

## Increasing Student Participation

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While increasing participation is an obvious goal in courses that include frequent discussions and small-group work, it is also important in a lecture course. In short, if only a few students participate by volunteering answers, asking questions, or contributing to discussions, class sessions become to some extent a lost opportunity to assess and promote learning. You can improve student participation in your course by devoting time and thought to shaping the environment and planning each class session. Furthermore, the way in which you interact, both verbally and non-verbally, communicates to students your attitude about participation.

Ideally, the goal of increasing participation is not to have every student participate in the same way or at the same rate. Instead, it is to create an environment in which all participants have the opportunity to learn and in which the class explores issues and ideas in depth, from a variety of viewpoints. Some students will raise their voices more than others; this variation is a result of differences in learning preferences as well as differences in personalities. For example, some students who do not speak often in class are reflective learners, who typically develop ideas and questions in their minds before speaking; others are shy students who feel uncomfortable speaking in front of groups (at least initially). Many students who frequently volunteer to contribute are active learners, who typically think while they speak. The instructor's goal is to create conditions that enable students of various learning preferences and personalities to contribute. To reach this goal, you will need to take extra steps to encourage quiet students to speak up and, occasionally, ask the more verbose students to hold back from commenting in order to give others a chance.

This handout is divided into the following sections:

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## Shaping the Environment

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**Reserve a classroom that will accommodate the kind of participation you have in mind. Starting on the first day of class, arrange the room in a way that encourages active engagement.** When it is time to reserve a classroom, keep in mind not only the number of student chairs you will need, but also whether these chairs should be moveable. If you lead frequent discussions, consider moving the chairs into a circle or “U” to ensure that students

can see, and speak to, one another. If you are teaching in a large lecture hall, consider asking students to move so that they are concentrated near the front of the room. Move the chairs back to their standard configuration at the end of class (in University-managed classrooms, see the diagram posted near the door).

**Make clear from the beginning your expectation that students will participate.** On the first day of class, explain what you see as valuable about class participation. Indicate that you want to do all you can to ensure that the classroom dynamics and activities support full participation, including calling on students who do not raise their hands and sometimes asking frequent contributors to allow others to have a chance. Ask students to inform you if you can make any changes to improve the classroom dynamics and rates of participation.

On the first day of class, give students a clear idea of what to expect regarding participation. If you plan to lecture each day with pauses for questions and discussion, do so on the first day; if you plan to lead more extended discussions, then do so on the first day (see [Tips for Teaching on the First Day of Class](#)).

Consider whether you will assign a grade to students' performance in discussions so that they understand the importance of participating. If you do plan to grade participation, inform students of the specific criteria that you will use. For example, will you evaluate the frequency and quality of their contributions, as well as how effectively they each respond to others' comments? Will you include in each participation grade the student's performance on informal writing, online discussions, minor group projects, or other work? Grading student participation is especially important, and usually essential, in discussion courses (see [Teaching with Discussions](#)).

**Learn and use students' names.** Students will be more engaged if they believe that you perceive them as individuals, rather than as anonymous members of a group. Encourage students to learn one another's names, as well; this strategy will increase the possibility that they will address one another by name and direct their comments to one another, not just to you.

## Planning

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**In a discussion course, assign to your students some of the responsibility for increasing participation by all.** For example, on the first day of class, you might tell students your goals for class participation (e.g., informed and lively discussions in which everyone participates) and ask them to come up with a list of guidelines that will help the class reach this goal. Typically, they will generate excellent guidelines such as "do not interrupt others when they are talking" and "critique the ideas; don't criticize the person." Post this list on the course Web site and hand it out in class. Students who feel invested from the beginning in making the discussions successful will be more likely to work together to increase participation.

Consider requiring students to lead discussions or to submit discussion questions before class. Provide guidance and assess student performance on these tasks (assigning a score, for

example, that forms a part of the class participation grade.)

In discussion courses in which you are having trouble getting students to participate, consider asking students to submit anonymous comments on class participation as well as suggestions on how to get more people involved; often, they will let you know that there are problems with the classroom dynamics that you may not see yourself (such as that some students resent the “domination” of discussion by one or two others) or that the structure of the discussions has become too predictable or formulaic.

**Use a variety of teaching methods, including lectures, discussions, and small-group work.** If you are teaching a lecture course, set aside time during each lecture to ask and answer questions, to ask students to solve a problem, or to discuss an issue. Pause every 15-20 minutes for this purpose. When students learn to expect these opportunities for discussion or questioning, they will listen more actively to the lecture. If you lecture for 45 minutes before you pause for questions or discussion, your students will have been taking notes for so long that they may find it difficult to switch modes quickly. Furthermore, they may well have forgotten questions, comments, or unclear concepts from the earlier parts of class (see [Teaching with Lectures](#)).

