

Guidelines for Establishing a Culture of Participation in Large Courses

Seminar on Supporting Active Learning in Jumbo Courses

Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute

The following approaches, with infinite possible variations, help prime students to expect to, and feel comfortable, communicating regularly with other students and with the whole class, even in a large course.

To prioritize a culture of participation, devote significant synchronous class time near the start of the semester to building this environment.

- For example, if vocal participation during synchronous class time is a priority for you, spend a whole class session bringing all student voices into the room. You might have students interview each other in pairs or trios and then introduce each other to the whole class. Prompts can be creative or silly to function as ice breakers. Groups can introduce themselves with brief digests (i.e., what common thread did you find across all three members?).
- On Zoom or similar platforms, build in an early activity that requires every student to unmute themselves and speak briefly, even if just to say a few words.
- To reinforce this culture, repeat the practice regularly. As the semester gets underway, you can adjust prompts and activities so that they increasingly relate to course content.
- If writing during class time is a priority for you, especially if it is an alternative mode of class participation in remote synchronous sessions, establish your expectations early in the semester (e.g. everyone writes a brief bio in the chat, or a single sentence motivation for enrolling in the course).

Communicate explicit expectations and protocols for class participation.

- What does your ideal participation look like? Should students hold themselves accountable for speaking up in a large-group setting once or twice every class session? Is every few weeks enough? Is it enough to participate in all smaller-group activities and/or other active-learning activities, such as in-class writing?
- What counts as productive participation? What kinds of questions or answers are generative? Consider modeling a variety of productive participation styles.
- Consider creating a rubric for class participation. You can assign students to evaluate themselves on the rubric as a required self-assessment, whether or not you use the rubric to actually assign participation grades.
- If you're teaching on Zoom, explicitly establish protocols early on for how students should participate in class. For example,
 - Should students simply unmute themselves and talk? Use the blue raised-hand icon and wait to be called?
 - Can they contribute to any discussion through the chat feature? Will you monitor the chat throughout, or is it best used for questions that can be followed up on during a break or after class?
 - Consider establishing participation parameters for specific kinds of discussions (i.e. "for this discussion, it's important that each comment responds to the previous comment, so we'll only use voice, which enables back-and-forth dialogue. Later, I'll

ask for thoughts from many of you simultaneously in the chat and ask you to skim through each other's comments and find trends.”)

- If video presence is important to you, consider establishing it as a baseline component of class participation, while offering acceptable alternative way(s) for students to earn full participation. Facilitate a whole-class brainstorming session about what benefits students might get from being present on video.
- If students are off video, how is attendance monitored? For example, are students expected to respond to all whole-class chat prompts (via public or private chat)?

Low-Stakes Writing and Speaking Activities for Large Courses

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Informal low-stakes writing and speaking activities are especially helpful in large courses because they ensure frequent active learning opportunities for all students without demanding individual feedback or, in many cases, any grading action at all.

Engaging students in writing- and speaking-to-learn activities might look, for example, like any of the following popular and infinitely adaptable activities. Low-stakes writing is often effective at yielding learning without the instructor ever seeing it, but can also be collected through a variety of means (e.g. submitted on index cards, through Blackboard, or through public or private chats during Zoom sessions).

Focused free-writing/speaking. In class, students are given a specific objective to complete through private writing, usually in 2-10 minutes. Alternately, students can discuss the prompt briefly with a classmate. For example,

- **To review or summarize** (e.g., “Summarize the main idea of the reading for today,” “in your own words, write an intuitive explanation of the term or concept we’ve just covered”)
- **To ground discussion** (e.g., “Describe something that confused you in the reading for today,” “Identify the most convincing evidence the writer uses to support their claim in this article”)
- **To practice disciplinary skills** (e.g., “Write a few sentences to explain what this data tells us” or “describe both a benefit and a drawback of the proposed policy”)
- **To generate ideas** (e.g., “List as many potential applications of this concept as you can,” “Describe what aspects of this painting strike you as the most different from what we’ve looked at so far in our course”)
- **To prepare for next steps** (e.g., “Name one thing from today’s class you should review before the exam,” “Document two takeaways that could apply to your upcoming papers”)

Index Card Temperature Taking. Distributing an index card to each student and collecting them is a simple way to assess learning in progress, particularly in large classes. For instance, you might prompt students to write a single question they have at the close of a lecture. A quick flip through the cards then offers a broad assessment of the class.

Reading Journals. Ask students to maintain a hard or digital journal (i.e. the Blackboard “Journals” feature) in which they summarize, quote, or paraphrase from assigned texts on the left-hand page, then respond with questions, reactions, personal reflections, or counterarguments on the right. (Reading Journals are also sometimes called Double-entry Journals or Dialogic Journals.)

Learning Logs. Provide continuity from class to class by asking students to begin and/or end each class summarizing key points and generating questions, through private or shared writing or in small conversations.

Thesis Statement Drafting. In just a few minutes, students can practice generating and articulating an argument. Ask them to respond to a reading, or make a recommendation based on a case presented in class.

“Think, Pair, Share.” Give students an opportunity to write on a prompt before speaking, first in pairs and then with the whole class, thereby scaffolding communication about course content. Note: this one’s extra challenging online! We include it because the payoff of the sequence of private writing, paired conversation, and group shareout is so great. It’s possible, although admittedly unwieldy, to do using Zoom breakout rooms or private paired chats.

Reading Summaries. Students can deliver these orally at the start of class on a rotating basis, providing them with an opportunity to practice concise content delivery.

