

## Guiding Dominating Students to More Egalitarian Classroom Participation

*Lynda R. Wiest, Ph.D. and Kellie J. Pop, M.S.,  
University of Nevada, Reno*

### **Authors' Contact Information**

*Lynda R. Wiest, Ph.D.  
Professor of Education,  
University of Nevada, Reno,  
College of Education / 299, Reno, NV 89557  
Phone: 775-682-7868  
Email: [wiest@unr.edu](mailto:wiest@unr.edu)*

### **Abstract:**

*The authors of this article offer college instructors suggestions for carefully orchestrating face-to-face class discussions with the dominant student in mind. They provide some insight into why students might over-participate and how this can be problematic. They then offer recommendations for whole-class and small-group instructional approaches that can help minimize monopolizing and create more fair and balanced class discussions.*

### **Key Words:**

Postsecondary Education, Dominating Students, Class Discussions, Instructional Techniques.

### **Introduction**

To maximize learning for all students, college faculty must adeptly address situations where students dominate classroom discussions. A student might be particularly garrulous for many reasons, such as:

- quick processing time (Seif, 2012);
- strong intellect, verbal skills, enthusiasm, and self-confidence (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005);
- high motivation and interest in the subject matter (Weimer, 2009);
- egocentrism and an attempt to control situations or influence others (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Knowlton, 2013);
- unawareness of turn-taking or appropriate discussion conventions, or interpersonal insensitivity (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Case, 2011; Eberly Center, 2016);
- attempts to gain the instructor's approval (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005); and

- perception of a free and open discussion that teachers fail to orchestrate (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

Clearly, some of these motives are favorable and some are unfavorable in terms of desirable student behaviors, and some can be subject to teacher influence. Regardless of the cause, the result is the same: Nonparticipants might check out (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.). Engaging *all* learners is important because active participation can favorably influence student knowledge and skill development, as well as dispositions (AlKandari, 2012; Hyun, Ediger, & Lee, 2017; O'Connor, 2013; Wonglorsaichon, Wongwanich, & Wiratchai, 2014).

Students and even professors can come to rely on and defer to class talkers. For example, some students like having peers claim the class floor to pose questions they are reluctant to ask or to shield them from speaking themselves (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Case, 2011; Howard, Short, & Clark, 1996; Weimer, 2009). Although over-participating students can make valuable contributions, they sometimes take a discussion off topic and waste time (Howard et al., 1996), besides silencing classmates (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Case, 2011). McFetridge (2015) notes, "You don't want one student to go off on a mini-lecture and bore everyone half to death" (para. 2). Commentary that comes largely from one or two students can yield more narrow exploration of a topic and constricted learning potential for the class in general. Differences in student status (e.g., by gender or age), besides individual personalities, can influence who speaks more, adding another layer of importance to the instructor's role (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Case, 2011; Howard et al., 1996; Tatum, Schwartz, Schimmoeller, & Perry, 2013; Howard & Weimer, 2015).

To enhance learning, enjoyment, and a sense of fairness for all students in a college classroom, instructors must carefully orchestrate class participation. In this article, we offer suggestions for doing so successfully with the dominant participant in mind. However, many of these techniques have the added benefit of drawing quiet students into classroom conversation as well. We focus on face-to-face discussions and organize our recommendations into whole-class and small-group approaches. Note that arranging physical classroom space crosscuts these two categories and can be an important factor to consider as a "baseline" structural element for many of these ideas. For example, circular seating arrangements and round tables in which all students can directly see each other's face can encourage greater student participation, interaction, and even a sense of belonging (Falout, 2014; Howard & Weimer, 2015; Hyun et al., 2017; Rosenfield, Lambert, & Black, 1985).

### **Whole-Class Approaches**

One way to minimize monopolizing is to encourage wider class participation (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). This takes place most readily in a comfortable climate, in which instructors show interest and support by making eye contact and smiling, praising student effort, listening carefully and responding to student comments (e.g., with probing questions), and allowing sufficient wait-time for responses (Rocca, 2010; Seif, 2012; Tanner, 2013; Tatum et al., 2013). Early in a course, instructors should discuss good group communication skills with students, such as fair turn-taking, and the fact that discussions are richer with varied perspectives, increasing interest value and

learning potential (Case, 2011; Hara, 2010; Weimer, 2009). The first author has had success with telling students they should speak about 1/25 of the time if the class has 25 students and issuing occasional reminders. (Students sometimes say, “I might be speaking more than my 1/25, but...,” showing that they remain aware of their approximate target participation amount.) Below we suggest some specific whole-class approaches.

