HOW TO GET AN "A"

ON CLASS PARTICIPATION!

A Student Manual

by

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1993
INTRODUCTION

The way in which humans acquire knowledge is one of the important features that sets us apart from other animals. A five year old child is one of the most curious, creative creatures in the world. Experiences, training, pressures and the course of least resistance often results in the destruction of our curiosity and diversion of our creativity. Education is the process by which we express our human-ness. Education is the process of discovery of new ideas. Curiosity, creativity, respect for ideas and individuals are fundamental to the educational process. If university classes are to contribute to the educational process, they must involve the active participation of both students and faculty in a "community of scholars."

Both faculty and student participation contribute to the process and are in many respects similar. However, faculty must participate while many students may avoid participation unless it is an explicit part of the grading process. Participation is doubly important: first it is an important component in education and second it probably effects your grade. This document will hopefully increase your skills in the achievement of both.

TIME, TIME, MORE TIME

Before you read any further, we need to make one thing absolutely clear: getting an "A" on class participation is not an easy thing to accomplish. First, it will mean allocating time to preparing for each class period. Generally, for most upper division courses, students are expected to spend 6-9 hours per week preparing assignments and doing all the work necessary to succeed on exams, projects, papers, etc. Getting an "A" on class participation also requires time. There are no magic formulae, no tricks, no quick cures. If you are not willing to spend time and effort on the techniques we will suggest to you in this publication, then it is best that you not proceed any further.

Getting an A in class participation may also require a change in your perceptions of the world and attitudes about learning. It is necessary to identify the objectives of the course and to understand your objectives for taking the course. If your only objective is to get a grade and three (or four) hours of credit on you transcript, you will find participation difficult unless you're an accomplished thespian. Classes that stress "training" usually require different participation skills from those classes where "education" is stressed. It is necessary to know the differences.
We all know that some people speak up easily, with apparent skill, while others withdraw into themselves and break out into a cold sweat whenever the professor looks at them. No doubt, personality plays a large role in getting an "A" in participation. If you are shy, withdrawn, meek, modest, introverted, and/or otherwise fearful of looking like a fool when speaking in class, then you will need to change your behavior!! There is no other way to get a high score. Besides, if you fear seeming stupid and ill informed, just remember this: you are! And so are all the other students in your class. And so is the professor!! The professor has just spent a few more years than you cultivating his or her ignorance of the subject.

If you succeed in changing your behavior, your reward may be more than just an A in the class. Consider this. If you hope to participate in the "real world" by having a career or job, you will find the ability to "participate" important to your advancement. If you are unable to express yourself clearly and comfortably in a class in an academic setting you will probably not be an efficient communicator in a business setting.

In summary, you will need to do three things to succeed in participating in your courses: (1) allocate **TIME AND EFFORT** to the job of participation, (2) be aware of the importance of your **ATTITUDE**, and (3) change your **BEHAVIOR** if necessary to achieve your objective.

**COMMUNICATIONS FAILURE!**

Have you ever wondered what "class participation" means on your course syllabus? Has your professor ever explained to you what she or he expects you to do in order to get a high score on the participation component of your grade? Probably not!

There has been a serious failure on the part of most of your professors to communicate to you their expectations. Most syllabi simply state: "class participation .... 10%." And that's all! Other syllabi will add that attendance is mandatory, but surely there are other things which the professor expects you to do other than merely appearing in class. Also, many professors claim that participation is important, but they do all the talking and lecturing and never give students a chance to say anything. What do you do then?

No doubt, you have also failed to challenge your professors to provide more clarification on what they expect of you. Do you dare ask them what they expect for participation, on the first day of class, in front of everyone? This is, of course, the obvious beginning in developing a strategy for participation: ask what
the professor wants you to do? Write it on a piece of paper if you must, and raise your hand and say: "Professor Soundso, what would you like me to do to get a high grade on class participation other than just coming to class?" Chances are, the professor will be unable to give you a real clear answer because no one has ever taught him or her how to identify, articulate and communicate their objectives?

This little publication is intended to solve this miscommunication problem. We intend to tell you exactly what is expected of you, even if your professor has not explained it to you directly. We will give you valuable tips for performing well AND for showing your professor that you are performing well. After all, this is what it is all about: convincing your professor that you are a good student and that you are interested and that you’re are trying hard. [NO B.S. PLEASE!]

**OBJECTIVES**

In order to participate in any endeavor, it is necessary to ascertain the professor’s ultimate course objectives. For any course, there are three possible objectives. These objectives may change from one week to the next, from one day to the next, or even within a class period. The three possible objectives are (1) **training** you in the skills necessary to perform a specific task, such as calculating Gross National Product, or doing a benefit cost analysis; (2) **indoctrinating** you in a certain ideology, such as the ideology of free market capitalism and the value of a competitive market system; and (3) **educating** you to ask questions, to doubt, to argue, to challenge, to probe beneath the surface of the ideas that are presented to you, and to discover your own personal assessment of things.

