

The Think Tank

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Special Issue: Class Participation

From the Editor

As you well know, participating in class discussions can have a significant impact upon your success in any course. There are some students who have no problem speaking up; in fact, it's more difficult for them to remain silent--they are active learners. For others, they'd rather listen to others attempting to make meaning--they are more comfortable being passive recipients of information.

This issue of *The Think Tank* examines the benefits and drawbacks of class participation. The student-contributors offer some advice to those resistant to hand-raising, with advice coming from both the out- and soft-spoken. ♦

Eye Contact, Exercise, and Education

by Christine Beaudoin, Writing Consultant

We've all been there: a Friday afternoon class where everyone just wants to get out as soon as possible, the professor desperately trying to engage the class in discussion. The student next to you is staring out the window. Another is earnestly trying to look like he's taking notes so the professor doesn't call on him, and the girl in front of you is having a field day with a lock of hair. The professor poses a question to everyone. Suddenly the room gets very quiet, and the only sound you can hear is the gentle blowing of the heating vent. You look around during this eerie stillness and the professor eventually comes into view. His heartbroken expression almost

makes you feel sorry for him until he notices that you are looking at him. Oh no, you've made eye contact! A smile spreads across his face as he calls on you to shed some kind of deep, probing insight on the subject at hand. You desperately search through your text, hoping that the answer will pop out at you, but it doesn't.

So, with a timid voice, you utter the most intelligible response that springs into your head, hoping someone else will finish the thought for you. No one does, but all twenty-seven heads turn around to look at you. You think to yourself, "mental note: never sit in the back of the room again." The professor sighs, yet commends your effort as he says, "that's an interesting thought, but... ." While everyone flips to the page he refers to, you sit in anguish, imagining an imprint of a question mark on your forehead.



Now, I know that I have suffered through this experience many times and always say that it will not happen again. But how is this situation avoidable? I have learned that, first of all, I must be prepared for class. This means reading the designated text, taking notes on what I've read, and scribbling down any questions or comments that popped into my head. These extra steps may be a little more time consuming than just skimming through the material, but it allows me to retain concepts and prepares me for discussion. The next thing I've learned is not to wait until the professor asks a question to raise my hand. If anything troubles me, or is particularly interesting to me, then I say so! My professors can only help me with the material if they in fact know that I need help. Furthermore, they've been teaching the same subject for years, so a different per-

Quote of the Month

"To venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is to lose one's self."
-- Kierkegaard

The Think Tank welcomes contributions from students, faculty, and staff. Send submissions to JP Nadeau, editor, the Writing Center, Hall 6, 4th floor. This newsletter is published monthly through the Bryant College Academic Center for Excellence and the Writing Center.

spective may be refreshing for them. Also, my classmates may benefit from my participation because they might share my questions and/or concerns.

In regard to the quality of questions or comments, what I have learned from day one is that no question is a stupid question. Most professors encourage class participation and take note of those who do participate. It's ok if you do not give the same response that the professor was looking for. There is no such thing as a uniform opinion; difference makes things interesting. This stimulates debate, which will get everyone involved and thinking for themselves.

Just remember to respect others' opinions, and tactfully refute them. Also, as I mentioned earlier, your professor notices when you get involved. It shows that you are interested in the material and your progress in the class. Participation can have an enormous effect on your final grade. Also, I have found that I learn more by engaging in discussion. It exercises my mind, and expands my insight on the subject.

So, next time you're in class, try it. Use the three muscles it takes to raise your hand, and you will greatly benefit from the result. Remember, it may be a little scary at first, but sometimes you have to jump into the deep end to improve your abilities. ❖

Class Participation and Reputation Preservation

by Jessica Dodge, Writing Consultant and Tutor

We all have opinions. Those who know me will agree that I have more than my fair share. Among my friends, family and co-workers, I am extremely vocal about those opinions and whatever feelings are attached to them. That's not always the case in the classroom. Some of my professors may argue this, thinking, "She always contributed in my class." Others may agree without even realizing it because they don't remember my being enrolled in one of their classes. For a person that always has something to say outside of class, why is it that I remain silent in certain classes?

By default, people associate participation directly with confidence. Although I don't consider myself a person lacking in self-esteem, there are times when I feel that I could learn more from others than they could learn from me. You see, as much as I like to share my opinion, I also like to observe. Sometimes I feel I get more out of listening to everyone else than I do out of hearing my own voice. I've realized that I'm more likely to participate in the classes I'm stronger in for the simple reason that, loosely speaking, I feel I have

less to learn. Obviously the flip side is that I'm less likely to contribute to class discussion in my weaker classes—unless, of course, it's mandatory (but that's another issue). In this light, I can see my participation level to be related to confidence. If I'm sure of my abilities in a particular subject and course, I'll speak out, often without even raising my hand (another interesting issue, if you think about it). I'm sure that this is directly related to my personality in that I'm not much of a risk taker, and I have a reputation to live up to.

