STUDENTS PARTICIPATION IN CLASS DISCUTION

Ana Cristina POPESCU
Universitatea din Piteşti

Abstract: *Students' enthusiasm, involvement, and willingness to participate affect the quality of class discussion as an opportunity for learning. The challenge is to engage all students, keep them talking to each other about the same topic, and help them develop insights into the material. There was a warning against falling into quasi discussions – encounters in which students talk but do not develop or criticize their own positions and fail to reflect on the process and outcomes of the session. Two common forms of quasi discussion are quiz shows (where the teacher has the right answers) and bull sessions (characterized by cliches, stereotypes, empty* generalizations, lack of standards for judging opinions, and aimless talking).

Keywords: *involvement, willingness, challenge, discussion, quiz shows*

Encourage students to learn each other's names and interests**.** Students are more likely to participate in class if they feel they are among friends rather than strangers; so at the beginning of the term, ask students to introduce themselves and describe their primary interests or background in the subject These introductions may also give you some clues about framing discussion questions that address students' interests. Get to know as many of your students as class size permits**.** In classes of thirty or less, learn all your students' names. If you require students to come to your office once during the first few weeks of class, you can also learn about their interests. Class participation often improves after students have had an opportunity to talk informally with their instructor.

Arrange seating to promote discussion**.** If your room has movable chairs, ask students to sit in a semicircle so that they can see one another. At a long seminar table, seat yourself along the side rather than at the head. If appropriate, ask students to print their names on name cards and display them on their desk or the table. Latest research shows that people tend to talk to the person sitting opposite them, that people sitting next to each other tend not to talk to one another, that the most centrally placed member of a group tends to emerge as leader, and that leaders tend to sit in the least crowded parts of a room.

Allow the class time to warm up before you launch into the discussion**.** Consider arriving two to three minutes early to talk informally with students. Or open class with a few minutes of conversation about relevant current events, campus activities, or administrative matters.

Limit your own comments. Some teachers talk too much and turn a discussion into a lecture or a series of instructor-student dialogues. Avoid the temptation to respond to every student's contribution. Instead, allow students to develop their ideas and respond to one another.

Make certain each student has an opportunity to talk in class during the first two or three weeks. The longer a student goes without speaking in class, the more difficult it will be for him or her to contribute. Devise small group or pair work early in the term so that all students can participate and hear their own voices in nonthreatening circumstances.

Plan an icebreaker activity early in the semester. For example, **a** professor teaching plant domestication in cultural geography asks students to bring to class a fruit

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or vegetable from another culture or region. The discussion focuses on the countries of origin and the relationship between food and culture. At the end of class students eat what they brought.

Ask students to identify characteristics of an effective discussion**.** Ask students individually or in small groups to recall discussions and seminars in which they have participated and to list the characteristics of those that were worthwhile. Then ask students to list the characteristics of poor discussions. Write the items on the board, tallying those items mentioned by more than one student or group. With the entire class, explore ways in which class members can maximize those aspects that make for a good discussion and minimize those aspects that make for a poor discussion.

Periodically divide students into small groups. Students find it easier to speak to groups of three or four than to an entire class. Divide students into small groups, have them discuss a question or issue for five or ten minutes, and then return to a plenary format. Choose topics that are focused and straightforward: "What are the two most important characteristics of goal-free evaluation?" or "Why did the experiment fail?" Have each group report orally and record the results on the board. Once students have spoken in small groups, they may be less reluctant to speak to the class as a whole.

Assign roles to students**.** Ask two or three students to lead a discussion session sometime during the term. Meet with the student discussion leaders beforehand to go over their questions and proposed format. Have the leaders distribute three to six discussion questions to the class a week before the discussion. During class the leaders assume responsibility for generating and facilitating the discussion. For discussions you lead, assign one or two students per session to be observers responsible for commenting on the discussion. Other student roles include periodic summarizer (to summarize the main substantive points two or three times during the session), recorder (to serve as the group's memory), timekeeper (to keep the class on schedule), and designated first speaker.

Use poker chips or "comment cards" to encourage discussion**.** One faculty member distributes three poker chips to each student in her class. Each time a student speaks, a chip is turned over to the instructor. Students must spend all their chips by the end of the period. The professor reports that this strategy limits students who dominate the discussion and encourages quiet students to speak up. Another professor hands out a "comment card" each time a student provides a strong response or insightful comment. Students turn back the cards at the end of the period, and the professor notes on the course roster the number of cards each student received.

Use electronic mail to start a discussion**.** One faculty member in the biological sciences poses a question through electronic mail and asks the students to write in their responses and comments. He then hands out copies of all the responses to initiate the class discussion.