### ***Establish class expectations from the start.***

Expectations for individual participation can be formalized in the syllabus, with class participation scores and descriptive criteria appearing in a rubric or a class contract that students are asked to sign (AlKandari, 2012; Case, 2011). Class input might be solicited for developing discussion norms, which are “a set of accepted usual, typical, standard acceptable behaviors in the classroom” (Tanner, 2013, p. 329). To help establish these norms, instructors should model and facilitate expected behavior early in the course (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

*Institute structure in facilitating oral discussions.* Students should raise hands and be acknowledged to respond, with no interruptions permitted, and quieter students should be called on first fairly often (McFetridge, 2015; Tanner, 2013). Cold-calling on students who do not raise hands can have merit (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2012), particularly for less difficult questions or when students have first had sufficient time to ponder independently or to discuss in pairs or small groups, but some sources recommend against this practice (e.g., Rocca, 2010). Student oral responses in the whole-class setting might also be timed, perhaps limited to two minutes (McFetridge, 2015).

### ***Solicit broader student participation.***

In particular, ask to hear from someone who has not yet responded to a question (Hara, 2010; Howard & Weimer, 2015). Classmates might also be asked to comment on ideas expressed by an especially talkative student (Howard & Weimer, 2015). Many good techniques exist for asking all students to actively engage the course material. For example, students might do a “quick write,” in which they take a few minutes (about one to three) to explain their thinking about a question posed, perhaps on an index card that the instructor might collect (Howard & Weimer, 2015; O'Connor, 2013; Tanner, 2013). Use of modern technologies is another way to increase student engagement. For example, students might use tablet computers as learning aids or classroom response systems in which they answer questions anonymously using individual response pads. These devices provide an opportunity for whole-class participation and can increase student learning and engagement (Mango, 2015; Termos, 2013). A “bring your own device” (BYOD) approach has been gaining ground in the college classroom. BYOD involves students using their own personal devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, or laptops) to respond to questions via classroom systems designed to sync with them. In fact, students have been shown to prefer this approach to using handheld devices distributed by the instructor (Katz, Hallam, Duvall, & Polsky, 2017).

Non-technological response systems can also be used. For example, students might be asked to put thumbs up/down to signify agreement/disagreement or to display their

choices from colored or numbered index cards that represent specific responses or to write responses on small marker boards and hold them up for the instructor to see (e.g., O'Connor, 2013). Activities can also be designed that require students to physically move around the room to discuss ideas, as in standing in two concentric circles with the inside circle facing out and the outside facing in with students paired to discuss a question posed by the instructor; those in a designated circle then move several spots left or right for another question. Students might also be asked to do a "forced choice" activity where they move to one side of the room or the other (e.g., for true-false) or to one of four corners representing given response alternatives before discussing their choice with others at the same location and/or with the class at large. (See, for example, O'Connor, 2013.)

***Have students take turns monitoring discussions.***

Students might be assigned to observe discussions to report how equitably the class participated, with an eye toward suggesting improvements (Case, 2011; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014).

## **Small-Group Approaches**

The following small-group ideas can promote more equal participation:

***Use more pair and small-group discussions.***

Think-pair-share is a highly popular and effective method that requires students to think quietly (and then sometimes write their ideas independently if doing think-write-pair-share) before sharing their thoughts with a designated peer and then with the whole class if so nominated. This approach affords greater individual engagement and an opportunity to test ideas in a small, safe setting before possibly sharing ideas in a whole-class setting (Howard & Weimer, 2015; Seif, 2012). Some options for pair and small-group work include assigning students specific roles to perform within the discussion group (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005) or at least a discussion monitor for each group (see previous section), and placing talkative students in the same pair/group (Case, 2011; McFetridge, 2015; Weimer, 2009).

***Include activities that ensure and teach more balanced participation.***

For example, students might have or imagine having a given number of tokens to use one per discussion contribution, or they could sit in a circle and toss a soft ball to another person to speak next (Eberly Center, 2016; Hara, 2010). (This can be used in a whole-group setting as well.) Similarly, students in discussion pairs might play a "Less Is More" or "Equal Is More" game (Case, 2011). For "Less Is More," the student who speaks less during the allotted time wins. Students try to get their partner to speak more by posing questions to each other about the discussion topic. In "Equal Is More," pairs jointly try to ensure 50 percent participation by each partner. (Each group might have a third person to monitor and judge the outcomes.)

