

## Ways to Encourage Student Participation in the Classroom

Whether you are a seasoned instructor or one who recently started teaching, everyone at some time or another has faced a lack of student participation in the classroom. The sound of crickets, blank stares, eye contact being avoided, and yawns of boredom happen. So, what can you do to stimulate your students and get them to participate in class? Below are some simple techniques you can use to engage your students and avoid becoming a bland “sage on a stage.”

### Contributions to Class Discussion

Make things easy on yourself and set a precedent for contributing to classroom conversations at the start of a course. When it comes to student participation, the precedent should be that everyone is invited to, and should, participate, especially in class discussions. The below strategies help students relax and get comfortable with contributing to class discussions.

#### *Give Students Time*

A simple technique to promote participation in class is to give your students time to answer your questions. Many instructors dread the silence that follows a question and will jump in with the answer if the silence feels too long or to keep the class flowing. If you do this frequently, however, students will learn to anticipate your reaction and will not make any attempt to contribute an answer. Sometimes you may have to wait through everyone looking around uncomfortably and beginning to feel awkward. Let them squirm, though. While this might sound or feel harsh, students must get used to public speaking, a skill they will need in their future careers.

#### *Calling on Individual Students*

If students still refuse to participate in class discussion after you’ve waited out silences, start calling on students. To avoid students feeling picked on or forced into participation, randomly select students to call on. Write the name of each of your students on an index card and have students pick a card whenever you are soliciting responses from the class. If there are students that rarely speak up, you can try a different selection technique such as one based on a characteristic. For example, if you are noticing that your male students are participating more heavily, base the order of who will answer questions on longest hair length to shortest (since women generally have longer hair than

men). You can also base the order of students you will call on chronologically by using their birthday months as a guide.

#### *Calling on All Students*

Ensuring that everyone contributes to the classroom means that you have to monitor participation. For a seasoned instructor, this is usually a simple task. For a new instructor trying to acclimate to the demands of teaching, this can feel overwhelming. An easy way to make sure everyone is speaking in class is to ask a question, then rotate around the room from student to student and get an answer from everyone. If a student shuts down or can’t come up with an answer, ask the class to help out their classmate.

### Peer-to-Peer Learning

A great way to encourage student participation is to use peer-to-peer learning. Split students up into small groups and pose an engaging problem or question that is relevant to the class topic. It can involve a current event, an objective the class is struggling with, or a challenging question from the course material. The student groups need to collectively solve the problem or come up with an opinion about the issue presented. This provides an opportunity for shy students to discuss their ideas with peers when they might not otherwise. By talking to their classmates, students also discover they are not the only ones who find material difficult or confusing, which is helpful for gaining confidence in the course. You can circulate between the groups and facilitate any discussions that aren’t getting off the ground. Doing this also enables you to hear your students’ thought processes and identify what material or concepts they are struggling with.

### Jotting Down Immediate Reactions

A creative strategy to increase participation is to give student a few minutes to write down their immediate thoughts or questions about a specific topic and then call on students to share their reactions. Some students will be hesitant to share at first, but ensure them that they can speak their mind without fear of being judged or getting in trouble. You do have to make sure that you are encouraging participation from all students, though, and that when one student is speaking the other students are being respectful and listening.

### Exercising Practical Skills

A straightforward solution to increasing participation is to introduce practical skills students are learning at the

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very beginning of class and have students execute them. Instructors tend to lecture on practical skills, but by asking students to perform a skill you will get them moving around, interacting with one other, and more engaged. Bolder students will be happy to get up and demonstrate their skills, but there may be some students who refuse to practice a skill in front of others if they feel uncomfortable. If this happens, remind students that they will have to perform the skill in front of many people in their careers and stress that the classroom is the perfect place for learning—it is a place where you can make mistakes, ask your peers for help, and maybe even have a few laughs.

### **Learn Your Students' Names**

Students are far more receptive to instructors who call them by their names because the acknowledgement indicates that you have taken an active interest in them. Therefore, learning your students' names can encourage better class participation. If you aren't great with names, make a seating chart for your classroom. Whenever you call on someone to answer a question you've posed, ask for their name before they provide their response and note it on your chart. Use the chart to help you address each of your students by name whenever you interact with them—the repetition is a great way to solidify your knowledge of who everyone is. Make the effort to memorize two to three names per class, and soon you will no longer need the chart!

Using these techniques will help you make students feel included in your class and will encourage a friendlier, more open, and much more participatory group of learners. You will also find that you enjoy teaching your classes more when students are talkative and excited to be there.

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