

CLASS PARTICIPATION TIPS

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As in many courses, a significant portion of the grade for THIS course is based on class participation. Over my many years of teaching experience, I have had hundreds of conversations with students to try to help them improve their class participation performance. Based on those discussions, in my experience, I have seen only a small handful of reasons why students struggle with class participation, and each of these has a simple solution. The five main barriers to class participation are: coming to class unprepared, language barrier, introversion, fear of making mistakes, and defining class participation too narrowly.

So, let's consider each of these five barriers in turn.

The first possible reason why students sometimes struggle with class participation is if they are simply not coming to class prepared. Naturally, anyone who is coming to class unprepared would tend to avoid speaking up due to the fear of embarrassing oneself by saying something that would reveal that lack of preparation to the rest of the class and to the professor.

So, what does it mean to come to class prepared? For this course, there are three essential elements to preparing for class: First, at the very least, coming to class prepared includes taking the time to do all of the assigned readings in advance, as well as taking 15 to 20 minutes to think about those readings. Second, for each class meeting, the course syllabus includes a set of discussion questions. We may not discuss every one of these questions at every class meeting, but we will discuss most of them at most of the class meetings. So, preparing for class also includes reviewing those discussion questions from the syllabus and writing down your answers to those questions. Third and finally, most of our class meetings include discussing a case study about a company that is facing a problem. So, whenever we have a case study to discuss in class, your preparation should also include taking some time to write answers to the question of what the company in the case study should do about that problem. If you're doing a thorough job on all three of those elements, then you're probably pretty well prepared for class. If you're struggling with class participation, and you're not doing all three of these elements to prepare for class, then I would encourage you to start with improving your pre-class preparation as a first step.

Of course, lack of preparation is not the only reason why students struggle with class participation. A second barrier to class participation is the language barrier for students who are not native speakers of English. The challenge that a non-native speaker faces is what I would call the "time-delay effect." Here's how it works: We usually have a complicated and fast-moving discussion in class, sometimes using unfamiliar terminology. So, a non-native speaker often has to go through a four-step process before she can participate in that discussion: First, she must hear the discussion taking place around her in English. Second, she must mentally translate the English discussion into her native language. Third, she must formulate something to say in response to the discussion. And fourth, she must then mentally translate that response back into English. Only after doing all four of those steps is she ready to speak up and participate in the discussion. The problem is that the conversation in class moves quickly, and so by the time she has done all of those mental translations back and forth, somebody has probably already made the point that she wanted to make and the conversation has moved on. In this

situation, the real problem is the time delay that she experiences as a result of doing all of those mental translations, which just slows her down too much.

To solve this problem, we simply attack the time delay by shifting the time when we do most of the translating. Specifically, we want to do as much of the translation as possible before coming to class. How can we do that? It's simple. We just anticipate some things that we will probably want to say during class, and write those things down on paper in English before coming to class. For example, for each class session, the syllabus contains some discussion questions related to the topic of that session.

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Now, as I mentioned earlier, I may not always ask ALL of those questions in class, and they might be phrased a little differently when I ask them in class than the phrasing that you see in the syllabus, but you know that some version of most of those questions will be asked in class. So, my point here is that if you arrive at class with pre-prepared written answers to those questions in English, then you won't have to do any mental translating to answer those questions, so you can answer those questions immediately, with no delay at all.

And there are also other questions that you can easily anticipate that I will ask in class. For example, whenever we are scheduled to discuss a case study, you can be fairly certain that I will ask an action question about what the company in the case study should do, or about what your recommendations for the company would be. So, if you take some time before class to think about your recommendations for what the company should do, and write those down, then you will be ready to answer when that question is asked. This way, you can skip all of the mental translations and beat the time-delay effect by just raising your hand as soon as you hear the question and then reading your written answer to the class.

Similarly, you can also anticipate that, at the end of any case study discussion, or at the end of any experiential class exercise, I almost always will ask, "What are the lessons learned from this case or this exercise? What are the take-aways?" So, even if you arrive at class completely unprepared, with no answers written down, you can still prepare during class to answer this "lessons learned" question. As the case study is being discussed, or as the class exercise is being done, simply write some notes about what you think the lessons or take-aways will be. Then, when I ask the "lessons learned" question, you can just read those notes to the class.

All of these different types of questions are easy to anticipate, and if you have written your answer before the question is asked, then you can just raise your hand as soon as you hear the question, and feel confident in knowing that your answer is already prepared. And it's perfectly OK for you to just read your answer to the class from the paper where you have written it, if you need to do that. If reading the answer off of your paper makes it easier for you, that's OK with me. However, this does require some discipline from you: You must have the discipline to simply raise your hand as soon as you hear the question asked, and resist the temptation to re-think or re-phrase your answer. After all, if you pause to re-think or re-phrase your answer, then you'll be falling right back into the old time-delay problem. So, just raise your hand when you hear the question and confidently rely on the thinking and phrasing that you have already done before the question was asked.