If you are teaching a discussion course, integrate short lectures into the lesson plan in order to introduce concepts, clarify and order ideas, and help students make connections. Use small-group discussions, informal writing assignments, and online discussions before or at the start of class to prompt student thinking about the discussion topic. These strategies can be effective ways to provide reflective learners and shy students a means of developing ideas that they can then contribute to the class discussion. Commenting on the insights that quieter students contribute in small-group discussions and on informal writing assignments and online discussions can encourage them to speak up in the larger group; you might comment on a student’s written work, for example, “this analysis is insightful; the entire class would benefit from hearing your ideas more often” (see [Teaching with Discussions](#)).

**Organize each class session to include opportunities throughout to ask and answer questions; prepare initial and follow-up questions ahead of time.** Use questions to assess student learning, to signal to students which material is the most important, and to help students advance their knowledge and thinking. (For a discussion of strategies for formulating questions, see [Asking Questions to Improve Learning](#)). Encourage students to ask questions throughout the class (approximately every 15 minutes), not just at the end.

**If grading student participation, plan to give students a preliminary participation grade, as well as a brief written evaluation of their performance.** If you will grade class participation, give students preliminary grades as early as 3-4 weeks into the semester and at midterm so that they will know where they stand. Your written evaluation can be designed to encourage the quiet students to talk more often and the verbose students to hold their comments to give others a chance to participate).

# Listening and Responding

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**Use verbal and non-verbal cues to encourage participation.** Do not rely on the same volunteers to answer every question. Respond to frequent volunteers in a way that indicates that you appreciate their responses, but want to hear from others as well. Move to a part of the room where quiet students are sitting; smile at and make eye contact with these students to encourage them to speak up. By the same token, when frequent volunteers speak, look around the room rather than only at them to encourage others to respond (see below).

Reduce students' anxieties by creating an atmosphere in which they feel comfortable "thinking out-loud," taking intellectual risks, asking questions, and admitting when they do not know something; one of the best ways to do this is to model these behaviors yourself.

**Give students time to think before they respond to your questions.** Do not be afraid of silence. Give students 5-10 seconds to think and formulate a response. If 10-15 seconds pass without anyone volunteering an answer and the students are giving you puzzled looks, rephrase your question. Do not give in to the temptation to answer your own questions, which will condition students to hesitate before answering to see if you will supply "the answer." Patience is key; do not be afraid of silence. The longer you wait for students to respond, the more thoughtful and complex those responses are likely to be.

Often, there is at least one student in every class who will quickly raise her or his hand to answer nearly every question. If you consistently call on this student, those who require more time to formulate answers will simply learn to wait for this student to answer. (See [Asking Questions to Improve Learning](#).)

**Listen fully to your students' questions and answers; avoid interrupting.** Resist the urge to interrupt when you think you know what the student is going to say or ask. Often, well-meaning and enthusiastic instructors make incorrect assumptions and leave their students' actual questions unanswered or misrepresent what the students had planned to say.

**Provide specific, encouraging, varied responses.** Point out what is helpful or interesting about student contributions. Pick up on comments that were made but not discussed. Do not use the same, standard praise to respond to every comment. When students hear "good point" again and again, they start to lose motivation. Ask follow-up questions to prompt students to clarify, refine, and support their ideas. When a student gives an incorrect or ill-conceived answer, respond in way that challenges the student to think more deeply or to reconsider the evidence. The best way to shut down participation, and learning, is to embarrass a student.

**Repeat student responses to summarize or clarify ideas.** Use this strategy when a student's comments are vague or "all over the map," but do not over-use it, leading students to rely on you to "translate" or validate their ideas.

**Redirect comments and questions to other students.** Encourage students to respond to one another, rather than merely to you. When a student is speaking, look around the room, not just at the student who is speaking; making eye contact with other students lets them know that

you expect them to be listening and formulating responses. Provide students with a model of civil discourse by demonstrating respect for, and interest in, the views of others. Learn to limit your own comments. Particularly when facilitating a discussion, hold back from responding to every comment; otherwise, students will learn to wait for you to respond rather than formulating their own responses.

**Place the emphasis on student ideas.** Encourage students to share their ideas and use those ideas (with attribution) whenever you can. Referring back to a comment made by a student in an earlier class demonstrates that you have thought about and appreciated what your students have to say.

Active student participation does not happen naturally in university courses; it must be carefully planned and encouraged. Set aside time throughout the semester to assess student participation in your course and to develop strategies for improvement; administer midterm student evaluations to help you with this process. Consider asking a colleague to observe your class; often, outside observers can discern patterns that hinder participation but that may not be apparent to participants. Take notes during and after a semester so that you have a record of what went well and what you would like to change the next time you teach the course in order to increase student participation.

## Links and References for Increasing Student Participation

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McKeachie, Wilbert, et al. *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 12th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.



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