People know me as that "accounting girl," the one that breaks the curve. My classmates always expect me to have the right answer. If I'm not sure of myself, I say nothing. We all know that if we don't say anything, we can't be wrong. A wrong answer from that smart accounting girl that breaks the curve . . . I might just as well streak through the rotunda—people would forget it sooner!

Often times I don't participate in class because I perceive that a wrong answer will cause everyone to think less of me or make fun of me—neither one a favorable situation. I assume many students who are reluctant to participate tend to hesitate for similar reasons. I'd also be willing to bet that the reality that holds true for me holds true for them as well: we *perceive* that we can learn more from others' contributions than others could learn from us. We also perceive that others will think less of us if we say the "wrong" thing. The truth is we all have something to learn from one another. My classmates may not get after me for that wrong answer; in fact, they may even help me arrive at the correct one. ❖

Preparation: One Way to Quell Class Participation Fears

by Melissa Mancuso, Writing Consultant

I vividly remember my freshman humanities class. I sat in a room with over seventy other students, feeling intimidated, especially since I was accustomed to smaller high school classrooms. It was scary enough to be at a new school with hundreds of unfamiliar faces, but when the professor spoke the dreaded words: "Class participation will constitute twenty percent of your final average," I knew I was starting off with an eighty average. "Class participation," I thought. "I hate speaking up in class, let alone a class of seventy people I do not know." Why would someone possibly want to talk out loud and have everyone in the room listening to his or her every word?

Sometimes it is not a matter of wanting to; it is essential in order to get a good grade. I decided I had to overcome my fear. Now, when confronted with a class par-

ticipation requirement, I always follow three golden rules:

- The only way to contribute to the class discussion is to be familiar with the material. Therefore, be prepared. Do the assigned reading and other homework.
- Before class, write down a list of your opinions or thoughts about the current topics being discussed in class. By having written ideas in front of you, you'll eliminate some of the pressure of having to think on the spot.
- If you are still unsure of the course material, talk to another student before class. This is almost like practicing for class participation.

With preparation there is less fear, making it easier for you to raise your hand, speak your mind, and get those twenty points for class participation. Class participation becomes less intimidating with preparation and practice. ❖

Putting it All in Perspective

by Shannon Naujock, Writing Consultant and Tutor

“No, I’m not going to raise my hand. You can’t make me. I don’t care if class participation counts for twenty-five percent of my grade. I’m not going to do it!”

Sound familiar? I know that these thoughts have run through *my* mind before. Let’s face it, stating your opinions in class takes courage and confidence. You not only have to answer the question, but you may also have to explain your reasoning and be able to defend it against contradictory views. Whereas certain classes at least allow for multiple correct answers, many others call for just one right answer.

Personally, I don’t like class participation for reasons involving fear, self-doubt, and self-consciousness. To overcome my own apprehensions, I take a step back from my immediate fears and worries in order to look at the big picture. I realize that all that is being asked of me is to speak. Looking at class participation from this perspective helps me transcend the barriers of self-doubt and self-consciousness I have constructed. I know that I speak more than a thousand words every day. Thus, I figure, why not use a few of those words to verbalize my thoughts to my professor and classmates?

Knowing that I only stand to gain from participating, specifically in the forms of higher grades and improved communication skills, I raise my hand and contribute. What’s the worst that could happen? Yes, I could answer incorrectly. In all honesty, though,

what’s going to happen if I do? I will simply learn the right answer. No one will remember my mistake except me, if I choose. As Vince Lombardi once said, “All learning is trial and error. The negative experiences do not inhibit but rather contribute to the learning process. As soon as the error is corrected, it is important that the error be forgotten and only the successful attempts be remembered.”

The Mouse that Roared

by Courtney Zullo, Writing Consultant

I would not characterize myself as a shy individual. It seems, though, that the second I twist certain door-knobs in the Rotunda, I suddenly transform into a timid mouse. When I think about why I become this way in certain classes, three things come to mind: large numbers of students, upperclassmen, and intimidating professors.

When I walk into a class that has more than thirty students in it, I begin to pray that class participation does not play a huge factor. I am not sure exactly what it is that makes me so uncomfortable. Even if I am familiar with many of the faces I see, I still feel uneasy asking a question or lending an answer. A method that seems to work for me in getting over my fear of large numbers is sitting closer to the front of the class. It may seem funny, because you want nothing more than to go unnoticed, but haven’t you noticed that the professor seems to pick on those students in the back anyway? Besides, I don’t feel *as* uncomfortable offering a comment or suggestion if I can’t see who is glaring at me. Unfortunately, the size of the class isn’t the only reason I’m reluctant to participate.

