

The Practical Professor

No. 4

Quick and easy tips, questions, and suggestions for improving teaching and learning.

Ask the Practical Professor #1: Class Participation

Dear Practical Professor,

We're in the third week of classes now, and I've found that my students have settled into roles as either active participators or silent listeners in my classes. Since it's still pretty early in the semester, I'm interested in ways that I might get more students to speak/participate in class. Thanks!

B.S. - Okay. Nice **long** question, so let me ask: how much do **you** talk in class? The more you talk, the less other people can. So first, time yourself. 5 - 8 minutes max. Stop talking. Students have a lot less thinking to do when we lecture or use long videos, and many are happy to just sit there. I like to set an expectation that **everyone speaks** each week. I do tell people that if there is a reason they cannot speak in class, they should tell me. Also, I give a lot of "think, work with 1 - 2 other people for 5 minutes, answer" type activities so people can report their group work, rather than their own. Well, another thing is that you can have students in pairs or triads come up with questions based upon the reading or homework or lab. It's just another way to give shy students a chance to speak.

J.F. - Ask your students for help. Tell them the class has some great and active participators and now you need their help to make sure that even more people have the chance to participate. Have them come up with ideas in groups (an exercise in participation!). Ask the dependable participators to hang back a little until you signal them. Call on students randomly. This might make some slightly uneasy, but this kind of *mild* unease can be a good thing for attention, focus, and learning. Or call on a table or section: every student in a given row or section gets to contribute or ask a question before you "call on" another section. Introduce a foam ball or stuffed animal to your class. Let students call on each other by tossing the object to another student, who must then contribute to the discussion or ask a productive question. Many people like to gather their thoughts before speaking. Others develop their thoughts *by* speaking. It's the first group that's probably the silent group in your class. Give them *time* to think before answering a question: tell the class you're about to ask a question and you're going to wait 15 seconds (time it) before anyone can raise a hand. You'll see new hands go up.

B.S. - You can probably guess how much J.F. talks in class.

J.F. - Just remember, readers, his initials are B.S.

In the next *The Practical Professor*: Student Feedback Techniques Series #2

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