

2009-2010 Seminar Participants

The "Talkers" and the "Quiet Ones": Improving the Quality of Student Participation

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The classroom dynamics in a recent meeting of EN220, my course on "Space, Place and Landscape" in literature, were typical. Two students raised their hands after almost every question, responding in a lively way and taking some risks with their answers. Seven students participated occasionally when they were certain of their responses or had formulated their thoughts more carefully. One student did not speak at all.

Although the students in this small seminar have developed an easygoing, friendly rapport that might help them overcome reticence, this class still mimics the basic structure of student participation that characterizes nearly every class I have taught. From first-year general education courses to small honors seminars, students seem to stratify into "talkers," average participants, and "quiet ones." In the Teaching and Learning Strategies Seminar, I would like to study the pedagogical literature on student participation and classroom dynamics in order to maximize student engagement in the classroom.

I do not wish merely to overcome those typical dynamics. I certainly don't want to simply make quiet students talk. I believe strongly that students' different styles of participating should be respected, and that different types of contributions should be valued. Yet at the same time, I believe that as a professor of English, teaching the skills of speaking should be as vital a part of my mission as teaching writing and critical thinking. Instead of simply expecting quiet students to talk and talkative students to listen, I hope to learn about what motivates different students, how different forms of classroom engagement foster learning, and how to allow for different kinds of participation.

In my six years of teaching in graduate school at Harvard and here at Stonehill, I have tried to develop methods for encouraging such participation. Small group work both in and out of class allows quieter students a more comfortable venue to have their voices heard. In-class presentations give all students a chance to practice speaking with more formal preparation. Having students submit discussion questions before class allows new voices to set the agenda. With especially quiet students who need to gain confidence, I will sometimes send a question to ponder before class so they can have some time to prepare. This semester I have begun using class blogs (see attached example of a blog discussion from www.en220.blogspot.com) to allow for written "conversations" outside of class.

In addition to my classroom experience, I twice participated in teaching seminars while in graduate school at Harvard that were vital to helping me develop new teaching techniques as I began my teaching career. Although it is still early in my academic career, I have taught in a variety of settings and have amassed enough experience to start exploring new techniques in a more focused way. Now in my second year at Stonehill, I feel comfortable experimenting in the classroom and am eager to gain a new set of skills.

My project would have three major elements. First, I would like to expand my repertoire of in-class teaching tools (such as small group work) to allow for methods participation beyond impromptu responses to professor-led-questioning. Second, I plan to explore new ways of using technology outside the classroom to allow for alternate forms of interaction between students. For example, some of my colleagues in other English departments use the Learning Management System Blackboard to post a poem, which students can mark up online, performing a group analysis that can then be used to start discussion in class. Since Stonehill is currently evaluating new LMS options, I would especially welcome the opportunity to test the new platform and share what I learn with the wider community. Finally, I plan to explore the literature on classroom interaction and student participation, in order to better understand students' own mindsets and the complex social environment that develops in class.

In addition to implementing these new pedagogical practices in my classes, I hope share my experience with Stonehill faculty in two ways. In my own department, I would like to hold a teaching roundtable to report on some of my findings and to share ideas that are specific to the teaching of literature. I would also be glad to write a "Class Notes" post that focuses on using technology to encourage fuller engagement on the part of all students, both in and out of the classroom.

My perspective on these questions-and my passion for the topic-comes in part out of my own past experience as one of the "quiet ones." Although I was a very strong student who was deeply engaged in my college classes, early on I convinced myself that I simply wasn't "quick enough on my feet" to participate well in class. In one first-year seminar, I can vividly remember the feeling of pressure building as the weeks wore on and I hadn't spoken up yet; having established a reputation as quiet, I felt that I would draw too much attention to any comment I made. By senior year, I had grown more confident and spoke regularly in class. But my personal experience teaches me to be mindful that students often do not arrive at Stonehill with the skills of impromptu public speaking, or the tools to know how to improve those abilities. I hope this seminar will allow me to make some of those tools available to my students.