



Why Students Don't Participate In Discussions And What To Do About It

By Michael Linsin on February 11, 2017

Make no mistake.

Participating in class discussions is important, for all students.

It's important for their academic development.

It's important for their communication skills.

It's important for their confidence and enjoyment of school.

But it's also one of the most misunderstood areas of teaching.

Conventional wisdom says that you should confront students directly about their lack of participation.

You should give [pep-talks](#) and private chats. You should encourage and spur them on. You should explain its importance and let them know that they "need to participate more."

But doing so is a mistake.

It's a mistake because the added pressure will cause them to sink deeper in their seats (hide) or volunteer through clenched teeth (against their will).

To get everyone in your class involved, even the most reluctant students, they have to *want* to participate. It must be of their own volition. Therefore, you must pull, not push.

Another common strategy is to encourage students *as they're participating*.

The teacher will make eye contact with the speaker, nod their head in support, and smile with satisfaction when the student finishes. They may also offer winks, high fives, and “way to gos.”

But again, for those who feel uncomfortable speaking in front of the class, this is precisely the wrong strategy – because it makes them feel like the center of attention.

It highlights their discomfort in front of the class and labels them as shy, aloof, or awkward, which reinforces how they already feel.

So what's the solution?

The solution is to back off, release the pressure, and allow your students to gradually become more comfortable.

Here's how in three simple steps:

Provide tools.

Most teachers assume their students already know how to participate because it seems so obvious. You just raise your hand and speak.

But they need to know what it looks like. They need you to model for them how to successfully take part in a discussion.

How best do you agree or disagree? How do you voice an original idea? How do you piggyback or dovetail? How long should you speak? What does polite and impolite discussion look and sound like? What is and isn't acceptable?

Seeing *how* to do it removes much of the fear associated with public speaking and is all most students need to take risks and become lost in the give and take of lively conversation.

Focus on the topic.

The focus of class discussions should be on the topic at hand, not individual speakers. In fact, you must behave as if you don't give a whit who is doing the talking.

Now, at first it may feel like you're ignoring the speaker, especially if you're in the habit of encouraging hesitant students. But this is exactly what they need to become uninhibited enough to voice their true thoughts and opinions.

It's exactly what they need to show passion and become invested in the topic.

So even if Jonah, Reina, and Jackie share for the very first time, you must pretend that it's a normal, everyday occurrence. *No big deal, simply an expectation of the class.*

Move on quickly.

When a student finishes speaking, it's important that you move on as quickly as possible in order to remove the spotlight and allow them their private moment in the sun.

Taking a risk and succeeding (i.e. getting the same "hmm," "okay," "interesting" or no response from you as the more confident students) is deeply and intrinsically motivating.

If you allow the student to bask in the glow of doing something they were previously self-conscious about, all on their own and without your interference, it will lead to more and more of the same.

A True Safe Space

The key to getting students to participate is to **make them feel safe** by removing any judgment *of their performance*.

For the purpose of cultivating vibrant, interesting discussion, performance is irrelevant. It will, however, naturally get better and more confident with time.

Within such an environment, students are perfectly okay with having their ideas disagreed with. This is virtually never the reason they're reluctant to participate.

Respectful disagreement is good and healthy. In fact, it's vital to a well-rounded education.

Your classroom should never be safe from differing ideas and opinions. Rather, it should be safe to share them. It's a form of safe space that causes all students to get involved and *want* to participate.

It teaches them that it's okay to disagree. It's okay to be persuaded by facts and well-informed arguments. It's okay to think for yourself.

Teach great lessons. Present all sides of an issue, while keeping your own opinions to yourself. Provide the tools of respectful participation and set the parameters.

Then gently take the pressure off.

Give your students the freedom to share, debate, learn from each other, and wrestle with complex issues, character motivations, and historical perspectives without a care in the world about their performance.

And they will thrive.