

Ten Methods to Get Participation at Any Time

Active learning cannot occur without student participation. There are various ways to structure discussion and obtain responses from students at any time during a class. Some are especially suitable when time is limited or participation needs to be coaxed. You might also consider combining these methods—for example, using sub-discussion and then inviting a spokesperson from each group to serve on a panel.

1. **Open discussion.** Ask a question and open it up to the entire group without any further structuring. The straightforward quality of open discussion is appealing. If you are worried that the discussion might be too lengthy, say beforehand, “I’d like to ask four or five students to share...” To encourage students to raise their hands, ask, “How many of you have a response to my question?” Then, call on a student with his or her hand raised.
2. **Response cards.** Pass out index cards and request anonymous answers to your questions. Have the index cards passed around the group or otherwise distributed. Use response cards to save time or to provide anonymity for personally threatening self-disclosures. The need to state your answer concisely on a card is another advantage.
3. **Pooling.** Design a short survey that is filled out and tallied on the spot, or poll students verbally. Use polling to obtain data quickly and in a quantifiable form. If you use a written survey, try to feed back the results to students as quickly as possible. If you use a verbal survey, ask for a show of hands or invite students to hold up answer cards.
4. **Subgroup discussion.** Break students into subgroups of three or more to share (and record) information. Use subgroup discussion when you have sufficient time to process questions and issues. This is one of the key methods for obtaining everyone’s participation.
5. **Learning partners.** Have students work on tasks or discuss key questions with the student seated next to them. Use learning partners when you want to involve everybody but don’t have enough time for small-group discussion. A pair is a good group configuration for developing a supportive relationship and/or for working on complex activities that would not lend themselves to large-group configurations.
6. **Whips.** Go around the group and obtain short responses to key questions. Use whips when you want to obtain something quickly from each student. Sentence stems (e.g., “One change I would make in the United States is...”) are useful in conducting whips. Invite students to

“pass” whenever they wish. To avoid repetition, ask each student for a new contribution to the process.

7. **Panels.** Invite a small number of students to present their views in front of the entire class. An informal panel can be created by asking for the views of a designated number of students who remain in their seats. Use panels when time permits to have a focused serious response to your questions. Rotate panelists to increase participation.
8. **Fishbowl.** Ask a portion of the class to form a discussion circle, and have the remaining students form a listening circle around them. Bring new groups into the inner circle to continue the discussion. Use fishbowls to help bring focus to large-group discussions. Though time consuming, this is the best method for combining the virtues of large and small-group discussion. At a variation on concentric circles, have students remain seated at a table and invite different tables or parts of a table to be the discussants as the others listen.
9. **Games.** Use a fun exercise or a quiz game to elicit students' ideas, knowledge, or skill. TV game shows such as Family Feud or Jeopardy can be used as the bases of a game that elicits participation. Use games to spark energy and involvement. Games are also helpful to make dramatic points that students seldom forget.
10. **Calling on the next speaker.** Ask students to raise their hands when they want to share their views, and request that the present speaker call on the next speaker (rather than the teacher performing this role). Use this technique when you are sure there is a lot of interest in the discussion or activity and you wish to promote student interaction.