



CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

Speaking Up and Making Space:

Class Participation at Grinnell from Student and Faculty Perspectives

Grinnell College Center for the Humanities

Grinnell's signature pedagogy is active, participatory learning. Class discussion is a crucial dimension of this educational ethos. In the spirit of seeking to help our community think about how to make the most of class discussion, the Center for the Humanities' Student Steering Committee, in pursuit of its mission to promote humanistic inquiry on campus and support students in the humanities, explored faculty and student perspectives on class participation to help spur conversation about this central feature of academic life. Over the course of our work, we came to believe that class participation is an important measure of inclusive learning environments. Below, we present findings from information-gathering and present very brief conclusions.

Gathering our data:

In the fall of 2017, the Steering Committee sponsored a workshop on classroom participation.¹ The goal of the workshop was to better understand the barriers that students face in fully participating in the class and to provide helpful tips in making their presence felt in the classroom. Prior to our workshop, members of the Committee reached out to a number of faculty members, representing a variety of departments, such as English, history, political science, sociology, religious studies, and anthropology. We conducted semi-structured interviews with the faculty asking them about the barriers they see in the classrooms, what they look for in discussion-based classes, their techniques in making the classrooms more inclusive, and advice and tips they have for students to help themselves and each other to contribute to the class. Using our faculty interviews as a guide, we then held a 2-hour student-led workshop. In the workshop we asked students what they think makes a successful discussion-based class successful, how they see their role in helping their peers feel included in the classroom, and what they see or hope to see their faculty do to make the classroom more accessible and inclusive. We have brought together insights from these different ways of gathering perspectives on class participation with the hope they prove useful to students and faculty alike.

¹ Julia Schafer '18, Farah Omer '19, Helen Eckhard '18, and Kyle Lindsey '19 played crucial roles in this project, contributing in a number of different ways at each stage.

Findings

What students think makes classroom-based discussion successful:

1. When peers and professors give positive affirmation to participants by nodding, smiling, or connecting their comment to their own
2. When professors ask open-ended questions and are flexible with what direction a discussion takes
3. When there is mutual respect among class members and disagreements are handled respectfully, not aggressively
4. When professors offer alternate methods of participation, such as a game, small group discussion, or “pair sharing”
5. When professors provide questions to consider during assigned readings or ask students to reflect via brief journal entries

Techniques professors use to build a successful classroom environment:

1. Begin each semester by having students share something about each other--helps situate the students with each other, and with the material of the class
2. Everyone gets a chance to point to a topic or passage they want to discuss that day--that way students can shape the path of a discussion to suit their needs and interest
3. Small group discussion that is informed by questions about readings posed in advance of class
4. Create an opportunity at the beginning of the semester for students to chat with their professor during office hours. This makes it easier for students to use office hours as a resource later in the semester, and can create positive experiences with a professor one-on-one, rather than stressful ones
5. Use different media sources (e.g., film, music, literature) to create different points of entry into class materials

What students perceive as common obstacles to class participation:

1. General anxiety or shyness when speaking in front of large groups
2. Receiving condescending responses to questions or being shut down or policed by peers
3. Lack of confidence in voicing opinion when course material is particularly complex or difficult to grasp
4. Residual effects of high-school classroom dynamics, such as limited experience in discussion-based classrooms or hesitation due to one’s own religious, national, gender, or other identity
5. Feeling that the comment one wants to make is not relevant to the current course of conversation

What professors perceive as common obstacles to class participation:

1. Lack of preparation for class
2. Being shy or feeling self conscious, including feeling like you are not “expert” on a particular topic

3. Legacies of past classroom culture, including not being exposed to discussion based classroom, U.S classroom culture, and a culture of politeness
4. Issues of belonging, extending to gender, nationality, privilege, and feeling marginalized and essentialized by the professor and other students
5. International students sometimes underestimate the quality of their English abilities, or believe that other students will judge them for their language skills

Steps students take to make the classroom environment more accessible for their peers:

1. Seconding another student's point or building on it when contributing their own ideas
2. Giving peers who participate less frequently the chance to do so by pausing before jumping in
3. Recognizing one's own identity in the context of the classroom
4. Asking each other questions instead of directing comments/questions solely at the professor
5. Calling peers by name (and making an effort to learn their names if not already known)

Steps professors believe that students can take to make the classroom more accessible for their peers:

1. Affirm each other! Link your comments to someone else's
2. Practice active listening and positive body language
3. Direct comments and questions towards each other, not towards the professor, and learn each other's names
4. Treat discussion as a collaborative process, and not a battle in which you are supposed to defeat another student

Steps students would like to see their faculty/peers take to improve the classroom discussion environment:

1. Professors setting discussion expectations and explaining the difficulties of participation at the beginning of the semester
2. Professors encouraging students to switch up their usual seating and sit next to a "stranger" on occasion
Both professors and students acknowledging that small mistakes in speaking are natural and human
3. Debating points respectfully by validating the perspective of another person's comment before contributing your rebuttal
4. Offering accommodations to people with disabilities that might make participation difficult, such as writing a short reflection in lieu of more traditional, in-class discussion

Advice professors have for students:

1. Professors are not looking to be blown away by a brilliant comment, they just want to see that a student is engaging with the class
2. Write your comment or questions ahead of time, and read them to the class. Phrase things like questions to make them feel less risky
3. Set a goal for participating in each class, for example “I will participate three times”
4. Don’t over generalize what you think other students know, or assume that more talkative students are always “right”. Your insights matter!
5. After finishing a reading take 10 minutes to reflect on it. It can help to talk it over with a friend or roommate

Conclusion

Our project has revealed a slight disconnect in what students and professors perceive as major barriers to classroom participation. In part, the objective of this work has been to highlight these discrepancies and begin fostering a dialogue between students and faculty about how to improve classroom discussions. We hope that this feedback offers insight about how various members of the campus community approach participation in the classroom, creating a foundation from which to begin building more inclusive educational environments together. We also hope that the discussions this project has sparked will contribute to an increased awareness in the ways that each of us as an individual—whether student or faculty member—plays a role in fostering inclusive spaces for others. The work we have done this semester was primarily diagnostic, but we are interested in receiving your feedback as we continue to consider inclusivity in the classroom and offer more resources in the future.