

STIMULATING PARTICIPATION

- Learn to really wait after a question. All too often, teachers cut off a lot of valuable activity by getting anxious and moving on too quickly. Waiting is a signal that you really do want participation, gives students time to digest the question, ensures that most students will be thinking during the pause, and provides more openings for the slow to respond.
- Ask plenty of questions that are pitched at the level most of the class can handle. Success is a powerful encouragement to future participation.
- Vary the intellectual approach of your questions to provide opportunities for different types of students: include some information questions, some requiring deductions, some asking for hunches or intuitive leaps, and so on.
- Encourage students, by your questions, to use their own reactions and experience as starting points for discussion. This includes their feelings, perceptions, values, and life experiences.
- Ask open-ended “divergent” questions — ones with many equally valid answers. This will reduce anxiety over being wrong.
- Use the “brainstorming” method in which you entertain a number of responses to a question, writing them on the board, before evaluating or moving on. This makes differences among people more acceptable and reduces the worry over being judged, which often inhibits participation.
- Set aside certain times in class when you deal only with basic questions, to smoke out those who may be afraid to ask them. Label this in a way that will save face for students (e.g., by designating it a “review”).
- When you are having trouble explaining an idea, open it up to the class, and ask if anyone else can clarify. Be a model for honesty about your own puzzlements.
- Following a student contribution, ask if anyone else wants to comment or build on the idea. Break the habit of expecting a statement from you after every student input.
- At the end of a topic or meeting, invite a student to summarize the discussion, or recap a problem solution.
- Be hospitable to student questions or comments that surprise you. These may be signs that you haven’t understood their concerns, and they may have a novel perspective on the issue.
- Be clear and positive in rewarding all participation. Students will watch what happens to others who speak up, and this expectation affects participation enormously. When you must be critical, do it in a way that doesn’t alienate.

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