

Center for Instructional Development and Research

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Information for People who Teach
at the University of Washington

More and Better Class Participation

Students' class participation helps instructors see how the students have understood the course material, and it also helps promote further student learning. However, at times it can be a challenge for instructors to get their students to participate. Here are challenges instructors sometimes face and strategies to help you respond.

"I ASK QUESTIONS IN CLASS, BUT STUDENTS DON'T RESPOND."

1. Students may need more time to formulate a thoughtful response. What seems like a long silence to you might be just a few seconds, barely enough time for students to collect their thoughts and put them into words.
2. Students may not know what kind of answer to give. For example, is it clear to them if you are asking for summary? Analysis? Personal experience? Debate?
3. Students may need more preparation before responding. Have they completed readings, attended lectures, or had experiences that provide a basis for an immediate answer?

"SOME STUDENTS ASK AND ANSWER QUESTIONS, BUT OTHERS SEEM RELUCTANT TO PARTICIPATE IN CLASS DISCUSSIONS OR SMALL GROUPS."

1. Students may not want to speak out in front of the whole class. To help them gain confidence to participate:
 - tell them in advance what to prepare to discuss,
 - ask them to write briefly in class prior to the discussion to help them articulate their ideas, or
 - ask them to talk about the topic briefly with a partner or small group before the whole class discussion.

Then ask students to join a whole class discussion based on their writing, group work, or other preparation.

2. Students may see a question-and-answer session or group work as a "break" from lecture rather than as a way of learning. Students may participate more actively if you:
 - make your goals for the discussion explicit to students, and also the amount of time planned for it
 - tell specific groups that you will ask them to present certain points of a discussion or aspects of a problem
 - take time to discuss how groups can work effectively
 - give students feedback on their class participation in relation to what you want them to learn for the class

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3. Students may have somehow gotten the impression that your questions are directed only to particular students (for example, the “best” students who sit in the front row, or students in a particular social or ethnic group).

One way to change this impression is to move around the room during small group work so that you can talk directly with students who tend to participate less.

Use this group time to assess students’ progress, help solve problems, ask additional questions, and invite students’ participation in the whole class discussion.

“IN THE PAST I HAVE SEEN STUDENTS SHUT DOWN CLASS DISCUSSIONS WITH RUDE OR INAPPROPRIATE COMMENTS. HOW CAN I PREPARE FOR SITUATIONS LIKE THAT?”

1. Apply the principle of Prevention. Many UW instructors work with students to set ground rules for class participation before discussions take place.
2. Prepare in advance for discussing controversial topics. Make goals for the discussion clear to students, and remind them of ground rules they’ve helped establish.
3. From the students’ point of view, if you do not respond to inappropriate activity in your classroom, you are implicitly condoning it. Consult with your colleagues or with CIDR to develop ways of responding clearly and constructively in challenging classroom situations.

HOW CAN CIDR HELP?

Sometimes being aware of these factors is enough to help you make changes, but many people find it difficult to examine their own teaching style while they are teaching.

A CIDR consultant can help by observing your class and/or getting feedback from your students. We can also discuss ways to structure activities for your class, direct you to teaching resources, and propose additional strategies for responding to challenging classroom situations.

For more information, visit our web site: <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/>



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CIDR promotes excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Washington through its work with individual faculty and TAs, departments, campus-wide initiatives, and University leaders. CIDR staff are available year-round to collaborate on the design, implementation, and assessment of ways to advance teaching and learning for all students in the diverse UW community. Consultations are confidential and offered at no charge to UW faculty, TAs, and departments.

If you have questions about teaching and learning, or you would like to find out more about working with CIDR, you can call us at 543-6588, send a message to cidr@u.washington.edu, or visit our web site:

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