



Why Won't They Talk to Me?

When instructing a class nothing seems louder than the silence in the room after you ask a question. If the class participation does not increase throughout the presentation, instructors have often been heard making excuses such as, "After lunch no one participates.", "It was a big group so maybe I didn't hear the person who did answer.", or the famous "What is wrong with these people?" Research shows that there is most likely nothing wrong with the students, but the instructor may need to increase the marketing of themselves and/or the material.

Musical concerts often start with a spirited introduction such as "Hello Orlando, Florida!", or any geographic area where they are performing, followed by loud cheers from the home audience. Why do they do that, you may have wondered? They are actually following sound instructional techniques in creating a cohesive team out of a group of people who are only interconnected by their choice in music and geography. The same could be true in any course that you may instruct where, based upon their attendance, it is implied that all the participants are there for a uniform purpose and work in the same industry, but are in no other way interconnected. However, that may not be true. Some students may want to be in class actively seeking knowledge and others may be "hostages" ordered to attend by their employers. Hmm...even hostages can develop Stockholm Syndrome where they relate to and even defend their hostage takers. Maybe there is hope for this classroom of people!

The key as an instructor is to develop the individual participants into a cohesive unit so that cooperative learning can take place. Learning is inherently a social process, and learners often take as much information from one another as they do from the instructor. That is why it is important to lead any group as a very open and approachable facilitator. Students who are uncomfortable in unfamiliar settings are going to be more reluctant to share their viewpoints with others. This is primarily based upon the anxiety many adult learners have of being incorrect in front of others. It is important during the introduction of instruction to state there is no hard and fast "correct" way to complete many tasks, and that all viewpoints are welcome in the class. Furthermore, it is important to explain there is no stupid question other than the question left

unasked. In many courses, students are asked to introduce themselves to the group, including a mini-biography. This is done to help create a feeling of closeness and unity within the group with the hope it will aid in the later development of the class into a team. This team would be capable of working in collaborative effort toward a similar goal of learning certain knowledge, skills and abilities, while feeling they can trust one another. If students feel they are in an open environment, free of ridicule and the feelings of anxiety, they are more willing to share their viewpoints and more learning will take place.

Day to day most Telecommunicators are operating within their home agencies with high levels of self esteem, yet they may be intimidated and not have that feeling of belonging and self esteem when entering a new learning environment. Building the class “team” will meet their belonging needs and aid in the development of the students’ self esteem by having their viewpoint considered and accepted by a larger group. Once they are working at the higher levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs they are going to be able to synthesize the new information being presented into practical application in their home agencies.

No matter the agency size or geography, there are some highly similar problems in this, or any, industry. As you are explaining materials you may touch on an industry “hot point,” and without the students realizing you are using a documented instructional technique, the class group starts talking out loud and sharing. This may even be done just prior to a scheduled break, depending on class length, so the sidebar discussions of the issues at each person’s home agency can continue for a few minutes. Later, as you are covering more course material, it may be necessary to ask the class questions to elicit their feedback and ensure class progress toward the learning goals. A group of people who have already been talking and sharing with one another are more likely to answer you as they already feel that you and their classmates are all capable of understanding. This continues the creation of team camaraderie, which equates to increased motivation to continue forward in the learning process.

Questions directed to the class should have a purpose rather than just filling time. Questions posed to elicit classroom discussion of a topic should be open-ended, meaning they cannot be answered “yes” or “no”. As an instructor you may pose questions to:

- Review previously presented material
- Guide student thinking
- Diagnose student difficulties
- Introduce a new topic
- Encourage imaginative thinking
- Promote interest
- Encourage thoughts regarding the application of new information.

One way to initiate classroom discussion is to seek out one of your more extroverted and motivated students to be the first to take the plunge and to speak. Ensure that you demonstrate active listening skills when students do speak. If you want the class discussion to continue, at this point it may be appropriate to ask another student a question, or ask them to expand upon the first student's response. When you come upon an answer that is only partially correct, or incorrect, you may choose to redirect the question to another student to "help" out their classmate and elaborate on the answer. Most persons employed in emergency services have the helper personality trait, so even the most introverted student should be willing to "help" a classmate with the correct answer. During all classroom discussion you want to ensure that you do not tell a student that they are "wrong,"

Most open-ended questions are asked with the purpose of allowing student synthesis of new information to take place. Synthesis means allowing students to take the new information and relate it to their background, and while hearing the experiences of others, to relate classroom information to real life, on-the-job application. Studies have shown that students who are actively involved in the learning process are much more likely to retain the information presented, and after all, isn't that why you are an instructor?

By Lori VanGilder, APCO Institute Contract Instructional Designer

References

Benefits of Cooperative Learning In Relation to Student Motivation; Dr. Theodore Panitz; <http://home.capecod.net/~tpanitz/tedsarticles/motivation/htm>; downloaded 4/22/05

Constructivist Instructional Design; Oklahoma State University; <http://home.okstate.edu/homepages.nsf/toe/EDUC5910iep12>; downloaded 4/22/05

Questioning Techniques, Oklahoma State University; <http://home.okstate.edu/homepages.nsf/toe/EDUC5910iep20>; downloaded 4/22/05

Quiz

CDE Article – Encouraging Classroom Participation

Name: _____ Date: _____

Agency: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Fax: _____

Email: _____

1. Instructors may need to market class material better in order to gain more student participation.
 - a. True
 - b. False

2. It is not important for instructors to develop students into a cohesive unit
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. Learning is inherently a social process.
 - a. True
 - b. False

4. It is important to explain to students that the only stupid question is the one unasked.
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. When students feel they are in an open environment, free of ridicule and anxiety, they become unwilling to share their viewpoints.
 - a. True
 - b. False

6. Feelings of belonging and self-esteem play no role in student learning.
 - a. True
 - b. False

7. It may be necessary to ask questions of the class in order to spark more discussion.
 - a. True
 - b. False

8. Instructors may pose questions to students in order to guide student thinking or encourage imaginative thinking.
 - a. True
 - b. False