

## Encouraging Student Participation in Discussion

Students' enthusiasm and willingness to participate affect the quality of class discussion. Your challenge is to engage your students, keep them talking to each other, and help them develop insights into the material. Roby (1988) warns against falling into quasi-discussions—encounters in which students talk but do not develop or criticize their own positions. Two common forms of quasi-discussion are “quiz shows” (where the teacher has the right answers) and “bull sessions” (which are characterized by clichés, stereotypes, empty generalizations, and aimless talking).

Class participation tends to increase when students feel confident, are interested in the topic, and have good rapport with one another (Fassinger, 1997). The following suggestions are intended to help you create a classroom in which students feel comfortable testing and sharing ideas.

### General Strategies

**Get to know your students.** In classes of thirty or fewer, learn all your students' names; see Chapter 3, “The First Days of Class” for suggestions. If you require students to come to your office once during the first few weeks of class, you can also learn about their interests. Class participation may improve after students have had an opportunity to talk informally with their instructor.

**Arrange seating to promote discussion.** At a long seminar table, seat yourself along the side rather than at the head. If it's feasible, ask students to sit in a semicircle so that they can see one another. If the discussion tends to be dominated by students sitting closest to you, suggest that students change seats. (Sources: Brookfield and Preskill, 2005; Faust and Courtenay, 2002; Jensen et al., 2005)

**Encourage students to meet one another.** Students are more likely to participate in class if they feel they are among friends. During the first week or two of class,

plan some activities that will help students get to know one another. For example, ask students to introduce themselves and describe their background in the subject. These introductions may also give you some clues about framing discussion questions that address students' interests. See Chapter 3, “The First Days of Class” for suggestions. (Source: Faust and Courtenay, 2002)

**Help students dispel faulty assumptions about class participation.** Trosset (2000) has identified the following false assumptions that hinder students from participating:

- Participation requires advocating a particular position.
- Matters should not be discussed if the result is unlikely to be agreement.
- Personal experience is the only source of legitimate knowledge.
- All knowledge is merely opinion.
- People have the right not to be challenged.
- No one in the group should experience discomfort.

### Increasing Student Participation

**Create opportunities for all students to talk in class during the first two weeks.** The longer a student goes without speaking in class, the more difficult it will be to speak up. Use small-group or pair work early in the term so that all students can participate in nonthreatening circumstances.

**Allow the class time to warm up.** Arrive a few minutes early and talk informally with students. Or open the class with a few minutes of conversation about relevant current events, campus activities, or administrative matters.

**Limit your own comments.** Avoid the temptation to respond to every student's contribution. Instead, allow students to develop their ideas and respond to one another.

**Periodically divide students into small groups.** Students may find it easier to speak to groups of three or four. Divide students into small groups, have them discuss a question for five or ten minutes, and then reconvene the class. Choose topics that are focused and straightforward: “What are the two most important characteristics of goal-free evaluation?” or “Why did the experiment fail?” Once students have spoken in small groups, they may be less hesitant to speak to the class as a whole.

**Assign leadership roles to students.** Ask two or three students to lead a discussion session during the term. Meet with the discussion leaders beforehand to go over their questions and proposed format. Have the leaders distribute three to six discussion questions to the class a week before the discussion.

**Use tokens to encourage discussion.** Try a “token economy” in which you award tokens for participation that students can accumulate for extra credit or parlay into an option such as not having to take a quiz. Or use poker chips when over- or under-participation is a problem. One faculty member distributes three poker chips to each student in her class. Each time a student speaks, a chip is turned over to the instructor. Students must spend most of their chips by the end of the period. Another faculty member uses sticky notes which students place on their desk each time they speak. This gives an immediate visual sense of the contributions of each student. (Sources: Boniecki and Moore, 2003; Cross, 2002; Lang, 2008)

## Keeping the Discussion Going

**Build rapport with students.** Comment positively about a student’s contribution and reinforce good points by paraphrasing or summarizing them. If a student makes a good observation that is ignored by the class, point this out: “Thank you, Steve. Karen also raised that issue earlier, but we didn’t pick up on it. Perhaps now is the time to address it. Thank you for your patience, Karen.” (Source: Tiberius, 1999)

**Bring students’ outside comments into class.** When students make a good comment after class, through e-mail, or during office hours, ask if they are willing to raise the idea in class. If they agree, introduce the comment in class by saying something like “Jin, you were saying something about that in the hall yesterday. Would you repeat it for the rest of the class?” If the student is reluctant, bring up the issue yourself and give credit to the student.

