

# Magna20MinuteMentor

## Supplemental Materials

### How Do I Get More Students to Participate in Class?

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# How Do I Get More Students to Participate in Class?

Maryellen Weimer

## Strategies That Increase the Number of Students Who Participate in Class

- Increase your wait time.
- Talk about how you think discussion is better when many students participate.
- Get students to discuss what makes participation a valuable learning experience for them.
- Don't let some students participate too often.
- Listen carefully when students speak and thank them for their contributions.
- Focus on students when they are speaking.
- Look directly and encouragingly at students who don't speak.
- Use something the student said in your follow-up commentary.
- Ask a thought-provoking question and give students 30 seconds to jot down some ideas.
- Put the question (or part of it) on the board or in a PowerPoint presentation.
- Ask an important question and then let students briefly talk about it with those nearby.
- If a student offers a great explanation or has an interesting idea, label it with the student's name and refer to it subsequently. Do your best to find something positive to say about a first-time contribution.
- Take care when responding to wrong or not-very-good answers.
- Don't always have the right answer to every question.
- Talk informally with students before class begins, after it's over, when you see students on campus or via email.
- Define participation broadly.
- Expect great answers.

## Learning More about Participation

A lot of good research has been done on participation in college classrooms. Here are some key findings and references that provide excellent background and reasons why working to get more students participating is so important.

- In an observational study of 20 social science and humanities classrooms, teachers devoted only 5.85% of total class time to student participation. That's approximately one minute per 40 minutes of class time.
- Half the students surveyed in this study said they participated infrequently or never in classes.

Reference: Nunn, C. E. "Discussion in the College Classroom: Triangulating Observational and Survey Results." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1996, 67 (3), 243-266.

- In another observational study, only 44% of the students participated, and 28% of those who did participate accounted for 89% of all the comments made by students.

Reference: Howard, J. R., Short, L. B., and Clark, S. M. "Students' Participation in the Mixed Age Classroom." *Teaching Sociology*, 1996, 24 (1), 8-24.

- Why students don't participate: One study found that the main reason is a lack of confidence. Students feared looking unintelligent in front of the professor **and** in front of their peers.

Reference: Fassinger, P. A. "Understanding Classroom Interaction: Students' and Professors' Contributions to Students' Silence." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1995, 66 (1), 82-96.

- "The more students perceive the professor as an authority of knowledge, the less likely it is they will participate in class." (p. 586)
- Traditional-age students (defined as those between 18 and 24) are 2.5 times more likely to report that they never or seldom participate in class than non-traditional-age students. And non-traditional-age students are three times more likely to report that they always participate.
- Noted as the most important finding: Faculty interaction outside the class positively influences participation in class.

- Reference: Weaver, R. R. and Qi, Jiang. "Classroom Organization and Participation." *Journal of Higher Education*, 2005, 76 (5), 570-600.
- Less participation occurred in introductory courses than in upper-division courses: 5.7 students made two or more comments and contributed 75% of all student comments in the introductory courses observed, and 8.5 students made two or more comments for 90% of all student comments in the upper-division courses.

Reference: Fritschner, L. M. "Inside the Undergraduate College Classroom: Faculty and Students Differ on the Meaning of Student Participation." *Journal of Higher Education*, 2000, 71 (3), 342-362.

- Observers noted 31 interactions per session, 29 (92%) of which were made by 5 students.
- 29.3% of students were defined as "talkers" – they made two or more contributions per class session.
- More than half the students did not participate in any of the 10 sessions of each class observed.

Reference: Howard, J. R. and Henney, A. C. "Student Participation and Instructor Gender in Mixed Age Classrooms." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1998, 69 (4), 384-405.

- Only a bit more than 50% of the nontalkers (defined as students who did not speak or contributed fewer than two comments per class session) thought that students had a responsibility to participate in discussion.
- A student view repeatedly expressed during interviews: "Students, as consumers, have purchased the right to choose a passive role if they wish. To make them uncomfortable by requiring they participate in discussion was deemed an unreasonable expectation by many of the students interviewed." (p. 516)
- Only 43% of students (about 30% of the nontalkers) thought it was fair for an instructor to make verbal participation a part of the grade.

Reference: Howard, J. R. and Baird, R. "The Consolidation of Responsibility and Students' Definitions of Situation in the Mixed Age College Classroom." *Journal of Higher Education*, 2000, 71 (6), 700-721.

- Students overestimate the level at which they participate. More than 56% identified themselves "talkers," defined in this study as students making more than two contributions per class session. Just about 26% of these students were "talkers," based on observations of them in the classroom.

Reference: Howard, J. R., James, G. H., and Taylor, D. R. "The Consolidation of Responsibility in the Mixed Age Classroom." *Teaching Sociology*, 2002, 30, 214-234

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