Dialogue writing. Assigning dialogue writing is a lively way to encourage students to inhabit multiple positions and perspectives while bypasses the formality of academic prose, even allowing them to express and work through doubt and confusion. For example, students might write dialogues between

- two theorists trying to convince each other of their positions or looking for common ground
- themselves and a friend in the course who is struggling to understand a concept for an upcoming exam
- two policymakers debating the merits of a piece of legislation.

Coding and Seeking. Students can be directed to purposefully extract salient material from a text with coding and seeking activities. For example, you might ask them to highlight all the debatable claims, the evidence, or the applications of a course concept in either a course reading or another student’s writing.

Discipline specific “autobiographies.” In or outside of class, students can complete informal writing about their experience in the discipline or field your course deals with, reflecting not only on what material they’ve covered how and in what contexts, but how they felt about these experiences and what their current goals are. This is especially useful when students are likely to be anxious about a course, helping them ease into the material and encouraging self-reflective learning practices.

Short oral communication tasks. Students record themselves performing a task (e.g. explaining a concept, making a pitch, reading a scene, sharing an analysis) and post on a platform such as VOCAT. For homework or as part of asynchronous classwork in an online course, have students watch group members’ videos and write short responses, feedback, or questions, or have them share feedback directly with each other during class time.

Paired discussion assignments. Students can be assigned to complete paired discussion activities outside of class—especially useful in asynchronous remote courses. They meet on the phone or another voice-enabling platform, follow a clear set of prompts, and write up short reflections on their conversations, including about something they learned from their partner.

Guidelines for Facilitating Meaningful Group Work

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Whether it happens in a classroom, Zoom breakout rooms, outside of class, or asynchronously online, group work is one of the ways to ensure all students have rich opportunities to learn through communicating. Strategic planning and guidance will help students engage deeply and negotiate the challenges of collaboration.

Craft groups aligned with your activity- or assignment-specific priorities.

- Groupings can be impromptu and student-selected (“find three other people you’re sitting near to work with for the next ten minutes”).
- If regular work toward sustained, longitudinal group projects is an important part of your course, have students regularly sit with group members.
- Students left to create their own groups will do so based on existing affinities. Depending on your learning goals for an activity or assignment, you might prioritize crafting demographically heterogeneous groups, matching those with less developed disciplinary skills with classmates whose skills are more developed, or bringing together students of matching skill levels.
- Avoid isolating more vulnerable students by ensuring recurring groups do not, for example, feature one student of color and three white students.
- On Zoom, consider establishing pre-set, recurring breakout rooms.

Assign clear prompts with specific deliverables.

- Provide specific questions to discuss or tasks to complete, with an order in which to accomplish them.
- Concretize and quantify the work you want groups to produce (e.g. identify three different examples of X; come up with two arguments in favor and two against Y; be ready to summarize and synthesize the group members’ reactions to Z).

Assign rotating group-work roles.

- Near the semester’s start, discuss the various roles central to productive group work (such as facilitator, recorder, reporter, synthesizer).
- In non-recurring group contexts, assign roles randomly (i.e. “in today’s groups, the facilitator is the person whose first name comes first in the alphabet; the reporter will be the person whose birthday comes second in the calendar year...”).
- In recurring groups, students might choose roles based on skills, or rotate role assignments each week.

Hold groups accountable for sharing out.

- Let students know how share-out will work. Will every group share something? Will you call on groups randomly? Invite open comments? Collect a deliverable from every group via a Blackboard link?
- Elicit responses from specific groups to establish participation from a broad set of students

- In person, it's easy to call on impromptu groups established for a single activity (e.g. "I'd like to start by hearing from the groups in the far right corner today").
- Online, recurring in-class groups can be named and called upon (e.g. "Let's hear from Purple group first today.")

Establish time markers and provide support.

- Tell students how much time they'll have to complete a group task.
- If possible, rove the room to answer questions, check for understanding, and keep groups engaged.
- Online, where it's harder to monitor and support groups' progress, keep group tasks shorter and reconvene more frequently.

Guidelines for Designing Effective Discussion Boards

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Threaded online discussion forums are a popular way to assign weekly low-stakes writing, but it can sometimes be challenging to elicit productive and meaningful exchanges between students on these forums. The following are some ideas for structuring online discussion forums.

Remember that not all writing-to-learn activities need be social. Low-stakes writing completed outside of class can take many forms, including ones that do not include exchange between students (for example, Blackboard's Journals feature).

Assign discussion groups. Using Blackboard's Groups Discussion Board feature, have students post and comment each week in conversation with a small group of classmates.

Craft authentic reasons for students to engage with each other's comments in threaded discussion forums. For example:

- **Create several forums** of different kinds and allow students to post to any of them for credit. Some ideas include:
 - **Q+A Forum:** students post genuine questions about lecture/reading. Students get credit for writing clear, specific questions and for providing thoughtful, thorough answers. (Demonstrate what makes a question post strong! Give students grades on Q+A three or four times a semester.)
 - **Connections Forum:** students comment on connections they notice between this week's readings and previous course readings.
 - **Summary Forum:** Only first 3 students can do this for each reading/lecture/week.
- **Assign discussion forum roles:** (i.e. "This week, students A - C post comments by Tues. By Thurs, students D - F synthesize those comments—noting trends, drawing connections, identifying tensions. Then, students G and H formulate discussion questions for our synchronous session based on what's emerged on the forum.
- **Assign a number of posts due in a semester** and let students choose which prompts or forums to participate in.
- **Assign rhetorical contexts** for discussion forums (e.g. commenters use a theory from the reading to make a marketing pitch or to persuade their classmates to do something. Responders inhabit the role of the intended audience and respond authentically from that position).