How Do I Get More Students to Participate in Class?

Presented by:
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**Presenter Bio:**

**Dr. Maryellen Weimer** has edited *The Teaching Professor* newsletter since 1987 and writes the *Teaching Professor* blog at [www.teachingprofessor.com](http://www.teachingprofessor.com). She is a professor emerita of Teaching and Learning at Penn State Berks and won Penn State’s Milton S. Eisenhower award for distinguished teaching in 2005. Dr. Weimer has consulted with over 300 colleges and universities on instructional issues and regularly keynotes national meetings and regional conferences. Her Ph.D. is in Speech Communication from Penn State.

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How Do I Get More Students to Participate in Class?

Maryellen Weimer
Editor, *The Teaching Professor*

It’s not just *your* class

In one multi-classroom study

- Only 44% of students participated
- 4-5 students made 89% of comments

Strategies with limitations

**Cold-calling**

- Often used punitively
- Keeps students passive
- Students focus not on question, but how to look inconspicuous
Strategies with limitations

*Emphasizing points for participating*

- Students comment without much to say
- Students don’t listen to classmates
- Students focus on points, not discussion

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18 Strategies that work

1. **Increase your wait time**

- Average wait only 2.3 seconds
- Some people like to think before talking

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18 Strategies that work

2. **Talk about how discussion improves with many participants**

- Begin with this message on day one
- Repeat it regularly
18 Strategies that work

3. Get students to talk about what makes participation valuable in learning
   • Likely to cover issues that concern you
   • Sets foundation for asking students for their help

4. Don’t let students over-participate
   • Classmates wait passively for “regulars”
   • Try, “We need to hear from more people”
   • Try, “We haven’t heard from the back of the room”

5. Listen carefully and thank students for contributions
   • Laud the effort even when the answer isn’t all that great
18 Strategies that work

6. Focus on students when they speak
   • Listen as you would have them listen to you

7. Look at and encourage students who don’t speak (but look like they have something to say)
   • Encourage with a gesture (smile, nod)
   • Encourage with a comment (“Did you want to say something about this?”)

8. Use something the student said in your follow-up commentary
   • “Your point about X is important, Rob. Let me talk a bit further about it …”
18 Strategies that work

9. Ask a thought-provoking question and give students time to jot down ideas
   • Ask if some students will share what they’ve written

10. Put the question on the board / slide
    • Point out how much it helps students to have questions in their notes when reviewing for exams

11. Ask an important question and let students talk about it briefly
    • Ask someone to share something they heard in the conversation
18 Strategies that work

12. Label a great explanation or idea with a student’s name
   • Refer to it later
   • “Remember Sara’s theory on why …”
   • “Might Sara’s theory be relevant to …?”

18 Strategies that work

13. Find something positive to say about a first-time contribution

18 Strategies that Work

14. Respond to wrong answers carefully
   • Correct the answer, not the student
   • Remember that it’s a public conversation
   • You may know that a student is OK with tough criticism, but other students may not
18 Strategies that work

15. Don’t always have the right answer
- Say when you don’t know
- Say when you aren’t sure
- Wonder aloud

16. Talk informally with students
- Before class
- After class
- When you meet on campus
- Via email

17. Define participation broadly to include
- Asking questions
- Doing a problem on the board
- Taking notes during a discussion
- Writing key comments on the board
- Emailing questions or comments after class
18 Strategies that work

18. Expect great answers

• Teach expecting to learn something

Thanks for your time!

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