

Class Participation: Suggestions for Instructors

For most students, undergraduate and graduate, it has to feel safe to participate. So students' participation at the beginning of a course will be more tentative while students judge whether the climate is appropriate for them to participate safely. If there is any sense that they will feel humiliated or ridiculed in class, they won't speak up. If there is any sense that a faculty member couldn't care less about what students say, they won't participate.

Over the period of time the course meets, once the students trust that the instructor has their best interests at heart, the instructor can require more of students in class discussions, so that discussions can become as rich as the class and instructor care to make them.

The most important way to get good classroom participation is to ask good questions. For ideas for generating good classroom discussions, see the CITL website links on Discussions.

In this document, I focus on simple **techniques for increasing class participation:**

Poll the class periodically.

Ask for new hands or for some new people to speak.

Do periodic paired work and cold call a pair to respond to a question.

Ask, "How many of you have a response to this question?"

Say, "I'd like to hear three (or some set number) people's thoughts on this issue."

Cold call students on opinion questions, in which there is no right or wrong answer.

Learn students' names, or have students bring in name cards for every class so that you can call them by name.

Talk to students outside of class (individually). Request that they speak in class. (Usually this is easiest when you know someone is smart and never speaks up in class—particularly effective with students from cultures in which teachers are revered authorities.)

Ask students meaningful questions. If your questions require them just to respond with factual answers, they will get bored and disengage. However, you don't want to make all of your questions so challenging that only a few students dare to respond.

Wait longer after you ask a question. (Many faculty members don't wait longer than two seconds. Try to count slowly up to 10 or 15 before speaking after you have asked a question.)

Tell students not to respond to a question you ask for 60 seconds. (This takes the pressure off the more reflective students and reduces the likelihood of the very quick responders taking all the air time.)

Tell students to take 30 seconds to write a note to themselves or to talk with a neighbor about what they are thinking before calling on someone.

Control the students who are over-participators. Often, other students learn that some students will do all the participation work if the instructor lets them. So the others learn to be silent. Take the over-participators aside individually and thank them for their enthusiasm and willingness to participate; however, you would like them to do less so other students can be encouraged to work harder in class. (Some instructors ask the over-participators for ideas about how they can help others participate more.)

If a student has a phobia about speaking in class, and you are willing to work with him or her (usually her), ask the student to start with something very low risk (for most people, but high risk for the phobic student): Ask the student to raise their hand at least once a class and ask something like: "Would you please repeat that?" Over time, the student should be able to contribute meaningfully in class. (Most professors have little inclination to help such students, but the attention, patience and encouragement pay off for the student.)

Set a small group in-class task, and tell the students they will be reporting out to the rest of the class at the end of their task. Make it a requirement that everyone in the group speaks during the report out period. (This is a good task to give early in the course because it tends to build group spirit because it is a bit of a risk because all must speak. If it suits your style, lead the class in wild applause for each team that presents during the report out period.)

Some faculty members tell their students there will be ad hoc presentations throughout the course—to get students to practice thinking and speaking on their feet. I have seen this only in classes that are at least three hours long. The ad hoc presenters for the class get the 15 minute break to gather their thoughts and prepare their presentations. After the break, they do their presentation and then answer questions. I have seen this done primarily having presenters argue two sides of a controversial issue.

"Warm call" students. Robert Whitelaw in Finance does this. He lets specific student teams know that they will be expected to be responsive to particular content areas that will be coming up in a future class. This does not preclude other students from responding, but these students know they must be prepared to discuss the issues.

Your syllabus: Define what kind of participation you would like in class. A good definition is the following: (taken from Gina Dokko's Managing Organizations Syllabus on the sample syllabi site for Spring 2005):

In-class contribution is a significant part of the grade, and an important part of our shared pedagogical experience. Your active participation helps me to evaluate your overall performance as a student (as well as making the class more interactive and engaging for all of us). The quality of your participation is more important than the quantity. Given our limited amount of time together, talking without positively contributing to the discussion will result in a lower grade for in-class contributions. However, I want to stress that positive contributions are not necessarily "right" answers. I encourage you to experiment and take risks. "Wrong" answers can also be instructive and debate is often a good way to learn. Positive contributions are those that advance the discussion by presenting new ideas or insights, or building on others' comments, or presenting a counterpoint to others' comments in a respectful way. Contributions that are not positive are those that simply repeat points already made or deride others' contributions in a discourteous way.

For additional guidelines on making positive in-class contributions, please see "Participating in Case Discussions" included in this syllabus.

Many people are uncomfortable with presenting viewpoints in a large group setting, but contributing to discussions is an important part of your development as a manager and an MBA student.
