

Best Practices Guide for Respectful Classroom Participation

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Introduction

Students learn best when they participate in class (Fritschner, 2000; Petress, 2006; Rocca, 2010; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Participating may even have a positive effect on students' grades (Handelsman et al., 2005). In a philosophy class, where among the main goals is for students to develop their own ideas and argumentation skills, participation is an essential part of learning. How to maximize classroom participation thus ought to be of concern to every philosophy instructor.

This guide was formulated in response to our undergraduate and graduate students' perception that female students and minority students participate less than their male colleagues and white colleagues, and that female and minority participation is stymied by problematic in-class behaviors. To our knowledge, no research exists on the impact of gender or race on participation in philosophy classrooms,¹ but what is obvious and empirically verified is that classroom participation is dramatically unevenly distributed, with very few students accounting for most of the participation (Fritschner, 2000).

The goal of this guide is to offer guidelines for maximizing classroom participation by fostering a respectful in-class environment. Our hope is that indiscriminately maximizing classroom participation in this way will also elicit participation by students from underrepresented groups who might tend to participate less. Following these guidelines will thus not only help maximize educational outcomes by maximizing participation overall but may also engender more equitable classrooms.

First, we offer recommendations for both students and instructors. Second, we offer suggestions for any students who may be reluctant to participate out of a lack of confidence. We conclude with recommendations for instructors in particular.

Best Practices for Everyone

Classrooms with high levels of student participation are characterized by a supportive and encouraging classroom environment (Fassinger, 2000; Rocca, 2010) and by student confidence (Fassinger, 2000; Rocca, 2010; Weaver & Qi, 2005). The following guidelines recommend behaviors for both students and instructors that contribute to such a classroom.

1. **Avoid interrupting others.** This discourages others from participating (Petress, 2006).
 - Instructors should consider prohibiting interruptions and requiring students to raise their hands (Wiest & Pop, 2018).
2. **Avoid other discouraging or dismissive behaviors** like facial expressions or gestures indicating impatience, dismissiveness, or boredom (e.g., eye-rolling, finger-tapping, scoffing, etc.) (Petress, 2006).
 - Instructors should be especially careful, because instructors often *unintentionally* discourage students from participating by subtly projecting disapproval (e.g., frowning, smiling wryly, gruff voice, etc.) (Fritschner, 2000; Rocca, 2010).
3. **Engage in encouraging behaviors.**
 - Students should **praise** their classmates for comments they find especially helpful and otherwise be **supportive** of their classmates (Petress, 2006).
 - Instructors should **listen carefully** to student comments and **respond respectfully with praise and/or encouragement** as appropriate (Fritschner, 2000; Roberts & Friedman, 2013; Rocca, 2010; Wiest & Pop, 2018).

¹ In general, research on the impact of gender and race on classroom participation faces several challenges; Allan and Madden (2006), for example, found that findings regarding the impact of gender on classroom participation were highly dependent on methodology. See Rocca (2010) for a review.

- Both students and instructors should, moreover, consider supporting students' contributions when they are subject to excessive or otherwise discouraging criticism.
 - Encouraging behaviors are desirable in general because they are associated with high levels of classroom participation, but there are further reasons why encouraging behaviors are desirable in philosophy classrooms in particular:
 - ❖ Philosophy is an essentially argumentative discipline where the main activity is criticizing the ideas of others. We thus ought to be all the more encouraging to compensate for the sometimes discouragingly critical nature of our discipline.
 - ❖ Students will learn from the practice of encouraging their classmates, because they need to learn to see what is *right* in an opponent's position before they can begin to give an effective diagnosis of what might be wrong with it.
 - ❖ Moreover, the practice of encouraging their classmates will help students view their classmates' comments as potential sources of inspiration and as stepping-stones towards their own new ideas. To view their classmates' contributions in this way is not only correct; it is also a more productive way of doing philosophy.
4. **Avoid monopolizing class discussions.**
- Instead, students should **play an active role in soliciting participation from their classmates** (e.g., by directing questions to the class) (Petress, 2006).
 - Students who have already contributed should **cede the floor to others**.
 - ❖ Look around the room before you raise your hand. If there are other hands raised, pause and let someone else participate first.
 - ❖ If you and another student raise your hand at the same time, offer to let them speak first (e.g., 'Oh no, please go ahead').
 - Students and instructors should **avoid long one-on-one exchanges**. These take up limited class time and thereby deprive other students of the opportunity to participate.
 - ❖ Students who are tempted to initiate a long exchange with the instructor or another student should write their thoughts down rather than responding in class. Then they can discuss their thoughts with the instructor or the other student outside of class.
 - ❖ Instructors who are tempted to enter into a long one-on-one exchange should redirect the conversation to office hours. Instructors should also encourage students who have entered into a one-on-one exchange to continue the conversation after class.
5. **Keep your contributions as concise and relevant as possible** (Petress, 2006). Unnecessarily long-winded or off-topic remarks take up limited class time and thereby deprive other students of the opportunity to participate.
- Instructors should model concise and relevant participation by keeping their own contributions concise and relevant, by paraphrasing student comments, and by praising comments of appropriate pertinence and length (Petress, 2006).
6. **Be attentive and avoid repeating what classmates have already said** (Petress, 2006).
- Students who do repeat a classmate's comment should **credit that classmate for the comment**.
 - Instructors should gently remind a student who repeats another student's comment (without attributing credit) that the material was already covered (Petress, 2006) and credit the student who originally made the comment.
 - Both students and instructors should **be especially diligent in crediting women for their contributions**. Our female students report that their comments frequently go unnoticed and then are repeated by a male peer as if they were his original idea. This phenomenon has also been reported in the literature (Allan & Madden, 2006).
7. **Know how to respond to biased or harassing behavior**. See 'Tips for bystanders: Help to reduce biased or harassing behavior' by the Philosophy of Science Association Women's Caucus: <https://womenscaucus.philsci.org/images/docs/BystanderFlyer.pdf>

