

GETTING STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE CLASSROOM

from Bergquist, W.H. & Phillips, S.R. (1975) *A Handbook for Faculty Development*. Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges (pp. 114-17.)

There is generally no single reason why some students are in varying degrees uninterested and unwilling to participate in the classroom. Usually a combination of factors are responsible and the instructor is faced with diagnosing the problems in each individual class. The following represents some of the more common causes of student non-involvement:

- I. Factors which contribute to one-way communication on the part of the instructor.
- II. Certain student learning styles which avoid involvement.
- III. The lack of specific classroom structures which encourage participation.

The following sections examine each of the above causes, suggest how each contributes to the problem, and offer some possible solutions.

I. A tendency for the instructor to encourage one-way communication patterns will lead to a lack of involvement and participation.

A. *General characteristics of one- and two-way communication.*

One-way: Listener has little or no opportunity to respond immediately and directly. A teacher must make assumptions about the listener's skill level, prior training, and understanding of the material being communicated. Therefore, errors like the following could be made by the teacher: making the material too difficult, making the material too simple, making assumptions which are not fully shared by the audience, thus making it impossible for them to understand what is being said. Other characteristics: faster transmission less accuracy, potential lack of common vocabulary.

Two-way: There is a flow of information among and between individuals. Because of the opportunity for immediate feedback, many of the assumptions that one makes under one-way communication about skill level, prior training, and understanding of the material being communicated get tested immediately. Other characteristics: slower transmission, greater accuracy, time to develop a common vocabulary.

B. *Psychological effects of one-way communication on students.*

1. *Frustration*—the student cannot easily communicate or ask for clarification of instructor information.
2. *Apathy*—a lack of involvement and interest in what is going on.
3. *Fear*—students don't want to talk in front of the group for fear of being put down or for fear of making the teacher angry.
4. *Dependence*—students expect the teacher to give all the necessary information. Most become unable to judge the value of the information.
5. *Hostility and/or aggression*—they may cheat or quit coming to class.

All of the five psychological reactions will make it difficult for the instructor to get students involved in a meaningful manner. A movement towards two-way communication patterns will help reduce these reactions.

C. *Factors which contribute to one-way communication.*

1. *Faculty behaviors.*

- a. Status and title of the speaker and overusing it.
- b. Power to pass and fail.
- c. Formal mannerisms.
- d. Using sarcasm or ridicule.
- e. Making terminal statements where no disagreement is possible.
- f. Making punishing remarks.
- g. Displaying a great amount of detailed knowledge.

- h. Frequent use of technical language.
- i. Not getting to know students' names. Non-entities don't like to communicate with each other.

2. *General atmosphere.*

- a. *Front to back seating arrangements encourage one-way communication.* It is hard to talk to the back of someone else's head. Front to back seating arrangements discourage students from talking among themselves but they do focus attention on the instructor.
- b. *A failure to periodically solicit student feedback* in a course about how it is progressing. Are students getting out of the course what they want? Are the classroom procedures and methods used well? Are there some things that you are doing which students don't like (for example, lecture organization, clarity of presentations, unfriendly manner) ? Information on these factors not only helps make the classroom atmosphere better but it also creates *an atmosphere where students feel the instructor is interested in what they have to say*. This has a tendency to transfer into content areas as well.
- c. *Required attendance.* Students who feel coerced into attending every session are less likely to want to participate.
- d. *An overemphasis on grades and grading.* Constantly stressing the importance of material for the midterm or final, how important a good grade in your course is, and how much you appreciate good students will lead to a lack of involvement. Students are less likely to be involved when the name of the game is to get a grade and not learning something that might be of value to them.
- e. *Encourage exclusive dialogue with the instructor and not between students.* This fosters a lack of involvement since students must compete with each other for the "king's ear." This is more like convincing or arguing with the instructor over a point but it is hardly like a dialogue among peers. Trying to capture the "king's ear" is something most students lose interest in.
- f. *The non-involvement cycle.* All of the above help create an atmosphere where students don't want to get involved. Consequently, they begin to behave that way, which leads the instructor to assume they are apathetic and uninterested, and the instructor continues to treat them in ways that lead to more apathy and uninvolvement. Thus a self-fulfilling prophecy begins to emerge.

