

Co-producing Class Participation

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As faculty, we want students in our classes to be actively engaged. One measure of students' engagement is their participation in class discussions. Research shows that student participation enhances learning, improves motivation, develops higher level cognitive skills and leads to better academic outcomes. In addition to these pedagogical benefits, as a practical matter, employers are asking for better communication skills from our student body. In a business curriculum, class participation is greatly valued, and in some classes it may count for as much as 50% of a student's grade. Even with such a strong incentive to participate, some students do not. This is frustrating for teachers who do their best to facilitate discussion but are met by mystified looks or stony silence.

My research would characterize this as a classic co-production issue. Co-production is the notion that customer participation in a service affects its quality. My characterization is not to imply that a student is the sole customer of education or even a customer at all. Instead the characterization recognizes that in service industries the service provider and the service recipient must work together for a successful outcome. This situation is in contrast to one in which the consumer acquires physical goods (cars, clothes, sodas), where the customer is usually far-removed from the production process. In a medical setting, the clinical outcome is affected by how well the patient works with a physician (complying with preventive steps; following the recommended regimen). In a financial services setting, an accountant's ability to produce satisfactory results is affected by whether the customer keeps good records or shows up with a jumble of receipts in a shoebox. Similarly, in a teaching and learning setting, effective class participation requires effort from both faculty and students.

When people don't co-produce it is important to know why. Are our students A.R.M.ed for successful class participation? The acronym stands for Ability, Role Clarity, and Motivation. Deficiencies in any of these can hamper class participation, and it is important for teachers to know which factor(s) may be lacking in a particular class. Ability and

Motivation are familiar to us as the “will and skill” or as the “can-do and want-to-do.” Role clarity refers to mental scripts, to notions about appropriate roles for a student and a teacher.

The nature of the material or the size of the class may make it difficult to use class discussion effectively. The following is a discussion of some best practices for those instructors who can and wish to foster class participation. They draw upon both my observations of great teachers and research that I have supervised or conducted.

1. Set expectations about roles.

This practice may seem obvious but in some contexts—for example, teaching international students—it is absolutely crucial. It is not enough to do this on the first day of class or to put it in your syllabus. It is important to reinforce your message by acting in accord with your stated expectations and by otherwise making sure that students internalize the message. Over the years, I have had students trained in Germany share their puzzlement at the level of informality in an American classroom. Students from Asian cultures find it unseemly and a loss of face to debate one’s peers—or worse yet one’s teacher—in public. Even native students may need to adjust to paying attention in class as a crucial part of their learning, something that matters as much as their grades on exams or papers.

2. Be comfortable with silence.

It is awkward when you pose a question and you are met with silence from your students. You probably hear the clock ticking, and seconds may seem like hours. It is very important to be okay with this silence. Remember that the quiet is just as unnerving to the students. Given time, someone will jump in and begin the conversation. Too many teachers pose a question or ask for a response and seeing none, prematurely provide their own perspective. If students figure out that the teacher will immediately come to the rescue if no one speaks up, they are happy to sit back and be rescued.

3. Watch your body language.

Students pay attention to both what you say and to what you do. Without intending to, you may be acting in ways that hamper class discussion. I recall observing one teacher who asked for students’ responses. He would acknowledge some comments by writing them on the board, others with his oral responses, and still others with a nod. Sadly, he did not tie his

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mode of acknowledgment to the significance or thoughtfulness of a point. It was just happenstance. He was not aware that students were acutely sensitive to what got *recorded*, and he was similarly unaware that those whose viewpoints were not written on the board thought they were on the wrong track or were discouraged. Whether you walk towards or away from a

student, where you position yourself in a classroom, your tone of voice in responding to questions: students regard all these behaviors as clues to your attitudes toward them, and their interpretations of the clues significantly affect their willingness to participate in class discussions.

4. Create a safe environment.

Based on the class level, students may be more concerned with being embarrassed in front of their peers than with your assessment of their participation. Let students know that it is okay to make a mistake and that you will respect their questions. The worst thing to do is to give this assurance but then fail to follow through by mocking a response or dismissing a point of view. This policy does *not* mean that anything goes. On the contrary, students are much more likely to participate if they know you respect them enough to challenge their points of view. Students don't want to be patronized with a pat on the back. What they need to know is that your class is a place where challenges are intellectual, not personal. Learning to disagree in an agreeable manner is a skill that is in short supply in the classroom and beyond.

5. Address relevance.

A friend claims all of us are tuned in to one radio station: WIIFM or "What's in It For Me?" Because we are steeped in what we teach, it is obvious to us why everybody needs to know what we impart. It is important to look at our specialists' knowledge from a novice student's perspective in order to find ways to make such students care about learning what we know. Are the examples relevant to your students? Can you provide instances where knowledge of the topic makes a difference? The specific content of the class will make communicating relevance a more or less easy task. Nevertheless, it behooves all of us to make a

sincere attempt to address who cares, and why. Providing a framework for the class and showing where each class session fits allows students to stay connected. One way to build on this approach is to begin each class by asking a student to summarize the key takeaways from the previous session and to end each class by asking for a summary of today's session. This strategy gives you a chance to assess understanding even as it shows the group that one of their own gets it.

6. Beware the unintended consequences of praise.

In her zeal to encourage class participation, a teacher may praise a response by saying "That's a good point" and then wait for the next student comment. Unfortunately, this approach may kill all further conversation, because the students will interpret your praise as marking the comment as the *right answer*. A much better response is to say, "That is an interesting point. Thanks for sharing. Who has something to add? Who has a different take?" You are then more likely to get additional responses.

7. Deal with the student who talks too much.

There are times when one student dominates the class discussion. If the student makes good points but takes up too much airtime, talk to the student outside of class. Let her know you appreciate the enthusiasm but need to hear from others as well. Find other ways to engage the student; she may help identify relevant examples, provide the student perspective, etc. If the student just talks without purpose, check whether your grading system encourages this behavior. Do you reward quantity of participation over quality? Do you discuss levels of participation: asking a question; responding to one; initiating a discussion; making connections? Again, a private conversation and coaching on how to add value are appropriate.

8. Elicit more from the student who talks too little.

Some students are comfortable with thinking aloud. Others need to think things through before they share in public. This difference is not just a matter of linguistic facility or of degrees of introversion. It reflects different preferences for processing information. To even things out, ask everyone to write down their thoughts about an issue before you ask for volunteers. Then ask them to read out what they have written. The written material works wonders as a crutch for a shy student or as a road map to a thoughtful response. The same technique can also work if you ask students to discuss the concepts in a small group and to share the group's perspective. Having the shy student report on the small

group discussion has the additional benefit of reducing her anxiety about looking foolish to her peers. She knows what the peers in her group have said and how her own thoughts measure up. There is comfort in numbers here.

I hope that these ideas—in combination with the ideas and strategies you bring to your pedagogy—will help you in your efforts to have students become active co-producers of their educational experience. After all, as William Butler Yeats taught us, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”