**Use nonverbal cues to encourage participation.** Smile expectantly and nod as students talk. Maintain eye contact with students. Look relaxed and interested.

**Draw all students into the discussion.** You can involve more students by asking whether they agree with what has just been said or whether someone can provide another example to support or contradict a point: “How do the rest of you feel about that?” or “Does anyone who hasn’t spoken care to comment on the plans for greening the campus?”

**Give quiet students special encouragement.** Some quiet students are just waiting for a nonthreatening opportunity to speak. To help these students, you can try these strategies:

- Arrange small-group (two to four students) discussions.
- Pose casual questions that don’t have a single correct answer: “What do you remember most from the reading?” or “Which of the articles did you find to be the easiest to understand?” (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006).
- Assign a small specific task to a quiet student: “Carrie, would you find out for next class session what Chile’s GNP was last year?”
- Bolster students’ self-confidence by writing their comments on the board.
- Stand or sit next to someone who has not contributed; your proximity may draw a hesitant student into the discussion.

**Discourage students who monopolize the discussion.** Here are some ways to handle dominating students:

- Ask everyone to jot down a response to your question; then choose someone to speak.
- Enforce a minute or so of silent wait time after posing a question, allowing students to structure a response (Bean and Peterson, 1998).
- Restate your desire for greater student participation: “I’d like to hear from others in the class.”
- Avoid making eye contact with the talkative.
- Explain that the discussion has become too one-sided and ask the monopolizer to help by remaining silent: “Larry, since we must move on, would you summarize your remarks, and then we’ll hear the reactions of other group members.”
- Acknowledge the time constraints: “Our time is running out. Let’s set a thirty-second limit on everybody’s comments from now on.”
- Speak to the monopolizer after class or during office hours. Tell the student that you value his or her participation and wish more students contributed. If this student’s comments are good, say so; but point out that learning results from give-and-take and that everyone benefits from hearing a range of opinions and views.

**Tactfully correct wrong answers.** Any type of put-down or disapproval will inhibit students from speaking up. Say something positive about those aspects of the response that are insightful or creative and point out those aspects that are off base. Provide hints, suggestions, or follow-up questions that will enable students to understand and correct their own errors.

## Grading Class Participation

**Decide whether you want to grade student participation.** Some faculty grade students on their classroom participation, and on some campuses the practice is common. This may benefit students who test poorly but who demonstrate a depth of understanding by their comments during class. However, grading class participation may discourage free and open discussion, making students hesitant to talk for fear of revealing their ignorance or being perceived as trying to gain grade points. Faculty also argue that thoughtful silence is not unproductive, and that shy students should not be placed at a disadvantage simply because they are shy. Some faculty regard the grading of participation as too subjective to be defended if challenged. (Sources: Bean and Peterson, 1998; Hollander, 2002)

**If you grade participation, select appropriate standards.** Brookfield's many examples of kinds of participation (2006) include bringing in an article or a Web URL that adds new information or perspectives; asking the group for a moment of silence that gives others time to think; and paraphrasing or summarizing previous comments. Bean and Peterson (1998) recommend using holistic rubrics for scoring participation; for example, from "1" (is disruptive and rude) to "6" (is well prepared, advances the conversation, shows interest and respect for others). If you use rubrics, share them with students at the beginning of the term so they know how they will be graded.

Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) ameliorate the problem of the instructor's subjectivity by incorporating peer-to-peer evaluations. You can ask students to rate each other: "How much did student X contribute to your learning in this course?" You can involve the class in defining the criteria for assessment. For example, classes have generated criteria such as "willing to take risks," "limiting participation to a reasonable amount," and "providing new ways of thinking about the material."

Zaremba and Dunn (2004) and Lang (2008) describe examples of self-evaluation measures in which students rate their preparation and verbal and nonverbal participation after each class session. When the student's self-evaluation is consistent with the instructor's assessment, the student's rating is recorded. When they differ, the instructor's takes precedence, and students receive an explanation for the instructor's rating.

Melvin (1988) describes a grading scheme based on peer and professor evaluation: students are asked to rate the class participation of each of their classmates as high, medium, or low. If the median peer rating is higher than the instructor's rating of that student, the two ratings are averaged. If the peer rating is lower, the student receives the instructor's rating.

Faculty who grade participation tend to make it 10–20 percent of the final grade in the course.

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