## Closing Comments

If these methods fail to nudge a dominating student toward more equitable behavior, it will be necessary to talk directly with him or her outside of class to discuss how excessive participation disadvantages classmates and to establish clear expectations for future participation, while also validating the student's passion and engagement (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.; Eberly Center, 2016; Hara, 2010; McFetridge, 2015; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014; Weimer, 2009). Weimer (2009) says, "Perhaps the student could be encouraged to move his or her participation to the next level by not just answering questions, but asking them; by not just making comments, but specifically responding to things other students say in class" (para. 6). Case (2011) suggests spending some one-on-one conversation time about course material with the student outside of class. These approaches are important because even classmates who harbor some unfavorable feelings about a dominating student do not want to see the "compulsive communicator" chastised publicly in class (McPherson & Liang, 2007). Despite the enthusiasm and intellectual contributions of monopolizing students, it is incumbent upon professors to ensure opportunities for all students to actively participate in class in order to optimize their academic growth.

## References

- AlKandari, N. (2012). Students' communication and positive outcomes in college classrooms. *Education*, 133(1), 19-30.
- Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Case, A. (2011). *Dealing with dominating students*. Retrieved from <https://www.englishclub.com/efl/tefl-articles/dominating-students/>
- Center for Teaching Excellence. (n.d.). *Handling classroom distractions*. Retrieved from [https://www.sc.edu/about/offices\\_and\\_divisions/cte/teaching\\_resources/goodteaching/handling\\_classroom\\_distractions/](https://www.sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/cte/teaching_resources/goodteaching/handling_classroom_distractions/)
- Dallimore, E. J., Hertenstein, J. H., & Platt, M. B. (2012). Impact of cold-calling on student voluntary participation. *Journal of Management Education*, 37(3), 305-341.
- Eberly Center. (2016). *One student monopolizes class*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University. Retrieved from <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/solveproblem/strategy-monopolizes/monopolizes-01.html>
- Falout, J. (2014). Circular seating arrangements: Approaching the social crux in language classrooms. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(2), 275-300.
- Hara, B. (2010, February 2). Disruptive student behavior: The case of talkative Nancy. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/disruptive-student-behavior-the-case-of-talkative-nancy/22948>
- Howard, J. R., Short, L. B., & Clark, S. M. (1996). Students' participation in the mixed-age college classroom. *Teaching Sociology*, 24(1), 8-24.
- Howard, J. R., & Weimer, M. (2015). *Discussion in the college classroom: Getting your students engaged and participating in person and online*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hyun, J., Ediger, R., & Lee, D. (2017). Students' satisfaction on their learning process in active learning and traditional classrooms. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 29(1), 108-118.

- Katz, L. K., Hallam, M. C., Duvall, M. M., & Polsky, Z. (2017). Considerations for using personal Wi-Fi enabled devices as “clickers” in a large university class. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 18(1), 25-35.
- Knowlton, D. S. (2013). Navigating the paradox of student ego. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 135, 19-30.
- Mango, O. (2015). iPad use and student engagement in the classroom. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 14(1), 53-57.
- McFetridge, D. (2015, October 6). *4 ways for dealing with dominant students*. Retrieved from <http://www.teachingenglishinberlin.com/4-ways-for-dealing-with-dominant-students/>
- McPherson, M. B., & Liang, Y. (2007). Students' reactions to teachers' management of compulsive communicators. *Communication Education*, 56(1), 18-33.
- O'Connor, K. J. (2013). Class participation: Promoting in-class student engagement. *Education*, 133(3), 340-344.
- Rocca, K. A. (2010). Student participation in the college classroom: An extended multidisciplinary literature review. *Communication Education*, 59(2), 185-213.
- Rosenfield, P., Lambert, N. M., & Black, A. (1985). Desk arrangement effects on pupil classroom behavior. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77(1), 101-108.
- Seif, E. (2012). *Eight types of instructional strategies that improve learning in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century world*. Retrieved from <http://edge.ascd.org/blogpost/eight-types-of-instructional-strategies-that-improve-learning-in-a-21st-century-world>
- Svinicki, M. D., & McKeachie, W. J. (2014). *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (14<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belcont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Tanner, K. D. (2013). Structure matters: Twenty-one teaching strategies to promote student engagement and cultivate classroom equity. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 12(3), 322-331.
- Tatum, H. E., Schwartz, B. M., Schimmoeller, P. A., & Perry, N. (2013). Classroom participation and student-faculty interactions: Does gender matter? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 84(6), 745-768.
- Termos, M. H. (2013). The effects of the classroom performance system on student participation, attendance, and achievement. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 25(1), 66-78.
- Weimer, M. (2009, May 8). Those students who participate too much. Retrieved from <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-classroom-management/those-students-who-participate-too-much/>
- Wonglorsaichon, B., Wongwanich, S., & Wiratchai, N. (2014). The influence of students school engagement on learning achievement: A structural equation modeling analysis. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 116, 1748-1755.