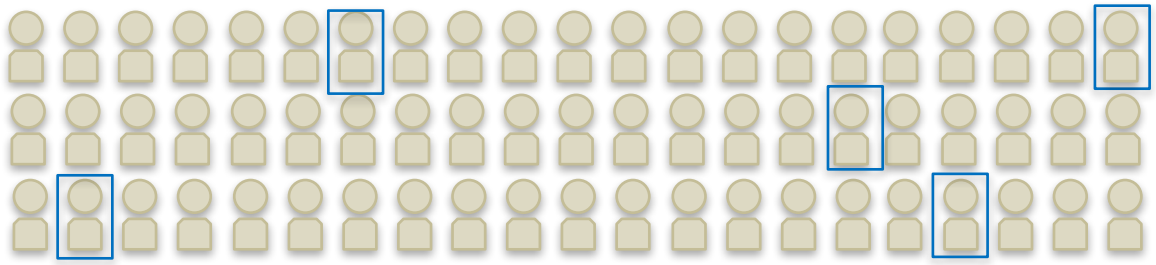
CETL Weekly Teaching Tips presents

Cold-Calling on Students in Large Classes



You may be reluctant to call on students in your large classes thinking that they may be intimidated by the large class size and may clam up when answering questions. You might think that they would prefer not to be called on and are content listening to the responses of students who are more outgoing and volunteer to answer questions. In teaching large courses, I have realized that many students actually want to be involved in class discussions but are deterred by the division that quickly develops in courses between students who "talk" and students who don't. If students do not establish themselves as part of the talking group at the beginning of the semester, they find it difficult to join that group as the semester progresses. By calling on students regularly from the start of the semester, I give more students a chance to be heard. My observations are confirmed by Dallimore et al.'s (2012) study of undergraduate accounting courses.[1] She found that "cold-calling" on students does not make them uncomfortable and has the further benefit of increasing their *voluntary* participation in discussion; in classrooms where instructors regularly called on students, voluntary participation increased as the semester progressed. (David Gooblar's article on Dallimore et al.'s study and the comments on his piece also provide further suggestions for making cold-calling work effectively.[2])

Call on Students Randomly

In my experience, the effectiveness of cold-calling on students depends on two critical components: 1) calling on students randomly, and 2) doing so during nearly every class session so that students come to expect it. Before I start calling on students at the beginning of the semester, I tell them that this is what I will do and that it will be a regular part of the course. I emphasize that I will call on students randomly so that students do not have the impression that I have some other method of choosing whom I call on, such as calling on favorites, calling on "smart" students, and so on. I don't want to stifle students who willingly participate in class discussions, however, so I give them a chance to answer as well. Throughout the semester, I carry out a careful balancing act of letting students answer questions voluntarily and also calling on students randomly to obtain a wider range of input.

Questions that Students Want to Answer

Since my aim is to involve more students in class discussions, I call on individual students only to answer opinion questions that do not have one right answer. I do not call on individual students to obtain answers to analytical questions that definitely have a correct answer. When individual students volunteer to answer those questions, that's fine, but I do not intentionally want to put students on the spot if they have the wrong answer. The questions I use when I call on students are carefully selected so that everyone's input will be valuable.

Written by Helena Riha. Designed by Christina Moore. Published August 2017.

CETL Weekly Teaching Tips presents

Cold-Calling on Students in Large Classes

continued

Create a Randomly Ordered List of Student Names

I use a list of randomly ordered names to call on students, and I tell them that this is what I will use. I create the list at the beginning of the semester and start using it as soon as the first week so that students will feel comfortable with this practice. When a student answers a question, I put a checkmark by his or her name on the list. If he or she is absent, I mark their name with an X and count their lack of a response in their attendance grade. I make my way through the list during the semester, and depending on the class size, I may be able to go back to the beginning of the list and start calling on students a second time.

Refining the List During the Semester

As the semester progresses, I refine the list so that it becomes more efficient to use:

1. To avoid wasting class time and breaking up the momentum of class discussions by calling on students who are absent, after everyone's attendance pattern is established several weeks into the course, I sort the list to place students who rarely or never attend at the end of the list. If needed, I sort the list again during the semester if students' attendance patterns change.
2. After I learn students' names, I place the names of students who frequently volunteer to answer questions further down the list to give other students a chance to answer questions.
3. I call on students by their first name only to save class time and to maintain an informal class atmosphere. I tell students that I will use their full name only if their first name is the same as that of another student in the class. I highlight first names shared by two or more students in the class on my list so that I know when to call out a student's last name in addition to their first name.

Benefits of Calling on Students in Large Classes

I have noticed several benefits in my large classes from cold-calling on students. One is that class discussions are lively and involve a much wider range of opinions – in short, they are more fun and interesting! Another is that calling on students enables me to learn their names, which is difficult to do otherwise in large classes. I establish a personal rapport with a greater number of students by knowing their names and hearing their contributions to class discussions. Finally, calling on students enables them to experience a more personalized class atmosphere, which improves their learning experience.

[1] Dallimore, Elise J., Hertenstein, Julie H. and Platt, Marjorie. "Cold Calling in Accounting Courses: Impact on Participation, Volunteering and Comfort" (July 21, 2009). AAA 2010 Management Accounting Section (MAS) Meeting Paper. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=1437080 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1437080

[2] Gooblar, David. "Why Cold-Calling on Students Works." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 Sept. 2016, p. A32.

Written by Helena Riha. Designed by Christina Moore. Published August 2017.