Build rapport with students. Simply saying that you are interested in what your students think and that you value their opinions *may* not be enough. In addition, comment positively about a student's contribution and reinforce good points by paraphrasing or summarizing them. If a student makes a good observation that is ignored by the class, point this out: "Thank you, Dan. Maria also raised that issue earlier, but we didn't pick up on it. Perhaps now is the time to address it. Thank you for your patience, Maria".

Bring students' outside comments into class**.** Talk to students during office hours, in hallways, and around campus. If they make a good comment, check with them first to see whether they are willing to raise the idea in class, then say: " Ioana, you were

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saying something about that in the hall yesterday Would you repeat it for the rest of the class.

Use nonverbal cues to encourage participation**.** For example, smile expectantly and nod as students talk. Maintain eye contact with students. Look relaxed and interested.

Draw all students into the discussion. You can involve more students by asking whether they agree with what has just been said or whether someone can provide another example to support or contradict a point: "How do the rest of you feel about that?" or "Does anyone who hasn't spoken care to comment on the plans for … ?" Moreover, if you move away from – rather than toward – a student who makes a comment, the student will speak up and outward, drawing everyone into the conversation. The comment will be "on the floor," open for students to respond to.

Give quiet students special encouragement. Quiet students are not necessarily uninvolved, so avoid excessive efforts to draw them out. Some quiet students, though, are just waiting for a nonthreatening opportunity to speak. To help these students, consider the following strategies:

Arrange small group (two to four students) discussions.

Pose casual questions that don't call for a detailed correct response:

"What are some reasons why people may not vote?" or "What do you remember most from the reading?" or "Which of the articles did you find most difficult?"

Stand or sit next to someone who has not contributed; your proximity may draw a hesitant student into the discussion.

Discourage students who monopolize the discussion**.** In classes with fewer than forty students, four or five students accounted for *75* percent of the total interactions per session. In classes with more than forty students, two or three students accounted for 51 percent of the exchanges. Here are some ways to handle dominating students:

Break the class into small groups or assign tasks to pairs of students.

Ask everyone to jot down a response to your question and then choose someone to speak.

If only the dominant students raise their hand, restate your desire for greater student participation: "I'd like to hear from others in the class."

Avoid making eye contact with the talkative.

If one student has been dominating the discussion, ask other students whether they agree or disagree with that student.

Explain that the discussion has become too one-sided and ask the monopolizer to help by remaining silent: "Mihai, since we must move on, would you briefly summarize your remarks, and then we'll hear the reactions of other group members."

Assign a specific role to the dominant student that limits participation (for example, periodic summarizer).

Acknowledge the time constraints: "Ion, I notice that our time is running out. Let's set a thirty-second limit on everybody's comments from now on."

If the monopolizer is a serious problem, speak to him or her after class or during office hours. Tell the student that you value his or her participation and wish more students contributed. If this student's comments are good, say so; but point out that learning results from give-and-take and that everyone benefits from hearing a range of opinions and views.

Tactfully correct wrong answers. Any type of put-down or disapproval will inhibit students from speaking up and from learning. Say something positive about those

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aspects of the response that are insightful or creative and point out those aspects that are off base. Provide hints, suggestions, or follow-up questions that will enable students to understand and correct their own errors. There are also suggested prompts such as "Good–now let's take. it a step further"; "Keep going"; "Not quite, but keep thinking about it."

Reward but do not grade student participation**.** Some faculty members assign grades based on participation or reward student participation with bonus points when assigning final grades. Students are asked to rate the class participation of each of their classmates as high, medium, or low If the median peer rating is higher than the instructor's rating of that student, the two ratings are averaged. If the peer rating is lower, the student receives the instructor's rating. Other faculty members believe that grading based on participation is inappropriate, that is, subjective and not defensible if challenged. They also note that such a policy may discourage free and open discussion, making students hesitant to talk for fear of revealing their ignorance or being perceived as trying to gain grade points. In addition, faculty argue, thoughtful silence is not unproductive, and shy students should not be placed at a disadvantage simply because they are shy.

There are means other than grades to encourage and reward participation: verbal praise of good points, acknowledgment of valued contributions, or even written notes to students who have added significantly to the discussion. One faculty member uses lottery tickets to recognize excellent student responses or questions when they occur. He doesn't announce this in advance but distributes the first ticket as a surprise. Tickets can be given to individuals or to small groups. Over the term, he may hand out fifteen to twenty lottery tickets. In a small class, you maybe able to keep notes on students' participation and devote some office hours to helping students develop their skills in presenting their points of view and listening to their classmates.

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