II. Some student learning styles avoid classroom involvement.

Students exhibit a number of learning styles in their approach to the classroom. Three that are related to a lack of involvement are:

- A. *Avoidant.* This response style is typical of a student who is not interested in learning course content in the traditional classroom. He does not participate with students and teachers in the classroom. He is uninterested or overwhelmed by what goes on in the classes.
- B. *Competitive.* This response style is exhibited by the student who learns material in order to perform better than others in the class. He feels he must compete with other students in the class for the rewards of the classroom, such as grades or teachers' attention. He views the classroom as a win-lose situation where he must always win. Other students are unlikely to join this student in participation because of the win-lose nature of the interaction.
- C. *Dependent.* This style is characteristic of the student who shows little intellectual curiosity and who learns only what is required. He sees teachers and peers as sources of structure and support. He looks to authority figures for guidelines and wants to be told what to do. Consequently, this student is unlikely to initiate or have much that is original to say in class discussions.

Three other learning styles are more likely to result in classroom participation; they are:

- D. *Collaborative*. This style is typical of the student who feels he can learn the most by sharing his ideas and talents. He cooperates with teachers and peers and likes to work with others. He sees the classroom as a place for social interaction as well as content learning.
- E. *Participant*. This style is characteristic of the student who wants to learn course content and likes to go to class. He takes responsibility for getting the most out of class and participates with others when told to do so. He feels that he should take part in as much of the class related activity as possible, but he does little that is not part of the course outline.
- F. *Independent*. This response style is characteristic of the student who likes to think for himself. He prefers to work on his own, but he will listen to the ideas of others in the classroom. He learns the content he feels is important and is confident in his learning abilities.

Research shows that students do not have just one style but that instead they have several in varying degrees and in various situations. It is not necessary to have a battery of psychological instruments to assess these styles, since an awareness of your students' behaviors will give you clues as to which ones are operating. A more formal way of obtaining this information is to give each student the description of the various learning styles (without the descriptive word) and ask them to rank the styles on a scale of most and least like them. A tabulation of that information may give you useful information about the predominate learning styles in your classroom. Moreover, by designing your classroom in certain ways, you can reduce the occurrence of certain styles.

III. The lack of specific classroom structures and rewards which encourage participation.

Students will not especially participate unless they are encouraged to do so and rewarded for it. *The weakest form of encouragement is to tell students "I want or I expect you to participate in the class and part of your grade will be based on such participation."* The problems this presents are: a) What specific behaviors on the student's part count as participation? Asking questions, answering questions, giving a report, sharing information? b) How much of the student's grade is affected by participation? and c) What are the specific consequences of not participating?

A different approach to the problem is to assume that students will participate when specific classroom structures are established for participation and the subsequent participation is rewarding to the student.

A. *Rewards*. Three classes of rewards can operate in the classroom. They will not operate, however, unless *attempts are made to make them operate*.

1. *Instructor rewards*—recognition of a good performance verbally and/or through earning specific points towards a grade;
2. *Peer rewards*—a recognition from peers that the student did a good job. This can be done informally or students can be asked to formally give written comments to a peer for some participation activity; and
3. *Self-reward*—We all evaluate our performances, and the personal satisfaction from a job well done is rewarding. For this to operate in the classroom, students need to know what specific participation jobs they must accomplish.

To the extent that all three types of rewards are allowed to operate, a high degree of participation is possible.

B. *Classroom structures*. The following table presents a tabulation of various kinds of classroom structures which encourage participation and which you may find useful in your own classrooms. If you choose to experiment with any of the less common methods described on the table, it is often desirable to take a fair amount of time to introduce the technique to the class so that everyone understands its purpose and feels comfortable with it.