How Do I Get More Students to Participate in Class?

Presented by:

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Hello! My name is Maryellen Weimer, and I’m the editor of *The Teaching Professor*, and author of a number of books on teaching and learning. I’m really happy to be able to spend these 20 minutes with you talking about something which I think is a concern to many of us and that’s how we get more students volunteering to participate in our classes.

I don’t think that most of us need to be told that we don’t have enough students participating in class. Every day in class it seems like it’s the same hands up in the air time and time again. If it’s any comfort, it’s not just a problem in your class.

In an observational study that was conducted in multiple classrooms, only about 44 percent of the students in those classes participated, and, of those who did participate, 4 or 5 students were making 89 percent of the comments.

So the next 20 minutes is about how we can get more students voluntarily participating in their class. Before I present my collection of strategies, that I think accomplish that, I want to talk about a couple of strategies pretty widely used, but ones which I think do have some limitations. The first one is calling on students: cold-calling is what it’s called in the literature.

It’s when you just flat-out look at a student eyeball to eyeball and call on that person. Often faculty use this strategy in a punitive kind of way. They will call on students whose attention appears to be waning or students who they think might be texting, or they call on students to just make absolutely sure that they are prepared when they do come to class.

The problem with punitively using cold-calling is that I don’t think it makes students want to participate in the classroom. I also think that when you call on students, it absolves the student of any responsibility for carrying the discussion.

They don’t have to think about whether or not it’s time for them to participate, whether or not they need to contribute, what to do about the long, awkward silence. Nope! They can just kind of sit back and wait for the teacher to carry the ball, and the teacher will do that by calling on one student after another. Students who don’t like to be called on often are not thinking about the question that the teacher is asking them. The power of the question to engage students is in that little space between the question and the answer. During that time, students ought to be thinking about the answer.

But if they’re worried about whether or not you’re going to call on them, they’re sort of thinking about how, “Oh, my gosh, you know, is the teacher looking in our direction? Can I kind of like hunker down and hide out? How can I be inconspicuous and avoid being called on.” So think
that there are some liabilities with cold-calling when it comes to encouraging a larger number of students to participate in class. I also want to caution about emphasizing that students get points for participation. For me, the keyword is emphasizing that there are points for participation.

What that does is to encourage students to make comments because they want the points, not because they have anything really intellectual to contribute to the conversation. I also think that emphasizing the points causes students to listen less well to what others are saying. Instead, they’re thinking about whether or not whether or not they’ve participated enough, whether or not the teacher liked what they said. Maybe they ought to say something else? When would be a good time to raise their hand? And as a consequence, what happens in the discussion then is that you call on one of these students, and they make a comment which is seemingly irrelevant to the discussion at hand.

That’s because they weren’t listening to the discussion at hand, but were rather getting their act together to participate. So those strategies I think have a couple of limitations. Now, let me propose a collection of strategies which I think are more constructive and are more effective ways of getting more students to volunteer in class. The first one is very, very simple, very straightforward, but something that we need to be reminded of. You need to increase your wait time: the time that you leave after asking the question before you do something else.

Most faculty report that they wait about 10 to 12 seconds before doing something else. In most observational studies, faculty are actually waiting somewhere between two to three seconds: the study that I like to cite, they waited 2.3 seconds after asking a question before doing some sort of follow-up behavior like calling on the first hand that appears or rephrasing the question. If you wait patiently, chances are good that you’re going to get more hands up in the air. It takes some students a little bit longer to process the question and to formulate an answer. One of the strategies I’ve tried to use in my own teaching was to make it a rule that I would not call on anybody until there were at least three hands up in the air.

The second strategy I think that is really helpful is to talk about how you think discussion and participation is better when a lot of different students are involved in doing this. You might even want to put that message in the syllabus. You certainly want to deliver it on the first day of class, and I would say you want to repeat it more or less regularly during the first weeks of the course. I also think it works to get students involved in a discussion about what makes participation a valuable learning experience in class. Chances are good that they’re going to talk about a lot of the issues that are a concern to you as well.
They’re going to talk about how there are not enough different people participating in the conversation. They’re going to talk about how some people are talking too much; sometimes they might even mention the professor. They’re going to talk about how it’s really important that other people listen when they’re talking and how they want all opinions respected in the classroom. After a discussion like that, it’s really easy to say to the class, “Look, I’m really committed to having interesting, useful participation in this course. That’s not something a teacher can do alone, so I’m asking you if you will help me make it happen in this class.”

