

Fostering Participation

Eliciting students' active participation—even in large lectures—is absolutely central to their success; it fosters critical thinking, enhances learning, and provides you important feedback about that learning. As with so much of effective teaching, modeling is key: whether you're planning a lecture or a whole-class discussion, perform meaningful participation yourself by being inquisitive, connective, and a generous listener. Establishing from the start of the semester a participatory **classroom community** (and reflecting its value with a portion of the final grade) will also go a long way toward bringing every student's voice into the room.

Some ways to foster meaningful participation:

In large classes, explicitly build in opportunities for participation.

- When planning a lecture, identify inflection points in the content to ask specific, targeted questions of the whole class, or to allow students to discuss briefly in **small groups**, or to pause for **in-class writing** that goes beyond note-taking. (These writing moments might, for example, invite students to identify an example of a concept you've introduced or work out a sample problem.)
- Consider calling on students by name to respond to your questions. When asking a question with an objectively correct answer, if you don't get it, invite the class to help out the first respondent, rather than correcting him or her yourself.
- Open (or close) lecture with brief in-class writing to summarize previous content, and ask a few students to share before moving on.

Structure whole-class discussions with intention.

- To focus students, state the pedagogical purpose you intend for a discussion (“We’ll talk about contemporary conceptions of the U.S.-Mexican border to better understand the geographic imaginaries of *The Squatter and the Don*,” for instance).
- Prepare not only the content you want the discussion to include, but also a sequence of questions to elicit that content directly from students themselves.
- Provide time for students to write privately to gather their thoughts before a discussion begins.
- Wait a full 30 seconds after posing a question before repeating, reframing, or answering it.
- Remember that some students will participate much more actively in small groups, and create opportunities for them to work in pairs or groups of three or four.

References

- Brookfield, Stephen D. and Stephen Preskill. *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- Howard, Jay R. *Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015.
- Waks, Leonard J., ed. *Listening to Teach: Beyond Didactic Pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015.

See also

- Active Listening
- In-class Writing
- Teaching with Lecture
- Teaching with Small Groups