## CREATING A PARTICIPATORY ENVIRONMENT

### PURPOSE
For students to teach one another, they must be willing and able to contribute to the learning process. This tool discusses ways to develop a learn classroom culture where participation is a normal part of the everyday classroom experience.

### DESCRIPTION
President Henry B. Eyring prophesied that the students at BYU-Idaho would become “legendary in terms of [their] capacity to teach and to learn” (Devotional, Sept. 18, 2001). Many of our students, however, have come to BYU–Idaho from classroom environments that are neither participatory nor collaborative. It will take continuous effort to help students develop these abilities.

Success in a BYU-Idaho classroom should be defined as the result of a whole classroom dynamic, not just the achievement of an individual learner. It is from this sense of community that the concept of Teach One Another must derive its effectiveness. Learning within a community means that students must find joy in the success of [their] brethren. (Alma 29:14). It means that peers, with help and guidance from the instructor, work together to crack difficult concepts or memorize voluminous material. It means study groups when feasible and meaningful group work when appropriate. It means classroom time for them to process, review and refine their understanding, not just take notes. It means that we help each other and rely on each other as we pursue the spiritual quest of becoming educated.

Below are strategies to encourage students to engage and participate in each others’ learning.

- **Set the expectation.** President Clark has taught the students at BYU-Idaho to “come prepared.” Be explicit early in the semester that you expect your students to comment in discussions, share their opinions, teach their neighbors, and participate fully in other collaborative class activities.
- **Explain why.** Students are more likely to value these activities if they understand why they are being used. Explain how participation will be used to reach your course objectives and deepen student learning both in your course introduction and later in class.
- **Know your students.** Invest in your students. Learn their names, interests, and backgrounds. Greet and visit with them before and after class. Keep track of their progress. Provide opportunities for students learn each others’ names as well so a sense of community is developed.
- **Foster a safe atmosphere.** Manage class conversations. Ensure that student comments are met with courtesy and respect. Never permit yourself or others to belittle what others may say. Avoid sarcasm; it’s too often misunderstood. Insure that any feedback given is never demeaning. Encourage and validate both in class and with follow-up notes and emails. In short, expect both yourself and your students to live the 5th principle of the Learning Model—to love, serve, and teach one another.
- **Prepare students to be confident to participate.** Students are more confident participating if they come prepared. Assign readings and preparation activities that provide a context or “backdrop” from which the students can feel conversant on the subject. Provide study questions and small group activities to guide them in their preparation.
- **Make it relevant.** If students do not see how the conversation pertains to them, they are less motivated to participate. Help them draw connections. Connect the material to previous knowledge. Find pertinent examples to draw them in. Make the subject matter accessible—especially at the beginning of an activity.
- **Limit your comments.** In leading discussions, allow students to contribute and find their own voice by guarding your comments. Studies by various researchers have found most discussion classes are dominated by instructors. In an informal study at BYU-Idaho students reported that faculty talked 79% of the time in class (Eaton, 2006). Avoid the temptation to respond to every student or call upon every hand. Rather, guide the conversation and encourage students to respond to each other.
- **Track participation.** Keep track of who is participating. Be aware of your calling patterns so you can catch unintentional biases and encourage all to contribute.
- **Involve everyone.** Call students by name to ensure they feel included.

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answer a question. Don’t select the first person to raise his/her hand. Allow for pauses to encourage more responses. Help shy students to participate. Use low-risk approaches to target those who do not get as involved by asking them to read a quote or respond to a question you have given them in advance. Limit verbose students who can dominate discussions. Train the class to be inclusive with prompts such as “Let’s hear from somebody who hasn’t commented.”

- **Use multiple forms of engagement.** With instructor-led discussions, only one person can speak at a time, thus limiting participation. By structuring collaborative activities, many students can simultaneously converse in smaller groups.

- **Grade participation and contribution.** Validate the importance of participation to student learning by including it as a percentage of the overall course grade (e.g., 15-35%). Develop simple rubrics to evaluate not only the frequency of participation but the depth of the comments. This helps students understand that participation is more than “air time.” Significant contributions include listening to others and adding value to the dialogue by contrasting or building upon previous ideas.

In conclusion, students must ultimately accept responsibility for their learning. You cannot do it for them. Don’t let students “off the hook” by excusing them for not participating. As you accommodate special individual exceptions, keep in mind the ways you can maintain a class culture of participation.

Another instructor who traditionally struggled with student names decided to emphasize the use of student names, both when he spoke, and when students conversed among themselves. He made flash cards, memorized student names before the first day of class, and directed an active, participatory activity on the first day to establish the culture he wanted.

He also decided to use group work and teams throughout the semester, making it clear that part of the students’ grade depended on the team performance.

**TIPS**

- **Start on the first day.** Use at least one of your collaborative instructional methods the first day of class. If you want students to be active, you should set the tone early.

- **Involve everyone as soon as possible.** The longer a student does not participate, the harder it is to change his/her behavior. Intervene early to include reluctant students.

**PITFALLS**

- **Participation for participation’s sake.** Student participation is only a means to an end, not an end in itself. Use discussion, paired learning and other collaborative approaches to support learning outcomes.

**KEY ARTICLES**


**OTHER RESOURCES**

- Excerpt from “Teaching the Gospel”

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http://www.byui.edu/learning-and-teaching/instructional-tools

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