Next strategy – don’t let some students participate too often. That’s a norm that gets established early in the course, and over-participators really spoil the rest of the class. When you ask a question, and the same people are answering over and over again, the rest of the class even stops thinking about the question that you’ve asked. Rather they’re thinking about, “How come Rob doesn’t have his hand up in the air yet?!” and “How come Mark has only said two things in class today?” and “Gee, it sure would be nice if Kate got in there and said something so the teacher doesn’t just call on me.” So don’t let students over-participate in the class.

Make comments regularly like, “We need to hear from more people,” or look at a particular location in the room and say, “Gee, we haven’t heard anything from you folks in this corner of the room. What are your ideas?” That I think will help prevent the problem of over-participation in the class. Be sure also that you listen carefully when students speak and thank them for their contributions. You can laud the effort even when a student has given an answer that isn’t correct or one that wasn’t all that great. You also want to really focus on students when they’re speaking.

Don’t look at the clock. Don’t rearrange your notes, but look at the student and really hear what they’re saying. I had a problem with this in my own classes. I would find that when I was lecturing and presenting material in class it never crossed my mind to worry about how much time had elapsed and whether I was sort of on schedule in terms of how much content I had to cover. But as soon as I would pause for discussion and a student would be participating, I’d start worrying about what time it was, and I would sort of try to subtly sneak a peak at my watch.

Those things are not possible to do subtly. Students pick up on those nonverbal cues very, very quickly, and that’s ultimately very rude. And so I stopped wearing a watch and really tried to focus my attention on what the students were saying. I also think that while you’re doing that, you want to look encouragingly and supportively at students who don’t speak all that often in class. Be sure that you continue to keep them in the conversation by establishing eye contact with them and directing comments directly at them. That keeps them part of the class and encourages them to participate.
And if they ever look at all like they might have something to say, you can encourage them with a gesture or a comment that might be something like, “Hank, did you want to say something about this?” It’s also very encouraging to students when you use something that they’ve said in a follow-up comment that you might make – “Your point about listening is so important, Rob. I hope everyone heard that, and I want to talk a little bit more about how when managers don’t listen very well that discourages subordinates from sharing their ideas.” That really validates students’ voices in the classroom and encourages more people to participate.

Another way to get more students volunteering is to ask really thought-provoking questions. Ask a really good question, and then give students 30 second during which it’s silent and they have an opportunity to either think about the question or to jot down some ideas. Now, obviously, if you have a lot of content to cover in the course, you can’t do this for every question. I found that this was a really good course preparation strategy for me because as I was reviewing my notes and the questions I wanted to ask in class, this strategy forced me to identify the one, the two, the three really central most important questions. I could then mark those in my notes and make sure that I gave students a bit of time to think about those questions. Going right along with that, to reiterate the importance of a question and to get more students volunteering put part of the question on the board or have it on a PowerPoint slide. You know that most everything that you write on the board or that appears in the PowerPoint ends up in students’ notes, and that’s such a good strategy. As I point out to my students, it’s really valuable and beneficial to have some questions in your notes when you’re reviewing for the exam.

Another strategy, closely related to this one, is if you ask one of these important, thought-provoking questions that you actually let students speak briefly with the students sitting around them. You solicit and you get them to share some of their ideas and opinions with each other. A strategy that works well then to get students who don’t participate regularly in class is when you’re debriefing that activity, you ask students to report what they heard someone else say. That way they’re just repeating what they heard rather than having to formulate their own answers; I think that’s a strategy that encourages some of those reluctant participators to start talking in class.

Also, another strategy that I think works well, which is a way of validating student contributions, is to label a particularly good or interesting answer with the student’s name. For example, you might say, “Remember Sarah’s theory on why the character, Melinda, refused to talk. Do you think Sarah’s theory might apply at this point in the novel?” You’ve labeled it with the student’s name. That really validates the importance of
what the student has said and I think is a bit of positive feedback that can be encouraging to other students as well.

Pay particular attention when a student participates for the very first time in class and do your absolute best to find something positive in what it is that that student has said. Now, I don’t think that means that you go ahead and point out that it’s the first time the student’s participated, but there’s a lot of smiling, and acknowledging, and some positive commentary after the student has spoken.

