INCLUDING RELUCTANT STUDENTS

PURPOSE
For various reasons some students are reluctant to participate in class discussions and activities. This lack of engagement prevents these students from powerful learning and teaching opportunities that are at the heart of the Learning Model. This tool reviews several strategies to assist these students in becoming more actively engaged in the process of teaching and learning from one another.

DESCRIPTION
Despite your best efforts to establish a participatory environment, you may still have one or more students who are reclusive—even if it severely impacts their learning or grade. This student might be shy, or may simply be inclined to listen rather than contribute. Every student is unique and may have a particular reason for not participating. Whatever the case, avoid consenting to such passive behavior. President Henry B. Eyring prophesied that BYU-Idaho students will become "legendary in terms of [their] capacity to teach and to learn" (Devotional, Sept. 18, 2001). Hold to the institutional expectation that students should participate actively in their learning. Consider the following strategies that can help such students.

1. Create multiple venues for participation.
Participation should not be limited to classroom discussion. By varying the format and communication methods you can provide students with settings in which they may be more comfortable expressing themselves. For example, students who are reluctant to verbally comment in class may be more apt to express their thoughts with online discussion boards. Other students may feel more comfortable sharing their ideas in a small group. Consider having at least two-to-three major venues for participation in your course.
   - Class discussion
   - Small group discussions/projects
   - Paired activities
   - Displaying created works
   - Discussion boards
   - Wikis or other collaborative documents
   - Blogs or other electronic journals

2. Draw out shy students. Some students may still need additional encouragement and support to participate. For these students, you might:
   - Direct your questions. Explain that you haven't heard from some people and that you would like to respond to people who haven't yet participated.
   - Have student write down responses. Give students time to digest your questions by having them write down their thoughts. After this assignment is completed, ask students to share what they have written.
   - Use positive, nonverbal cues. Maintain eye contact with students. Smile and nod as students contribute.
   - Move closer to quiet students. During class, find opportunities to stand or sit by reluctant students as your proximity may draw them into the conversation.
   - Pre-assign questions. Give a student a question in advance to the next class and ask them to prepare a response.
   - Bring students' outside comments into class. Visit with students around campus, in the hall, or during office hours. If they make a good comment, ask if you (or they) can share the idea in an upcoming class.
   - Cold call with simple questions. Develop a casual question or ask for a simple opinion that doesn't call for a detailed answer. Coach the student through the response to develop their confidence.
   - Assign a task. Ask students to help in setting up the class or assisting with multimedia equipment. Use positive reinforcement to encourage participation.
   - Assign roles in small groups or pairs. Students feel an obligation to help their peers and will generally fulfill a responsibility or respond to assigned roles.

Online venues are particularly helpful in that they extend participation beyond classroom sessions. Asynchronous online activities are available at any time and allow ample time for students to think and develop responses.

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3. **Reign in the big talkers.** Researchers Karp and Yoels (1988) found that in classes with less than forty students, four or five students accounted for seventy-five percent of the total interactions per session. In classes with more than forty students two or three students accounted for fifty-one percent of the exchanges. Clearly one way to encourage shy students to participate is to control students who tend to dominate the conversation.

To distribute participation more evenly, consider rules that limit student comments. For example, only let students make two comments during a session. Not only does this broaden involvement, but deepens the conversation as students save their opportunities to speak for times when they have something that significantly adds to the conversation.

If a student has a serious problem monopolizing conversations, speak to him or her privately. Explain that you value their participation. If their comments are good, say so. Point out that too much participation on their part, however, limits other students’ opportunities to contribute. Solicit their assistance to include others.

**EXAMPLE**

Consider the following examples along with possible approaches for intervention.

1. **Independent Learner:** Some people would rather learn by themselves. Explain the doctrines behind the learning model (D&C 88:77) and how we are encouraged to teach one another. Explain the principle to “love, serve, and teach one another.”

2. **Afraid to Fail:** If students are concerned about making mistakes in front of their peers, consider ways to boost their confidence or increase trust and respect in the classroom or online environments. Reveal something that you are not good at to illustrate we all have weaknesses.

3. **Genuinely Quiet:** Explain that there are various ways to contribute. Encourage the student to develop a plan to participate. Fit the plan so it is challenging, but not overwhelming.

4. **Culturally Shy:** Talk about the differences in how teaching and learning take place in different cultures. Review the roles and expectations, provide opportunities, and invite students to participate in simple ways. This is especially important for students for whom English is not the native language.

5. **Disability:** Identify with the student the type of disability so that alternative approaches or accommodations may be explored—for example, a student may have trouble reading the assigned preparation material. If needed, refer the student to access resources from Academic Learning.

6. **Phobia:** Offer ways to help the student overcome their fears by providing less-difficult activities that build to the class expectations. If this fear is seriously impeding a student’s well-being make sure they are aware of the Counseling Center.

**TIPS**

- **Track student participation.** Find a simple method to identify who participates (and who does not).
- **Intervene early.** Later in the semester, it’s much harder to change student behavior.
- **Reign in big talkers.** Don’t allow a few students to dominate conversations and activities.

**PITFALLS**

**Excessive attention.** Avoid giving too much encouragement as it may draw attention to a student and embarrass them.

**KEY ARTICLES**


Melvin, K. B. (1988). The one or two who talk too much. Teaching Professor, 2(7), 5.

**OTHER RESOURCES**

- How Teachers Can Help Shy Students

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