A third reason why students may struggle with class participation is if they're more of an introvert by nature. I completely sympathize with those students, because I am an introvert myself. Being an introvert doesn't mean that I can't talk in front of a group of people. I can, but it's not in my comfort zone. Whereas an extrovert might feel energized after talking in front of a group, an introvert like me would be more likely to feel drained and exhausted instead.

Fortunately, as it turns out, the class participation barrier that an introvert faces is actually quite similar to the barrier that a non-native speaker of English faces, because what they have in common is the time-delay effect. You see, an introvert doesn't just immediately say the first thing that pops into his mind. Whereas the classic extrovert needs to talk it out in order to figure out what he thinks, the classic introvert prefers to think it through in order to figure out what to say. So, the extrovert tends to speak before thinking, while the introvert prefers to think before speaking. And what, exactly, is the introvert thinking about? The introvert is doing what I would call "mental testing." As an introvert, when I think of something to say, I first pause to ask myself: Is this correct? Is this valid? How would other people respond to me saying this? How would they interpret it? How might they misinterpret it? Should I say all of it or just part of it? Would I prefer to phrase it this way or that way? How would my choice of phrasing affect how others would interpret it or respond to it? These are all mental testing questions that indicate my strong need to test what to say and how to say it before I can feel comfortable opening my mouth.

This cautious approach has the advantage of helping an introvert avoid some blunders that an extrovert might fall into. However, it also has the disadvantage of slowing the introvert's responses, which may cause the introvert to miss out on some opportunities that require a quick response. And one of those may be the opportunity to contribute to a fast-moving class discussion. In other words, by the time I get through all of that mental testing, and get comfortable about knowing exactly what point I want to make and exactly how I want to phrase it, someone else in the class has already made the same point and the conversation has moved on. This is the same time-delay obstacle that the non-native speaker faces, except that it comes from a different sort of mental processing. Rather than spending time doing mental translations between languages, the introvert spends time doing mental testing, but regardless of the particular type of mental processing, the time delay is the same either way.

So, the solution is also the same. Just as with the non-native speaker of English, the introvert's solution is also to beat the time delay by moving the mental processing outside of class time, as much as possible. Anticipate the questions that are likely to come up in class discussions, and prepare written answers for them in advance, so that when the question gets asked, you can just jump right in by reading your answer to the class, without having to get slowed down by all of that mental testing. Come to class with pre-prepared written answers to the discussion questions in the syllabus, and pre-prepared comments about what you would recommend that the company and case should do and why. And during any case discussions or experiential exercises in class, write some notes about the possible take-aways so that you'll be ready when the "lessons learned" question comes up.

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So, when the discussion questions, or the action questions, or the lessons learned questions get asked, you can be confident knowing that you already have good and well-phrased answers to these

questions written in your notes, so you can skip over all the mental testing and just move directly to making your point.

But again, this requires some discipline from you, because when the question gets asked, you must be willing to simply raise your hand as soon as you hear the question asked, and resist the temptation to reconsider or re-think or re-phrase your answer. Otherwise, you would just fall right back into the old time-delay problem. So, when you hear the question, just raise your hand, read your answer to the class, and confidently rely on the thinking that you have already done and the phrasing that you have already prepared before the question was even asked. And again, it's perfectly OK for you to just read your answer to the class from the paper where you have written it, if you need to do that. If reading the answer off of your paper makes it easier for you, that's OK with me.

A fourth barrier to class participation occurs when students are paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake. As you know, everybody makes mistakes, especially when learning something new, and I certainly understand that. It's OK to make a mistake. In fact, it's not only OK, it's totally expected, and in a case discussion course like this, making mistakes is virtually required if you're actually going to learn something. By its very nature, the case discussion method is inherently a trial and error method of learning, and trial and error necessarily involves some error. So, if you are not making mistakes, then you are not learning.

In fact, making a mistake can actually be a very positive form of class participation, for two reasons: First, your mistake provides a valuable learning experience for the entire class. If you're making a mistake in your thinking, chances are very good that at least half of the rest of the class is making the same mistake in their thinking. But the only way we can correct the mistake is to discuss it. If we don't get the mistake out in the open, where we can identify the flaw in everyone's thinking, then nobody recognizes the problem and nobody can learn anything from it. For example, when we're discussing a case study about a company, let's say you confuse structural entry barriers with strategic entry barriers, and that mistake leads you to make a bad recommendation that would wind up killing the company. If we get that bad recommendation out in the open and see how it would kill the company, then we can start to figure out where that bad recommendation came from. We can ask questions like: What led you to make this recommendation? Was it due to some invalid assumption, or some incorrect information, or some faulty logic? We can trace your thinking back to the source of the problem and say, "Oh, I see, the problem actually started all the way back here at the start, where you confused structural entry barriers with strategic entry barriers." Then the class has an "a-ha" moment where everyone learns something valuable from the mistake. Indeed, half of the class usually realizes that they were also making the same mistake, but they just hadn't noticed it. That's where the real learning happens in a case discussion course.

