Encouraging Student Participation: Why It Pays to Sweat the Small Stuff
By Maryellen Weiner, PhD

A recent classroom observation reminded me that student participation can be encouraged and supported by attention to small but important presentational details. In this article I have highlighted these details in the form of questions and I hope that you’ll use them to reflect on the behaviors you’re using when seeking, listening, and responding to student contributions.

How often do you ask a question and when do you ask it? How often does it depend on the teacher but there’s evidence from more than one study that a lot of us over estimate how often we ask questions. How often should you seek student contributions? More than you do? Do you ask after you’ve covered a chunk of content and are thinking about how much you still have to get through? Do you ask at the end of the period when a lot of students are hoping nobody says anything so they can get out a couple of minutes early?

How long do you wait? How much time passes after you’ve solicited input before you move on or offer some verbal follow up? There’s research here too, and the findings are pretty consistent. Most faculty wait somewhere between two and three seconds before they do something else—ask the question again, call on somebody, rephrase the question, answer the question themselves, or decide nobody has anything to say and move on. When asked, most faculty claim that they wait 10 or 12 seconds. Time passes slowly when you’ve asked a question and there’s no sign of a response—it’s an awkward, uncomfortable time for the teacher and the students. But waiting longer has its rewards.

Do you encourage reflection before response? Student input improves if they have the opportunity to pull together their thoughts. Do you give them a minute to jot down some ideas, to talk with the person sitting next to them, to look something up in the text, or to just think about the question and how they might respond?

Do you move? How often do you get out from behind the podium? Do you routinely move across the space in the front of the room to where the student space begins? Do you cross the threshold into that student space?

Are you inviting engagement? As you move, are you establishing direct eye contact with students? If you’re smiling and looking relaxed, that kind of eye contact is not threatening. A lot of students won’t look at you, but some will and you can encourage them to speak with your eyes and face.

How intentionally do you listen? What are you doing while a student speaks? Are you looking at the student? Nodding or verbally indicating that you understand? Are you thinking about what the student is saying, or are you planning what you will say after the student is done speaking? It’s hard enough getting some students to talk in class, so let’s give them our full attention when they do. Don’t try to multi-task—listening but sneaking a peek at the clock; listening but looking down at your notes, attentive listening can be confirmed by what you say after the student has finished. "Thank you. Let me see if I understand your response." Follow that with a rephrase of what the student said, not what you hoped the student would say, but what the student actually said.

How are you showing that you value student contributions? Do you refer to the content of a good answer later in the class period, during a subsequent class, or in online exchanges? “Remember Paul’s point about such and such. It’s relevant here. Do you see the connection?” Do you point out why an answer is good? “Susan has just added something important to our discussion. Here’s why it’s important and why you probably ought to have it in your notes.” Do you value comments by writing them on the board or displaying them with the projector? Do you ever mention something you learned from a student contribution? “A couple of years ago a student in this course gave one of the best examples of this that I’ve ever heard.”

How often do you solicit feedback from students about interaction in your classroom? Have you asked for feedback on your responses to their contributions? What do they see as the role of interaction in your classroom? What have they learned from what other students have said?
THE OFFICES OF RESEARCH & GRANTS AND FACULTY DEVELOPMENT HAVE PROCURRED

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**IMPORTANT DATES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Contact</th>
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<tr>
<td>Using SPSS to Advance Scholarly Research</td>
<td>November 5th</td>
<td>9:00 AM – 4:00 PM</td>
<td>Computer Lab, Eva B. Dykes Library</td>
<td>RSVP to Ex. 7738</td>
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<td>Turning Technologies Clickers Training</td>
<td>November 12th</td>
<td>9:00 AM – 11:00 AM</td>
<td>Faculty Resource Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing Your Externally-Funded Grant</td>
<td>November 19th</td>
<td>8:15 AM – 1:00 PM</td>
<td>Cooper Complex Board Room</td>
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<tr>
<td>Next Faculty Meeting</td>
<td>November 19th</td>
<td>4:00 PM – 5:30 PM</td>
<td>Committee of 100 Auditorium, McKee B&amp;T Building</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRB Meeting</td>
<td>November 21st</td>
<td>1:00 PM – 2:00 PM</td>
<td>Social Work Lab, Green Hall</td>
<td></td>
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**FOR FUN**

A kid comes home from his first day at school. His mom asks, “What did you learn today?” Kid replies, “Not enough. I have to go back tomorrow.”

-Author Unknown

**A THOUGHT**

If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging.

-Will Rogers

**A FEW REMINDERS**

- To have dates and information included in future editions of NEWS AND NOTES, contact Shannan Malone, Project Coordinator at smalone@oakwood.edu

- Please mark your calendars for the annual Faculty Research Symposium: Tuesday, April 22, 2014.