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## Quick before It Dries: Setting the Pattern for Active Participation from Day One

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For a long time, I was guilty of giving "shadow messages," those hidden communications that qualify or contradict the overt message we intend to deliver, and that made it difficult for me to generate active participation in my larger classes.

While my syllabus insisted that the course would proceed by discussions rather than lectures, and while I mentioned active learning several times the first day of class, I always conducted that first session without any opportunity for participation beyond the usual "Any questions so far?" The students assumed—understandably—that the stuff about discussion was empty rhetoric, the equivalent of politicians telling us to read their lips or administrators claiming that teaching is as important as research.

I really did want active student participation, but by the second class, when I finally got around to inviting it, the rules of the game were already established in the students' minds: he talks; we sit back and listen. It was then an uphill struggle to change those rules and to prove that I actually did wish and expect to hear from students. I remember reading somewhere that students make up their minds about a course and an instructor within the first few minutes of the first class. The initial session is not an oil painting that we can come back to at leisure for touching up; it is an artwork in fast-drying plaster that needs to be shaped carefully and quickly before the whole course sets.

Stealing ideas from various sources (including workshops and individual consultations), I have used the following techniques to generate active student participation from the start, making it much easier to elicit discussion during the rest of the course:

### **Come to the classroom before the period begins to chat informally with students as they arrive.**

Undergraduates rarely initiate conversations with teachers, so it takes real effort to make them comfortable talking with us formally or informally. They often find it hard to converse even with peers whom they don't know. It's a bit intimidating and depressing for students and instructor alike to walk the first day into a large, absolutely silent classroom. The instructor can prevent that cold, cathedral atmosphere by generating a relaxed conversational buzz from the start, greeting familiar students, introducing herself to new ones, and drawing students into chats with each other.

### **Make the students realize that they count as individuals.**

Anonymity is one of the largest barriers to active participation. Students who feel the teacher doesn't know or care about them are less likely to participate than those whom the teacher recognizes as distinct persons with lives extending beyond the classroom. When students arrive on day one, I have them fill out a short questionnaire that asks for such information as their home town, major, career plans and extracurricular interests. This information helps me tailor the course to individuals as we go along; it also indicates from the start that they will be more to the instructor than an identification number, generic student, or kid in the back row with the funny haircut.

### **If possible, before students arrive for the first session, arrange the classroom to encourage and facilitate active participation.**

Chairs lined up in neat rows and all facing the lectern indicate that the course is lecture centered. If students do participate, they address questions and comments over the backs of their classmates' heads to the instructor. Try banishing the lectern to a corner and arranging the chairs in a circle so that students can see and talk with each other during discussions. If the chairs are bolted to the floor, wander around the room so that no one place becomes privileged as the sole focus of class attention. If students must twist and turn in their chairs to find the instructor, they are more likely to address their comments to the classmates facing them as well as to him or her.

**Make it clear from the start that you want and expect active participation from students, and tell them why.**

Indicate on the syllabus that a specific percentage of their grade will reflect their contributions to class discussions. Explain the pedagogical value of active, collaborative learning. Remind students of the wise (fill in your favorite ethnic group) proverb, "Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand."

**Start students talking several times during the first period.**

Begin with an easy exercise and then progress to more challenging levels of involvement. Going through the syllabus at the start of class, I pause on the first page after the comments about active participation. Here I ask the students to introduce themselves briefly to the people around them—just to say hello and exchange names. This gets people speaking for the first time early on, breaks the pattern of my doing all the talking, and starts forging the community that I want to develop in the classroom. (Even when the instructor knows them, students hesitate to speak out if their classmates are total strangers. We tend to forget what it feels like to sit in a roomful of people who all seem infinitely wiser, wittier, and more confident than we and who are just waiting for us to make fools of ourselves. It is much easier to talk with people we've begun to know, however superficially.) Emphasize from the start that students will be talking with each other, not just reciting to the instructor. If the enrollment is small enough, have students pair up with someone they've never met, chat with that person for a few minutes, and then introduce her/him briefly to the rest of the group.

**Sometime after the icebreaker, propose a substantial discussion topic for what remains of the period.**

This topic might address their knowledge of and preconceptions about the course content (e.g., what do you remember about Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman from high school or previous college courses? Formulate two hypotheses about these poets that we will test during the quarter). Or the topic might concern the students' own expectations and wishes for the class. (What knowledge and skills do you want to receive from this course? List five specific objectives that you hope to accomplish here by the end.) This discussion not only generates active participation from the start, but it also gives students a sense of owning the course, and it provides motives for working conscientiously during the following weeks. Since many students at this early stage are not likely to risk exposing themselves with individual contributions, ask them to form minigroups of twos, threes or fours and together to come up with a couple of points to contribute. They find it much easier to work quietly with a few classmates who will share responsibility for the ideas. After sufficient time for discussion, call the class together again as a large group and poll each mini-group for one suggestion.

**On this first day (and thereafter), ask questions that call for genuine discussion, not just right-or-wrong answers.**

Too often "gimmies" (guess what I'm hiding behind my back—gimme the right answer) or "Jeopardy"-style questions substitute for more sophisticated and useful participation. If the instructor poses only questions with specific answers in mind, students soon learn that they aren't really being asked to formulate their own opinions but to guess what the teacher wants them to say. Try open-ended discussion topics that can be debated and that call for higher-level learning skills. (For example, students should be able to provide a one-sentence definition of metaphor in literature, but they should also be expected to explore together how metaphors pervade non-literary discourse as well, shaping and coloring the way we perceive the world.)

**Reward students for participating.**

Acknowledge each contribution in some way, e.g., by paraphrasing the point to show that you are listening and to make sure you've understood, or by writing the contribution on the board, or by praising a particularly good response, especially if it's one you've not anticipated yourself. (Students get a special kick out of teaching the teacher; in a well-conducted course such two-way instruction should occur often.) Draw other students into the discussion by asking them to

respond to or expand on their classmate's comments.

**Get to know the students by name, starting the first day.**

Again, students are most apt to participate if they are more than anonymous faces to the instructor. (The saddest title in American literature is perhaps James Baldwin's *Nobody Knows My Name*.) Because I don't learn or remember names easily, I spend the last few minutes of the first session taking Polaroid photos of the students in groups of five or six. I then have them autograph their picture so that I can memorize names and faces at leisure and refer to my illustrated roster as needed. This technique not only helps me learn names without needing to ask them repeatedly or assign students to fixed seating, but it also serves as another ice-breaker for the students, who chat animatedly with each other as they group up for the photographic ordeal.

By the end of the first class, students should know that they are expected to participate actively, and they should have done so several times in a relaxed, nonthreatening environment. Eliciting continued discussion in the next class sessions will reinforce the pattern already set and will soon make participation an easy, natural part of the course.

This participation can keep us informed about what the students are actually learning, make them more responsible for their own education, and increase the likelihood that we will learn from the course ourselves.