Some Suggestions for Quieter Students

This section is for students that might be reluctant to participate out of a lack of confidence. The following suggestions might make participating seem less daunting and enable you to reap the benefits of participating.

1. **Remember** that, as a student in the class, you are entitled to ask questions and make comments in accordance with the class's policies. And, whatever your level of preparation and whatever the quality of your questions or comments, it is the instructor's job to teach you and respond to your questions or comments as best s/he can.
2. **Do not be afraid to ask for clarity.** Chances are, everyone in the classroom will benefit.
3. **Consider preparing** for making comments.
 - Prepare questions before class as you do the reading. Talk about your questions with your friends!
 - Prepare questions and comments during class as lecture or discussion progresses. Write them down before you raise your hand; you can even read them aloud if you'd like.
4. **Go to office hours.** In-class participation is not the only kind of participation, and taking advantage of office hours is a great way to get more out of your class.

Best Practices for Instructors

Everyone has a role to play in encouraging classroom participation, but instructors have an especially big role. The instructor's behavior has an outsize impact on participation, and the instructor sets the course's policies, which may encourage or discourage participation. The following guidelines recommend behaviors and policies that instructors can adopt to maximize participation in their classrooms.

1. **Humanize yourself in the classroom.** One major point of consensus in the literature is that the perception of closeness between students and the instructor is positively correlated with classroom participation (Cayanus et al., 2009; Fassinger, 2000; Fritschner, 2000; Mottet et al., 2004; Roberts & Friedman, 2013; Rocca, 2010). We recommend the following guidelines for **relating to your students**:
 - **Share appropriate facts and anecdotes about yourself**, especially in order to illustrate or explain relevant course material. Instructor self-disclosure is associated with higher classroom participation, perhaps by making the instructor seem more relatable (Cayanus et al., 2009; Fritschner, 2000; Mottet et al., 2004; Roberts & Friedman, 2013; Rocca, 2010; Wiest & Pop, 2018).
 - **Call students by name**, even if your class is large and you can only learn a few names (Fritschner, 2000; Mottet et al., 2004; Rocca, 2010).
 - ❖ **Consider using 'name tents'**: ask students to write their names and pronouns on a folded sheet of paper and to place it on their desks for the first couple of weeks of class.
 - In general, engage in behaviors that decrease the perceived distance between you and your students; **smile, relax, make eye contact, and use (appropriate) humor** (Fassinger, 2000; Mottet et al., 2004; Roberts & Friedman, 2013; Rocca, 2010; Wiest & Pop, 2018).
 - **Actively encourage students to come to your office hours**, and take that part of your duties seriously. Faculty-student interactions have an important effect on classroom participation (Weaver & Qi, 2005), and developing relationships with faculty both in and out of the classroom is essential for any student considering pursuing a career in philosophy.
2. **Consider the following strategies** for boosting participation:

