these questions, please tell me, or write me a note. Thanks.

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