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


See also

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