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## Limiting the Awkward Silences: Productively Engaging Students with Effective Questions

Anyone? Anyone?



We are all familiar with those silent moments when we ask a question and get nothing back. Here we are, trying to be interactive, reducing the time that we spend acting as the ‘sage on the stage’, yet students don’t seem to want to participate. The following is a compilation of guidelines for how to ask questions to elicit student responses by Howard Aldrich<sup>1</sup> (UNC-Chapel Hill) and how to productively engage students in active learning classrooms by Stephanie Chasteen<sup>2</sup> (CU-Boulder).

### Asking the types of questions that support contributions from all students

Student willingness to speak may come down to the types of questions we are asking. Questions heavily based on facts, or where the instructor clearly knows the “right answer” tend to create situations where students may feel under-confident. An alternative is to start discussions with more open questions that everyone feels comfortable contributing to and then working towards more conceptual questions as an end point. Here are some less threatening ways to begin a discussion:

- Ask about student experiences with a particular event or topic
- Write a concept on the board and ask students to contribute examples
  - You might build on this by asking how examples link together or relate to one another
- Ask if a topic or readings reminded them of a previous course or lecture
- Say that you are going to discuss pros/cons of a number of answers, rather than looking for the “right answer”
- Increase your wait time to allow students sufficient time to think – this is where awkward silences can be beneficial!
  - Wait beyond just asking the first student that raises their hand
  - Call on a woman first – this is more likely to generate a gender distribution in responses/questions asked<sup>3</sup> that is proportional to the audience
- Ask the students to write down their answers individually first
  - This asks everyone to contribute, rather than providing the temptation to sit back and rely on the students who always tend to talk (both for you and the students)
- Use a think-pair-share strategy, where students first think individually, then discuss with their neighbor, then share with the class
- Use clickers so that all students may respond anonymously – you can ask questions on the fly, they don’t need to be pre-planned in your lectures
  - Easy to run “on the fly” questions are those with yes/no, true/false, more/same/less options

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## Resistance is often passive, so let's think about productive engagement

It is helpful to think about encouraging productive engagement from students. If students resist, they tend to do so non-verbally or by partially complying, rather than actively pushing back against discussion. There are a number of things we can do as instructors to help encourage student engagement more broadly:

- Communicate engagement as important throughout the semester, not just at the beginning
  - We are often good at setting classroom norms on the first day (e.g., students will be required to participate in class, answer questions) and it is important to revisit these norms throughout the semester
  - Student perceptions change, particularly as they get fatigued when assignments pile up, so it is worthwhile to check in and recap why engagement will help them learn and succeed in your class
- Address engagement in a way that is interactive, using direct experiences and discussion
  - Ask students (e.g., on written homework assignments, exams, in class) to reflect on their own learning and what is helping or hindering it
- Don't just tell students why their engagement is helpful for their learning, show them
  - Ask students to discuss their experiences in previous courses that have involved varying degrees of active learning
- Foster a classroom environment that is motivating, i.e., where students feel like they are capable of succeeding, connected to others, have opportunities to take ownership over their own learning, and are learning about things that are connected to their own interests and goals
- Be consistent with what you expect in learning goals, instruction and assessment
  - Try practicing "backward design", where you decide what you want students to be able to do (learning goals), then how you will be able to tell if they can do it (assessment), and finally, how you will help them learn how to do it (instruction)

## Creating a classroom community that supports productive engagement

Relatedness, or the feeling of being connected to others, is central to student engagement. Feelings of relatedness are influenced by factors such as class norms for participation, a classroom culture where everyone feels safe and valued, and the support and encouragement of taking risks. In smaller classes, it may be easier to have these conversations directly with students. In larger classes, general cues may be more practical for building and maintaining a strong classroom community. Speaking in front of peers may generate anxiety for a many students. Here are some ways we can help mitigate this:

- Validate and build on student ideas that are shared in class
- Hear from multiple students
- Do not judge or be dismissive of responses
- Position yourself as a guide/facilitator of discussion, rather than the leader
- Pay attention to cues that may indicate a student is not very confident in their response or feeling threatened (e.g., "I don't know, but...", hesitation, other signs of nerves)
- Paraphrase and ask the student if your summary of their words is accurate, rather than fitting it to one of your desired responses without confirmation
- Write responses on the board, document cam, or blank slide
- Thank the students for contributing their ideas
- Learn names
- Solicit and respond to student feedback

**References:** 1. <https://tomprof.stanford.edu/mail/1631#> 2. <https://www.physport.org/recommendations/Entry.cfm?ID=101163> 3. Carter et al., 2017, Women's visibility in academic seminars: women ask fewer questions than men.