If the objective of the course (or particular class period or section) is to **train**, the questions you should ask when you "participate" should correspond this objective. Your professor will require that you learn (memorize) specific steps in the skills or processes being learned. You might for example be asked to learn how to best measure the depth of a lake. To participate, you might ask during class: "Professor Smellysox, what is the sequence of events that we need to complete in order to find the average depth of a lake?" Or you may ask, "Why is it necessary to complete step A in the process before step B?" Or you might ask, "How accurate has this method of lake depth measurement been?" You might also ask, "Is it possible to accomplish the same results by using step A' instead of A? What are the advantages of using step A?" Get the idea?

If the objective of the course is to **indoctrinate**, there are three possible ways to participate. You can: (1) drop the course and take it from another instructor (this is a form of participation, isn’t it?); (2) forget your grade and
resist the efforts of the instructor to tell you what to think (the ultimate form of participation! Take your education into your own hands!); or (3) prepare to smile and shake your head in agreement and pander to the instructor (an oftentimes useful and pragmatic form of participation). If you are not sure which of the three objectives is being pursued, it is perhaps best for your head and your soul to assume that education is the implied objective, although your grade may suffer if your professor can't distinguish between indoctrination and education. You will know within a couple of weeks if the objective is indoctrination or education, and you will have to decide whether to quit, fight, or succumb.

If the objective of the course is to educate, the questions you ask will be focused on the meaning and reasons why the information you are given is important. For example, you might ask "Does the benefit-cost analysis we have done measure what we wanted and are there any factors in the process that bias the results?" Or, "Does the existence of externalities and of unequal wealth and income distribution make the free market system unfair and undesirable?" Education is the process of questioning the process as well as the philosophy and ideology which justifies or rationalizes the study of the subject.

A given class may have any or all three of these objectives at different times or for different sections of the material. In order to participate you should be able to identify the nature of the objectives and to determine how to participate on the basis of that objective. Discerning these objectives will not be easy because the professor will rarely tell you explicitly; he or she may not even know!! Professors are typically not educated in the art of teaching; they don't take "how to teach" courses in graduate school. So, you will have to figure things out by yourself. You will have to use your intuition. You will have to be analytical. Talk with other students ("What does this guy want from us?"). Interview your professor during office hours (see below) and get a sense of what he or she is after. It will probably take a couple of weeks.

On the other hand, your own objectives for taking the course may be only to get credit for the course! If this is the case you should practice your acting skills and dispense with the remainder of this document.

**ATTENDANCE**

Obviously, nothing else will work to help you if you do not attend class. It is astounding how many students cut class regularly and then act surprised that their participation score is low. If you are not in class, what will the professor think of you? Remember that the professor's ego is tied up in the subject matter of the
course. It is the professor’s most important thing in life. The professor has devoted a career to studying the course subject matter. Put yourself in the professor’s shoes. How would you feel? You would most likely feel insulted. If students cut your class, failing to show up is an implied expression of disinterest and belittles the importance which the professor attaches to the subject. Remember this well.

Now, there will be times, no doubt, when you will be unable to attend. Here are some simple rules to follow. First, if you know ahead of time that you will be unable to attend, go to the professor’s office and explain the situation. If the professor is not available, then call and leave a message. This is NOT brown-nosing. Telling the professor is actually a way of sending him or her an altogether different message. It demonstrates that you believe the professor’s subject is important! This is the message you should send.

If your absence can not be anticipated then do the same thing as above: call or visit in order to explain. You may think this is stupid, but you simply must understand that the professor’s self esteem is tied up with this course and you are simply affirming that self esteem. It makes you look good.

Everyone may occasionally find that they must be late or leave class early. Instructors are no different from anyone else, they respond favorably to people who are reasonably polite. When you interrupt a group or conversation, it is polite to say "Excuse me." (Not in the tone of voice that Steve Martin uses.) It is a simple process to walk by the instructor at the end of class and say "Sorry I was late!" If you are late frequently, and there is a good reason, it would be a good idea to explain the problem to the instructor and be sure you cause as little disruption in class as possible. This is just a way to show respect to your peers.

If you were talking to a friend who turned and walked away from you when you were in the process of telling them about something important to you, how would you feel? If you have an appointment that requires you to leave class early, mention it to the instructor before class and make sure that you cause as little disruption as possible when you leave. If you find it necessary to leave class early (because you become ill or just remembered something important) and have not mentioned it to the instructor, it is a simple courtesy to explain it to the instructor before the next class meeting.