By the way, in the syllabus, I have a section about class participation that explains my criteria for evaluating your participation in class. It shows two parallel lists – a list of contributions to class discussion that are evaluated positively, and a list of contributions to class discussion that I would evaluate negatively. If you read those two lists carefully, then you'll notice that neither one of them contains anything about whether your contributions are right or wrong. That's because, as far as grading is concerned, it really doesn't matter to me whether what you say is right or wrong. So, making

a mistake will not affect your class participation grade at all. That's just NOT one of my criteria for evaluating class participation.

This point brings me to the second reason why making a mistake is a valuable form of class participation: Making mistakes here in our class discussion will ultimately help you in your career. Everyone makes mistakes at some point in their lives, but it is far better to make those mistakes in the classroom than on the job. That's because here in the classroom, there is very little at stake. As I just mentioned a moment ago, making a mistake doesn't even affect your class participation grade, so really the only thing that's at stake in the classroom is just some pride. But on a real job in a real company, the stakes are much, much higher. There may be millions or even billions of dollars at stake, and hundreds or even thousands of jobs on the line. So, if we can get our mistakes out of the way in the classroom, and learn from them here so that we don't repeat them out there on the job, then you will have much better results when it really counts, and your career will benefit.

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By the way, this is especially true in a strategy course like this one. In strategy, there is no such thing as a small mistake. Any decision that is important enough to be called a strategic decision has the potential to kill the company if the wrong choice is made. So, you especially want to make your strategic mistakes here in the classroom, rather than out there on the job. In fact, I have a very modest goal for this course: If I can help you to avoid just one strategic mistake over your entire career, then that will pay for the entire cost of your degree. Just one. That's enough to pay for the whole thing.

I think of the case discussion method as being like a flight simulator, but for learning to run a company instead of learning to fly an airplane. When pilots get trained to fly, they must first spend time in a flight simulator before they ever get into the cockpit of an actual airplane. Why is that? Because we know in advance that they are definitely going to make mistakes in the process of learning. If they make those mistakes when flying a real airplane, then equipment and property can get damaged, and people can get hurt or even killed.

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But if they make those beginner's mistakes in a flight simulator, then nothing gets damaged and nobody gets hurt, and they will have learned the lessons from their mistakes before they can ever do real damage in a real airplane. It's the same idea with case discussions: It gives you a chance to get YOUR mistakes out of the way in the classroom, so that you will have learned the lessons from those mistakes before you run a real company.

So, making mistakes in class discussion is a win/win for everyone involved. It's a win for you, because you get class participation credit now, and it helps you to avoid mistakes later in your career. It's a win for your classmates because they learn from understanding where you went wrong. And it's a win for me because it keeps the class discussion lively. So, for all of these reasons, I want to encourage you to let go of the fear of making a mistake in class. In fact, I would even encourage you to try intentionally making mistakes in our class discussions, for the purpose of learning.

The fifth and final barrier to class participation is that students may be defining class participation too narrowly. Sometimes students will get stuck thinking that class participation is only about answering

the questions that the instructor asks, when in fact there are many other forms of class participation. To illustrate this point, I will highlight two other ways you can participate in class – asking questions, and making process comments.

Asking perceptive questions in class is a great form of class participation for three reasons. First, getting your questions answered will help you to sharpen your understanding of the topics that you're learning about. Second, it also helps your classmates, because if you have a question in your mind, then there is a good chance that half of the class is thinking about the same question too, but they're too afraid to ask. So, if we can just get the question out in the open, then everyone can learn and benefit from the answer.

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This helps me too by giving me a clearer picture about what the class does or does not understand. Getting questions asked and answered in class also helps me because then I won't have to answer the same question over and over in conversations with individual students. So, asking questions is another win/win because it benefits you, your classmates, and me. The third reason why asking questions is a great form of class participation is that it can be a lot more comfortable for you than trying to answer one of my questions. If you're trying to answer one of my questions, then you're on the spot. The whole class is looking at you, and they may be ready to pounce if they think you're getting it wrong. And being on the spot like that can be a bit uncomfortable. However, if you're the one who is asking the question, then you're putting someone else on the spot. I'm on the spot if the question is directed toward me. Or maybe you're putting your classmates on the spot by asking them to explain their comments or defend their ideas. Either way, you're not on the spot, so there's no pressure on you.

Another helpful form of class participation is to make process comments about the class discussion itself. These could be simple comments on the reasoning and ideas being expressed by your classmates, such as stating your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with them. Or they could be deeper observations about the overall direction of the discussion, such as highlighting important issues that the class has been ignoring.

Let's recap the ideas that we covered here. There are simple solutions for overcoming the five barriers to class participation. Those solutions are: (1) come to class prepared, (2) beat the time delay effect by preparing your comments and answers in advance, (3) be willing to make mistakes, (4) ask questions, and (5) give process comments.

Now that you understand the five barriers to class participation and the solutions for each of them, you have the power and the tools to succeed in class participation in any course. You can take charge of these class participation challenges and overcome them.