

# Why So Quiet?: Strategies for Engaging Your Students in the Discussion

## WHAT PREVENTS STUDENTS FROM PARTICIPATING?

### 1. They don't think they have anything worthwhile to say or they worry about seeming stupid. How can we help students feel comfortable participating?

- Learn students' names: students will be more likely to participate if they feel recognized as individuals. If you have trouble with names, try name tags.
- Start with some easy questions or questions that don't have a wrong answer. For example, I often start by asking students what they **noticed** in a text.
- Encourage participation with positive *and* specific feedback: be affirmative without saying "great point" to everyone as it saps students' motivation to participate.
- Help students clarify unclear comments: use "say back" to clarify a student's point ("What I hear you saying is...") or ask others in the class to help out.
- Refer back to your students' comments from past discussions.
- Use class time for students to develop classroom guidelines for discussion.

### 2. They are not engaged with the material. How can we engage our students?

- Take a break from lecturing and Power-Pointing: break up class time with group work and in-class writing. Full-class lectures encourage passivity and don't promote active learning. Studies suggest that the average length of an attention span is only 15-20 minutes.
- Present students with complex problems: problems are natural motivators and students can work together in groups to wrestle with them.
- Ask students to ask the questions: as a homework or in-class assignment, ask students to pose questions. Use these questions to teach students how to ask good comprehension questions or the questions of your discipline.
- Hold a debate: present students with a debatable issue and break them into groups to develop arguments for each side. Work together to develop guidelines for the debate.
- Integrate multi-media: use youtube videos, Ted Talks, podcasts, etc.
- Give students in-class responsibilities: assign class presentations, ask students to lead discussions, and invite students to write on the board.
- Include participation as a factor in your grading on your syllabus. Be clear about your expectations.
- Ask students to turn off (not onto vibrate or silent, but off) cell phones at the beginning of class.

**3. They don't understand the material. How can we help our students understand the material?**

- Ask students to make a list of questions or to mark places in the text that they don't understand.
- Prepare students for difficult reading assignments in class: preview the reading (for example, read the introduction together), ask students to share what they already know on the subject, and/or grab students' attention with an unexpected entrée into the reading (for example, a scene from a movie or a youtube video). Students often have trouble with readings assignments that are wholly unfamiliar to them in both content and form.
- Ask students to create a glossary of terms that they update with each reading assignment. One of the challenges of breaking into an unfamiliar discipline is learning its language. This glossary can serve as a good study guide for an exam.
- Provide students opportunity to reflect on what they are learning and how they are learning it: meta-cognitive reflection increases the chances that what they are learning will transfer to other courses and beyond academia.

**4. Some students are just shy. How can we get shy students to participate?**

- Divide students up into small groups: shyer students usually participate in smaller groups.
- Use written feedback: if you have a shy student who does well on a test or writes a successful paper, respond with encouragement to share his/her ideas.

**HOW CAN I GET STUDENTS TO TALK TO ONE ANOTHER AND NOT JUST ME?**

- Make students aware of the IRE pattern and its limitations: teacher Initiates question, student Responds, teacher Evaluates (Milner & Milner).
- Make a circle of chairs when possible: students are more likely to talk to one another if they are looking at one another.
- Be quiet: leave silent space for students.
- Divide the class into groups: they will get to know each other and learn each other's names.
- Ask students to say their own names and use others when they participate.
- Ask students to summarize what the previous student said, and then to respond to his/her comment using: "I agree, and..." "I agree, but..." "I disagree because..."
- Distribute conversational moves to students (see "Discussion Strategy: Conversational Moves" handout).

# Why So Quiet?: Strategies for Engaging Students in Active Learning

## GROUP WORK

### Benefits of group work:

- Shyer students often open up in a small group.
- Studies on attention span suggest that learners zone out after 15-20 minutes. Even if students are participating in a large group discussion, the majority of students spends the entire time just listening rather than actively engaged.
- Students who explain the material to one another better understand the material.
- Students practice working collaboratively and learning from one another.

### Tips for integrating group work:

- Break students into groups of 2-5 depending on task.
- Use anywhere from 5-30 minutes for group work depending on task.
- Provide students with specific task preferably in writing (or they'll keep asking you to repeat it).
- Give the group a task that requires that they define and/or solve real world problems and/or raise questions worth pursuing.
- Require groups to report back. It helps to designate a spokesperson and to ask students to record their work in writing.

## LOW-STAKES WRITING

Low-stakes writing is ungraded, informal writing.

### Benefits of low-stakes writing:

- If students have written about something in class, even for a few minutes, they almost always have something to say on the subject.
- You don't have to grade it or even read it!
- Students who write about the material are more likely to internalize it and perform better on exams.
- Students who practice low-stakes writing are likely to write better papers because they've road tested the material.
- It can be done at any time during the class: at the beginning, in the middle, or as exit writing (exit writing is usually collected and can give you a sense of what students are understanding especially if it's anonymous).

### **Tips for using low-stakes writing:**

It helps to give student something specific to write about. Here are some examples of writing prompts:

- Take five minutes to summarize what you remember from our last class.
- Write down five questions you have about the reading assignment/lecture.
- Write an exam question.
- Define (insert key concept here) from the reading in your own words.
- Exit writing: identify 2 questions you have as a result of today's lecture or describe one thing you learned in class today. This will help you assess the students' experience of the class.

### **PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING:**

“In the problem-based approach, complex, real world problems are used to motivate students to identify and research the concepts and principles they need to know to work through those problems. Students work in small learning teams, bringing together collective skill at acquiring, communicating, and integrating information”(Dubh, Groh & Allen, 2001).

### **Benefits of Problem-Based Learning:**

- Problems motivate students.
- Students work collaboratively.
- Students who learn concepts in context are more likely to understand and retain them.
- Students learn how to define a problem.
- Students practice raising questions that allow them to better understand and solve problems.
- Students learn to weigh options.
- Students suggest that successful leaders have cultivated the habit of mind to sit with complex problems rather than reach for a quick but inadequate solution (Martin).

**Process for using problem-based learning** (from Duch, Groh & Allen, based on Boud & Feletti):

1. Divide students into groups and present them with a specific problem.
2. Ask students to define the problem attending to what is at stake.
3. Ask students to make a list of questions based on what they do not know or understand about the problem. (Boud & Feletti refer to these questions as “learning issues”).
4. Students rank these questions/learning issues in order of importance and work with the professor to decide what resources are necessary to answer these questions.
5. Students are assigned research questions to pursue individually and as a group depending on the size of the question.
6. After they've completed the research, students present the information and use it to redefine the problem.

Catherine Savini  
csavini@wsc.ma.edu

## References

- Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- Duch, Barbara J, Susan E. Groh, and Deborah Allen. *The Power of Problem-Based Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2001.
- Middendorf, Joan and Alan Kalish. "The 'Change-Up' in Lectures" *The National Teaching and Learning Forum* 5.2 (1996): 1-4.
- Rudolph, Jennifer and Scott Wurdinger. "Teaching Practices that Improve Student Learning: Five Experiential Approaches" *Journal of Teaching and Learning* 6.1 (2009): 1-13