The Engaging Educator

Increasing Student Participation
...by decreasing teacher talk!

In 1960 Joe Jones recorded a song called “You Talk Too Much”. As a teen I thought it was just a funny song about his talkative girlfriend. Then I became a teacher…and I realized Joe was singing to me. I talked too much! My thinking was, “If I’m not teaching, there couldn’t possibly be learning going on.” How wrong I was.

Are you conscious of talking too much in your classroom? We must certainly instruct, but we have to control how much of the class period we consume. Otherwise, we deprive students of their active learning time. Students need to participate. Not only must they be physically present to learn, but their minds have to come to school, too. Do you find yourself saying, “Same hands all the time”? Maybe it’s because the verbal/linguistic or the interpersonal ones are with us. Where are the others? “Teacher Talk” may result in students’ willful distractions or boredom! It also makes the class need us all the more. You know that’s true if you’ve stopped by a working group who asks so many questions that they hope you’ll do their work for them. To some degree it seems they’ve become needy, high-maintenance, dependent. So what do we do to increase effective “student talk”? Here are some ideas:

A. Plan deliberate “student moments”. We’re so excited about what we’re going to teach, that we become the “sage on the stage”. How do we become the “guide on the side” without abdicating our role as teacher?
   ➢ Plan stop points periodically to ask the students to rephrase to a partner (turn-and-teach). Sometimes that’s more effective than turn-and-talk. Ask them to explain, review a process, or summarize yesterday’s lesson at the beginning of class. Let the student-become-teacher by consistently sending them to the board to prove a problem or diagram a sentence.
Allow them to give constructive feedback to each other. In keeping with our Catholic identity and the IHM charism, teach the students charitable discussion methods. For example, “I agree with Sarah because…” or “I’d like to add something to Josh’s thought”. Watch for facial expressions or body language that would indicate that someone thinks another’s answer is wrong, or worse, stupid. Nip that in the bud. We need to show interest in their contributions and sound sincerely inviting. Let your face light up as if to say tell-me-more. Raise an eyebrow to invite a continued comment.

B. **Avoid answering your own questions.** What’s the point of asking formative questions and using higher order thinking verbs if we answer the question? We’re supposed to be prodding their thinking, checking for comprehension, and empowering them to speak, write and practice the learning. How?

- Provide a focus question/statement (e.g. I have a serious question for you; we need to find a way to prove…; What would happen if…?)
- Use more *wait* time! We’re so happy to see hands up that we call on the same ones all the time. If it’s true that 20% of our students do 80% of the participating, we’re reinforcing the problem if we call on that 20%. Some of our students are process thinkers. They just need more time, and might not be struggling learners. So **triple** your wait time. Then say, “I’ll accept hands up in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.” If you get the sense that some sincerely struggle to understand the question, ask students to rephrase it. Students can sometimes communicate to their peers better than we can.
- If you still get wrong answers, don’t give in. Tell them that trying shows they’re thinking. Provide clues to the answer. Let them work with a partner, or write their answers. Writing allows them to rethink and craft a better answer, especially if they are process thinkers.

The next two featured articles will explore more suggestions on increasing student participation. In the meantime, here are some references you may find helpful:

*https://achievethecore.org*

*teach.conceptuamath.com*  
Note: This site covers subjects beyond math.

*https://busyteacher.org*  
(by Claire Pesce)