

Encouraging Student Participation: Tip Sheet

A workshop from the University of Pittsburgh's
University Center for Teaching & Learning



This is our number one tip: Give a small writing exercise (1 or 2 minutes) in response to your question before eliciting a response, then ask for volunteers or call on students to share what they have written. Ask, “What did *you* write?”

-Tell your students *why* they are doing what they are doing. Relate participation directly to course/class learning objectives and communicate this relationship to your students. Tell your students how this participation will help them achieve their personal, academic, and professional goals.

-Learn your students’ names and use them. Talk to your students immediately before class begins about things that may not be related to class.

-Relate in-class participation to some kind of preparatory assignment. For example, provide some reading questions that they must answer beforehand in writing and bring to class with them.

-Relate participation to some upcoming graded assignment or test: “What we are doing now will prepare you to succeed on the mid-term, for these reasons.”

-Draw upon your students’ prior knowledge. Begin with a discussion question that you feel confident they can answer based upon their own experience (whether from earlier classes or their personal life experience). Relate your subject to real life: current events, pop culture, etc.

-Affirm correct answers verbally and with body language, and indicate *why* it is a good answer.

-Avoid “scaring off” students from participating after a wrong answer. Thank them for their contribution. Then identify what is *right* (or what could be right) about the wrong answer, even if it’s something small, while at the same time making the correction.

-Wait 20 seconds after asking a question—*students* should be uncomfortable with the silence, not you, and someone will eventually speak up.

-“Muzzle” yourself. Resist the urge to comment upon a student’s comment immediately. Instead, briefly and succinctly restate the student comment and ask the class, “What do others think of this?” or “Do you agree? Why or why not?”

-Start class immediately with a participation activity: a discussion question displayed overhead, a group activity which serves as a review of skills from the previous class, a “nuts and bolts” or “just the facts” discussion of the reading, which can serve as a foundation for more in-depth discussion later.

-Weave targeted, yet open-ended questions into your lecture, rather than breaking the class up into strictly bounded “lecture” and “discussion” portions.