- **Wait longer** after you ask for questions before moving on, **even if it feels awkward**. This signals to students that their participation is wanted and gives them time to organize their thoughts (Fritschner, 2000; Rocca, 2010).
 - **Use circular or semi-circular seating arrangements**, if possible (Fritschner, 2000; Rocca, 2010).
 - ❖ Try a ‘rotating chair’ idea where the last student to speak chooses the next student in the circle to speak.
 - **Divide students into small groups** (Roberts & Friedman, 2013; Rocca, 2010), although not at the expense of large-group discussion (Fassinger, 2000).
 - ❖ Consider assigning small-group homework in order to encourage a cooperative and supportive classroom environment, especially assignments that allow students to meet informally outside of class (Fassinger, 2000).
 - **Allow students to prepare prior to speaking in class**, whether by giving pertinent out-of-class assignments (e.g., reading responses), by dividing students into small groups prior to discussion with the whole class, or by asking students to do a ‘quick write’ for one to three minutes before discussion (Rocca, 2010; Wiest & Pop, 2018).
 - **Consider ‘cold-calling’** in lecture classes.
 - ❖ For example, post ten to twelve discussion questions before the beginning of the lecture, and call on students randomly from the roster for the first five minutes or so of class. Assign points to each question answered. Gently correct students if they happen to get the question wrong, and leave time at the end of each cold-calling session for questions about any of the discussion questions (Kollat, 2018).
 - ❖ Cold-calling may **encourage voluntary participation** in general (Dallimore et al., 2013), and it may also **reduce gender inequalities** in classroom participation (Dallimore et al., 2019).
3. **Give everyone a chance to participate.** Maintain a balance between participation by more talkative students and participation by quieter students.
 - Again, consider prohibiting interruptions and requiring students to raise their hands (Wiest & Pop, 2018).
 - In general, **prioritize** calling on quieter students (Wiest & Pop, 2018).
 - **Ask to hear from** a student who has not yet responded to a question (Wiest & Pop, 2018).
 - **Ask the rest of the class** to respond to a comment made by a more talkative student (Wiest & Pop, 2018).
 - If necessary, talk to overly talkative students outside of class; validate their enthusiasm and engagement, and suggest more productive ways of engaging with the rest of the class (e.g., asking questions of the class or instructor, rather than just answering questions) (Petress, 2006; Wiest & Pop, 2018).
 4. **Acknowledge** racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise ethically problematic views expressed in philosophical texts. Failing to acknowledge these problematic views often sends the message that you do not oppose them.
 5. **Support your female graduate student instructors.** Our GSIs report that students challenge female GSIs in the classroom more and more aggressively than male GSIs. Our undergraduates notice this, and we are concerned that it might discourage female undergraduates from participating. It is thus important for faculty to back up the authority of female GSIs when problems arise (e.g., grade disputes).
 6. **Ask students to complete a midterm evaluation of the course.** Consider sharing the results with the class and discussing possible strategies for improvement. This is important because, especially in low-participation classes, instructors’ perceptions of the classroom climate may be more positive than their students’ perceptions, so it is important for instructors to actively solicit student feedback to identify problems they may not have been aware of (Fassinger, 2000).

7. **Make participation part of the grade** (Fassinger, 2000; Rocca, 2010).
- Make your expectations concerning participation and your desire for participation explicit **at the very beginning of the course** (Petress, 2006; Roberts & Friedman, 2013; Rocca, 2010).
 - ❖ **Discuss good group communication skills**, and stress that class discussions will be richer and more rewarding with a wider variety of perspectives (Wiest & Pop, 2018).
 - ❖ **Consider sharing this guide** with your students and grading them not only on the quantity of their participation but also the extent to which they adhere to the norms for respectful participation recommended here.
 - **Consider this sample rubric** from Dancer and Kamvounias (2005):
 1. Preparation: the extent of your reading, analyzing and understanding of the material, demonstrated by contribution to discussion.
 2. Contribution to discussion: the extent to which you volunteered answers, asked relevant questions, expressed your own opinion and analyzed contributions of others.
 3. Group skills: the extent to which you allowed others to contribute, avoided class domination, shared ideas with others, assisted others, provided positive feedback to others and exhibited tolerance and respect for others.
 4. Communication skills: the quality of your expression, clarity, conciseness, use of appropriate vocabulary, confidence.
 5. Attendance: includes punctuality. (p. 448)
 - **Allow students to self-assess their participation**; this will make students feel invested in their own participation and feel that the participation grading process is fair (Zaremba & Dunn, 2004).
 - **Give students a mid-semester assessment** of their participation (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005; Rocca, 2010).

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