You do want to take care also when you respond to wrong or not-very-good answers. You want to always focus on correcting the answer, not the person. You don’t want to say something like, “No, Bill, you’re wrong.” You want to say, “No, Bill, the answer is wrong, and the answer is wrong because it doesn’t include any of the historical context,” or whatever else might be a problem with that.

You have to remember that participation that occurs between you and an individual student is happening in a public venue, and how you respond to that individual student can influence the level of participation for the rest of the class. You might be able to get away with dressing down a really smart student who should’ve known better.

He might really benefit from that kind of criticism; but other students who are not privy to what you know about that student might take real offense at that. I’ve kind of learned this lesson the hard way. I had a student who showed up in class one day – a bright, articulate student – and he was wearing a very strange pair of pants. They were sort of a faded rosy color – not the kind of thing that I’d expect him to wear at all. That day in class he gave a really, really good answer, and I acknowledged the answer, but then I made some quip about it was probably because he was wearing those fanciful pants that he was able to think so intellectually.

A few days later, he showed up in class wearing the same pants and asked if he could contribute that way because he was wearing the pants that helped him give good answers. As this kind of evolved in class, that student and other students would make comments about his pants whenever he wore them to class.

At some point in all of this, I actually asked the student if it was okay if we were doing this, and he was totally fine with it. He thought it was quite funny and humorous. And so this kind of played out for the whole semester, and I never knew it was a problem until I got my student ratings. And then there were all sorts of comments, particularly from students who I think didn’t participate in class, about how inappropriate it was for a teacher to be criticizing what a student was wearing – “Maybe he didn’t
have enough money to buy other kind of pants,” and “that was just really not a nice thing for a teacher to be doing.”

That was where I really learned that what you can do with an individual student may be fine, but it has larger implications for the class as a whole. So you want to be very careful how you respond to an individual student, particularly if you’re going to criticize that student.

Students are also encouraged when teachers don’t have the right answer to every question – when teachers are able to say, “Gee, I’m not sure,” or just flat out say, “You know what? That’s a great question, and I don’t know the answer to it.” If you wonder out loud sometimes, you show your own sort of curiosity about the content, you don’t present yourself as somebody who’s got all the answers, that can be very encouraging to other students who are participating.

One of my favorite strategies is to talk informally with students before or after class. I really like to get into my classroom just as soon as the previous class is out of there and get myself organized in the front of the room, and then walk all over the classroom as students are coming in. I might be passing back papers. I might be erasing the boards in the back – whatever – but I’m chatting informally with students, and I always try to make it a point to talk with the students who are not participating in class. It might be nothing more than social pleasantries, but I think it’s a way of really encouraging them to participate in class. If they have the chance to talk with me informally, then it’s a little easier for them to talk to me in a formal venue as well.

It also is very helpful if you will define participation broadly – if you think about a variety of different things that students can do that count as participation. Let participation include answering questions, asking questions, making comments, providing examples, doing a problem on the board, taking notes during a discussion, writing key comments on the board, even emailing questions or comments that might be something that you want to contribute in the classroom.

A lot of times if discussion is going well in the class and I’ve got a variety of students who are participating in class but I just can’t take time to get everybody called on and recognized, I can say to the students, “You know, if you’ve got a really good point, write yourself a note that you need to send me an email, or if you have something that you’d like to say about this, but you didn’t volunteer in class, you can also send that to me electronically. It just might be the kind of comment that we can use tomorrow when we summarize and reintroduce this particular topic.”

And last of all, I think you want to try to teach really expecting great answers from students. You want to teach expecting that you’re going to
be able to learn something from what the students will say. Now, I’m old, and I’ve been around for a long time, and I’m not naïve about this – I know that this is not something that is going to happen every day in class. It’s not even something that’s going to happen most days in class. But I think it’s important to be in class expecting that a student might say something that you will learn from. And sometimes this happens in a very surprising way.

One of my good colleagues at Penn State had a great story he told about a student in class who gave a really wonderful explanation for the title, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. A lot of discussion in the literature about what that title means and where it came from, and he was sharing a bit of that with the class, and this student volunteered. As my colleague said it was not a student from whom he expected to hear a great answer, but the student had a very creative, a very innovative, a very thoughtful explanation for that title. My colleague learned something from that student’s answer; I think that’s important to remember when we’re teaching.

So I’m hoping that this collection of strategies will be useful to you as you work in your classroom to encourage more students to voluntarily participate.

Thanks very much for your time. We would like to hear from you; there’s a web address on the screen where you can respond to a short set of survey questions. Have a good day.

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