Learning More about Student Interaction
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Research Documented Problems with Participation and Discussion

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.

- Observers in this study noted 31 interactions per session, 29 (92%) made by 5 students.
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.

*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 some research, 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.
This study explored a method for giving students credit that involved self-recording. More non or infrequently participating students did participate when the method was used, but close to 40% of them did not.

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

Give tokens for correctly answered questions which are submitted for bonus points on exams