PARTICIPATION

Research Documented Problems with Participation

Most teachers devote a small amount of time to participation

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.

Based on 155 visits to 40 college classrooms at different institutions, across a range of disciplines and at course levels from introductory to advanced: Professors talked almost 80% of the time, four times more frequently than students in these classes with an average size of 47. The amount of teacher talk was consistent across institutional type, discipline and perhaps most surprisingly, course level.

A large percentage of students never talk

Half the students surveyed in this study said they participated infrequently or never in the classes.

Over half the students in this study did not participate in any of the 10 sessions of each class observed.

Thirty two class sessions observed with 20 students in attendance on average. Twelve students per session did not participate.
A small number of students do most of the talking

In this 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.


Teachers ask factual questions that test recall, not questions that challenge higher order thinking

From a chapter summarizing a number of different studies of classroom participation: “Over four-fifths of the time, instructors asked students to recall facts or ideas. This was true whether the course was at an introductory or advanced level. It should disturb us to note that approximately one-third of the questions asked by professors were never answered. This suggests that professors often use questioning merely as a rhetorical tool for furthering their own lectures rather than as a strategy for evoking class participation.” (p. 185)

In a study that compared classes with the most and least participation, there was significantly more participation when faculty asked analytical questions. Reference: Auster, C. J., and MacRone, M. “The Classroom as a Negotiated Social Setting: An Empirical Study of the Effects of Faculty Members’ Behavior on Students’ Participation.” Teaching Sociology, October 1994, 22, 289-300.

What the research says about why students don’t participate

They participate less if they perceive that the teacher has all the answers

“The more students perceive the professor as an authority of knowledge, the less likely it is they will participate in class.” (p. 586)

They lack confidence

This study found the main reason is a lack of confidence. Students feared looking unintelligent in front of the professor and in front of their peers.
Are calling on students and grading participation viable solutions to these problems?

According to students, no

This student view was expressed repeatedly during interviews conducted as part of this study: “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)

In the same study, only 43% of students thought it was fair for an instructor to make verbal participation a part of their grade.


According to some research, yes

“Our results present a strong argument against the common belief that cold calling decreases student comfort in the discussion classroom.” (p. 241)


Innovative approaches to handling participation

Let students have some control over how they participate


“Pay” for good and appropriate contributions


Assessing classroom participation

Let students establish the grading criteria


Involve students in the assessment process


**DISCUSSION**
Getting Students Prepared to Discuss

--after a telling assessment revealing just how few students were actually doing the reading, devised an interesting assignment which did as the title claims

--insightful analysis of student reading skills and how they can be developed. Objects to quizzes and proposes an assignment that helps develop college level reading skills.

--great example of an assignment design that gets students doing the reading at the same time it develops college-level reading skills.

--describes an assignment that gets students doing the reading before they come to class and participating in discussion during class.

Good General Sources on Discussion

--thorough analysis of discussion and many ideas for more student participation and less teacher control.

--compelling confirmation of the power of discussion to promote learning from one of the all time best discussion teachers.

--super collection of discussion starter ideas, not dated despite the publication date.

--lots of practical suggestions like “cool” calling which gives students a bit of time to prepare an answer.

GROUP WORK

Group Formation

Should teachers form the groups or let students form their own groups? If teachers form the groups, what criteria should they use?
What’s the best size for PBL groups?
Should group membership stay the same or should new groups be formed for each case?


**Designing Tasks that Promote Learning and Develop Skills Needed to Work Together Productively** (for PBL and beyond)

  - How do you design tasks that students don’t find boring?
  - How do you prevent students from dividing the task and working independently? What about group to group collaboration?
  - What about group testing?


**Handling Small Group Dynamics**

  - What about students who are not doing their fair share of the work?
  - What about students who are doing more than their fair share of the work?
  - What about groups who are managing their time poorly; socializing, procrastinating?
  - What about groups with role problems; too many leaders, no leaders, no one disagrees? What problems should the group solve and what problems should the teacher solve? What should teachers do when they intervene in a group’s problems?


**Making Use of Group Products**

  - What’s the best way to share group products with the whole class? Presentations? Online?

**Assessing Learning that Occurs in Collective Context**

  - What’s best? Group grades? Individual grades? Some combination of both?
  - What about peer assessment within the groups? Should it count? How much?
  - What about groups assessing other groups?