As a freshman, I detest being in a multi-level course. It may just be me, but I tend to resist offering answers in a class in which half of the students are juniors and seniors. When I’m in this situation, I don’t want to answer a question for fear of sounding stupid, even when I’m sure that I know the answer. I also don’t want to seem like I am “kissing up” to the professor or act like I know all the answers. It is almost certain that one night I will meet these same upperclassmen at a party. The reality is, however, that once I get over the initial fear of looking dumb, I realize that the upperclassmen don’t mind at all. They seem happy that I’ve taken the pressure off of them to answer the question. They are probably even more pleased that I will end the silence that occurs when the professor throws out a question to which no one knows the answer.

This brings me to dealing with the “intimidating professor.” At the beginning of the semester, he or she

says that class participation counts for a significant percentage of your final grade. “Great,” you think to yourself. Your class is already at an ungodly hour and you’ve heard how difficult the class is. You listen each day to the professor discussing topics you don’t understand. You quickly realize that the way in which the professor conducts the class does NOT promote class discussion. S/he seems to ask random questions to see who is paying attention, always selecting the person who is looking down, sleeping, or talking. When faced with this classroom situation, I do my best not to be caught in such a position.

Class participation seems to work best when the class atmosphere is light and teasing. When professors know their students’ names, they can more easily create a positive relationship with them. In these classes, students who are not paying attention feel more comfortable either admitting they don’t know the answer or attempting to offer a solution when called upon. They don’t feel like they are being interrogated. In this environment, students understand that it is okay to be wrong sometimes. I admire professors’ ability to never directly say a student is wrong, but rather take the answer and add to it the message they want to convey.

Large classrooms, upperclassmen and intimidating professors cannot be avoided. They are inevitable at any school and students at Bryant College should be grateful that we are not in a class with 499 other student ID numbers. Just try to sit up front, forget about who is staring at you, and remember that each professor has his/her own method of teaching. ❖

Participation and Teaching Styles

by Daniel Pepin, Writing Consultant

One inevitable part of the college experience is coping with many different teaching styles. From my experience, teaching styles forge the way for very different levels of class participation. In many cases, participation is a veritable portion of the final grade, so it is imperative that students learn the expectations of each teacher.

One type of teacher is the “lecturer.” This type of teacher lectures to the class, while students take notes and determine which points are most relevant to the course. Generally, these teachers do not expect a high level of class participation, but instead may occasionally ask questions of the class or ask if there are any important points the class wishes to bring up. Another type of teacher is the “discussion leader.” Rather than lecture, this teacher brings up important points and asks the students to elaborate upon them. This type of class relies heavily on class participation. Very few teachers are strictly lecturers or discussion leaders;

instead, many maintain a balance between the two styles. Furthermore, different courses seem to be better suited to different teaching styles.

If you find yourself in a history class where the teacher mostly lectures, you should try to ask questions whenever a point is not clear. Not only will you and the class learn from your question, but you will show that you were awake during the lecture! If you are in a discussion class, give your opinion. This is a great way to start a good class discussion. Generally, if you want to say something, it is worth raising your hand and sharing it with the class. Oh yes, don’t forget to attend class. If you aren’t present, you won’t be able to participate at all. ❖

Being Wrong Isn’t Always a Bad Thing

by Melissa Kendall, Writing Consultant

What can I say about class participation? To be honest, I used to participate in class only when I thought I was sure my answer was correct. Who wants to say something that is wrong in front of the entire class? I now realize that there are benefits to getting involved in class discussion even when I’m not so sure about my answer.

If something is not clear to you, then do not be afraid to ask a question. Who knows, maybe someone else will join in the discussion because they themselves really do not understand what is going on either. Also, if there is a question that is posed to the class, try to offer your own answer or opinion, even if you fear others will disagree with you. One goal for class participation is to learn multiple ways of looking at a subject through other students’ opinions.

Offering an off-target response can be a valuable learning experience. Though you may feel quite uncomfortable and embarrassed at first, you have opened the lines of communication between yourself and your classmates and professor. You are letting them know that you do not understand something in particular or maybe there are a few other classmates who do not understand this and the professor could go over this topic with the entire class.

I know that it is sometimes very hard to participate in class discussions. You should try, however, to get involved. Class discussions are a valuable part of the learning process. They allow you to communicate what you think or what you do not understand about a particular subject to your professor and classmates so that you and others can learn together. They allow you to gain a wider view of the subject by listening to others’ opinions. Believe it or not, class participation can make learning a fun experience because you have an opportunity to actively involve yourself in the class. ❖