

Encouraging Student Participation in the University Classroom

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‘What can professors do to make the discussion of the average classroom more interesting and useful and what can professors do to increase participation in their own classrooms?’

Taken from the Summary and Implications section of Rocca, K.A. (2010). Student participation in the college classroom: An extended multidisciplinary literature review. *Communication Education*, 59(2). 185-213. Available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03634520903505936>.

My comments in brackets.

Class Size & Strategies:

Ideally, class size “should be capped at 35 where possible.” Where impossible, instructors can do the following to encourage participation:

- ‘Break students into smaller groups’
- ‘Use lab settings’
- ‘Meet outside of class in smaller groups’
- ‘Use clicker systems or response cards’

Classroom Seating Arrangements That Can Increase Participation:

- Putting desks or chairs in a ‘**U or circular pattern**’ can foster participation vs. ‘row & column seating.’

[Students can see the faces of every other student, rather than the backs of heads, making accountability to other students and the instructor stronger, and making hiding behind others impossible.]

Grading:

Evidence suggests that

- ‘**Participation needs to be counted** as either a part of students’ grades or as extra credit,’ with ‘rules for what counts as participation’ clearly set down for both in-class and online courses.
- Students can be included in determining what counts for participation, and instructors can do a ‘mid-semester check-in’ about how participation is going.
- Students can be encouraged to assess their own participation, perhaps in writing.

Conducting Class:

- ‘Cold-calling on students is not recommended due to its mixed findings and the possibility of increasing classroom apprehension.’

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- In lecture courses, ‘class time should be broken up to allow for participation activities at least every half hour.’
- Relying on a few vocal respondents can decrease wider participation.
- [The problem with the distraction of cell phones or other electronic devices can be discussed, and class rules and consequences established together (with humor and fun). Cell phone use interferes strongly with student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction.]

‘Creating a Supportive Climate’:

Research suggests class climate can either encourage or discourage student participation. The following conduct may increase student participation:

- ‘Immediacy behaviors’ such as ‘eye contact and smiling.’
- Increasing the ‘wait time’ when seeking responses.
- ‘Varying the types of questions asked’ [interpretive and open-ended questions allow for wider discussion as opposed to closed questions with expected right and wrong answers].
- ‘Allowing for preparation prior to speaking in class.’ [See the Tanner article cited at the end of this page for many methods for increasing student preparation and participation in the classroom.]
- ‘Listening with respect and refraining from making judgments.’
- Putting students in small groups with consideration: younger and older students together, less or more experienced, [international and multilingual with native English speaking students.]
- ‘There is no real evidence to support treating males and females differently to increase their participation.’
- Some ‘appropriate self-disclosure’ can make instructors seem ‘less remote to students’—either during class or in ‘small talk’ before or after class.
- ‘Praise and verbal encouragement should be increased’ [with emphasis on the thinking, problem-solving, and effort over ‘getting the right answer’]
- ‘Verbal messages should be clearly supportive with explicit feedback and praise,’ both in class & online.

Instructor Conduct that Dampens Participation:

- ‘Verbal aggression’
Instructors may perceive their own questions as “challenging,” while students view them as stress-inducing.
- ‘Sarcasm and negativity.’

Studies have indicated that professors rate themselves as more supportive than students do. It is clear that *‘instructor communication patterns’ are essential in ‘facilitating student participation.’*

Another Resource:

20 strategies for fostering interaction in the science classroom are elaborated in the following article:
Tanner, Kimberly (Department of Biology, San Francisco State University). “Structure Matters:

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Twenty-one Teaching Strategies to Promote Student Engagement and Cultivate Classroom Equity.” *CBE-Life Sciences Education*, Vol. 12, 1-10, Fall 2013. Available at <http://www.lifescied.org/content/12/3/322.full?sid=2682f1f0-3281-4f37-9ca7-1281e1698702>

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