

# SPEAKING UP & MAKING SPACE

## A brief guide to class participation @ Grinnell

Members of the Humanities Center Student Steering Committee drew on faculty and student experience to come up with a few things for you to keep in mind when you think about how you participate in class and contribute to your classroom cultures.

*What creates a good environment for classroom discussion? Here are some of the key ideas we heard from students and faculty alike.*

The biggest takeaway from our interviews is that we *all* need to work on our active listening skills.

- Use body language to *show* people we are listening.
- Refer to each other by name.
- Affirm each other's comments. This doesn't mean just saying "I agree with everything that's been said." (Is that ever really true?) Make sure that your comments refer to, build on, or somehow engage what others have said. You can affirm *and* respectfully challenge or question.

*Of course, having peers be active listeners isn't always enough. What are some obstacles to class participation?*

*Here's what professors had to say:*

- Sometimes students aren't really sure how to prepare for class. This is a great topic to chat about during office hours!
- Some students experience real anxiety about participating in discussion, which often comes from questions around belonging in the classroom that relate to gender, race, sexuality, language and cultural background, and privilege.

*Here's what students had to say:*

- Previous negative classroom experiences really leave their mark, creating anxiety about participation.
- Sometimes students doubt the relevance of their comments, especially with really challenging material.

What can *you* do to help create and support a positive classroom environment for participation?

*Here's what students had to say:*

- Ask each other questions instead of directing your comments and questions to the professor.
- Acknowledge that we will all make mistakes. We are here to learn. Approach each other with a spirit of support, and challenge people in positive ways. Be patient with each other.
- Build on what others have to say rather than thinking about discussion as a way to tear each other down.

*Here's what professors had to say:*

- The best discussions are when we all treat the classroom as a collaborative project.
- Direct your comments to each other, using each other's names whenever possible.
- Support and affirm each other with positive reinforcement, good questions, and engaged body language.

Finally, we asked faculty for some advice for students. Here is what they came up with:

- We are not looking for people to impress us. We are looking for signs of engagement with the material and with each other.
- There are lots of ways to contribute to classroom discussion. You can start class with a comment you have prepared ahead of time. You can do something as simple as agree with and reinforce a comment someone else has made. You can ask a specific question or a general question about material. It's about engagement!