Every student deserves the respect of their peers and the instructor. At the same time they should display a similar respect for their peers and instructor.
**APPEARANCE**

This might seem corny, but sitting in class is not the same as being in class. If you are in class, do not sit in the back half asleep with your baseball cap slung low over your eyebrows. Do not sit there picking at your cuticles. **DO NOT READ A NEWSPAPER OR STUDY FOR ANOTHER CLASS.** You wouldn’t believe the stories professors tell about students and the things they do in class. If you do any of these things the professor will feel angry and will want very much to retaliate. **Class participation grades are a great way to retaliate!**

Appear involved, interested, and motivated. Hopefully you will be and won’t have to pretend. If you really want to improve your chances of receiving a high score on participation, then sit in the middle of the classroom, toward the front, but not at the very front. Use body language to show interest: nod your head in agreement (not in excess), smile, take notes, look up in the air striking a thoughtful pose. Prove that you are really there and thinking and not just occupying a seat. Once again, it is hoped that you really will be thinking and that you will not have to pretend.

**THE VISIT TO THE PROFESSOR’S OFFICE**

Visit the professor often during the semester. Consult office hours, or make an appointment. You might find out something useful if you do. If you don’t, then at least you will have sent a message to the professor saying that the course is important enough to you to take the time to visit. This message will help immeasurably in getting a good score on participation.

Remember that you are not visiting **GOD,** even though the professor may believe that he or she really is **GOD.** Also remember that nothing can happen to you! You have been conditioned all your lives to believe that the professor is an unapproachable, scary person who will bark at you or even leap for your jugular vein with bared salivating fangs the moment you appear at the door. The professor may be gruff, even rude, especially if he or she is in the middle of something. Be persistent and self confident and polite and you should expect the same from the professor. If you don’t get politeness in return, complain to the department chair or dean, or indicate such on course evaluations. Evaluations are read and do play an important role in promotion and tenure decisions.
Now, what should you do in the professor’s office? You need to have an excuse for making the visit. How else can you deliver the real message that the course is important to you? Here are some easy things you can do.

Prepare a question about the material assigned or about the lecture. Prepare a personal comment about some aspect of the readings and ask for the professor’s opinion. He or she will certainly leap at the chance to express an opinion or to give you another mini-lecture. This is just the response you should expect to get. Ask for a reference to a book or an article which elaborates on some aspect of the topics discussed in class. You might never read them, but you might, and you might even find the reference interesting. Tell the professor that you agree, or disagree with something that was said in class, and ask for the professors’ opinion.

Remember that most professors enjoy intellectual activities and appreciate students who ask relevant and interesting questions.

Get the point? Get involved, get the professor to know you outside the classroom context. If you are the type of person who never speaks in class, you can compensate by approaching the professor one-on-one.

CLASS DISCUSSION

You probably believe that this is the tough part. Well it is, because it takes time to pull it off with finesse and without looking like a brown nosing idiot. Remember the first section above? TIME COMMITMENT! Now, these are some of the things you can do. Tricks of the trade, so to speak.

The most simple strategy is to ask a question at least once a week. A simple question such as "Would you please repeat what you said about symbolic interaction?" Certainly there will be something that you have read or heard that you do not understand!! If you do understand everything, simply choose an important point and ask the professor to clarify or elaborate: "Professor Smellysox, could you elaborate on Marx’s notion that capitalism will collapse? I don't follow his argument."

Obviously, this simple strategy won’t work unless you have read the assigned readings and have attended (attentively) class. So hand in hand with participation is preparation. Read something carefully, take notes, and make a list of questions and another list of important points. When you get to class, and the professor invariably asks, are there any comments or questions, you’ve got your pistol loaded
and ready to fire!!! Your professor will not be offended and will most likely spring in the air gleefully when he or she sees an interested student not enveloped in apathy.

Put it this way: make three short lists before you come to class. One list has three or four questions. You might ask, for example, "Am I on the right track here? Do Professors Lichtenstein and Reynolds really believe that all wealth should be confiscated?" A second list has three or four important ideas or concepts which you can ask to be clarified. A third list contains three or four personal opinions about the assignment, opinions which you can use in class when show and tell time comes. You can immediately raise your hand and say something like, "I believe we should have invaded Canada instead of signing a free trade agreement with them. What do you think, Professor Raymond?"

And what if you don't have an opinion? Do this: adopt an opinion! Never mind if you don't really believe in it. Just take a side, any side, and prepare yourself to argue it. You might find the opinion quite agreeable. You might find it disagreeable. This is what education is ultimately about, developing your own opinions about things.

Another discussion trick. Suppose the class is discussing that Smith article but you have prepared the Jones article instead. Do not be afraid to change the subject. Simply raise your hand and say something like, "Before the period is over, I'd like to ask a question about Jones' viewpoints."

Finally, here is something to try that will surely please your instructor: MAKE A CONNECTION. DRAW A RELATIONSHIP between something said in two separate places or between something the Professor said last time and what the professor is saying this time. This is a most important thing to do because it demonstrates that you are not only memorizing the material but are also internalizing it. This requires preparation, of course. Again, TIME, TIME, TIME.

**SOME FINAL OBSERVATIONS**

Many students will find the above techniques difficult because they are too shy. It takes courage to become an activist in your own education, but you can start slowly. First a simple question, then another, then an office visit, and before you know it you will find yourself perfectly comfortable with participation.