Encouraging student participation in lectures

This chapter

The title of this chapter can seem paradoxical. Teaching in lectures is typically conceived as presenting content to listening students, although it is now common for lectures to include some organised interactions to help maintain concentration and/or let students briefly apply new concepts. It might seem that a chapter on encouraging participation in lectures is about how to make those interactive interludes more productive. It is not – or primarily, it is not.

This chapter starts with exploring what participation might mean in Anglo-western universities, how learning theories and expected forms of participation are linked, and how differently teachers and students might conceive of participation because of their various previous educational experiences. It then suggests ways you can encourage more cognitive participation – that is, more engaged thinking – in your lectures. Suggestions are especially geared towards engaging culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Tools in this chapter

- Making the underpinning structure explicit in a lecture
- Adjusting your use of English in lectures to lower the cognitive demand on students
- Using video and audio recordings to support learning
- Becoming more self-aware about language usage
- Encouraging note making to support later learning
- Managing interactive tasks in lectures

What teachers often mean by participation

Many teachers seem to assume that the participation they want from students studying on Anglo-western programmes is obvious but, in fact, participation

is both the same and different across educational settings. In situations where students' behaviour does not match their teacher's expectations, then explanations are quickly offered: 'it's because of their culture' and/or 'it's because of their language capabilities'. While students' language skills probably go some way towards explaining their behaviour in lectures, that element plus assumptions about 'culture' do not justify the negative labels that often go along with explaining why students do not do what lecturers seem to expect. Culture does not make students passive, unresponsive or disengaged; culture does not make students write a 'confused' paper. Nor can what students bring fully explain their participation, since teaching and learning are social interactions and what teachers do and assume will also play a role. Indeed, what seems like non-participation can in fact be just the opposite. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard teachers describe students from a particular country as 'passive' because their faces do not move in the ways that a lecturer has come to associate with engagement. Many do sit silent with fixed faces, but not because they are withdrawing from what is being said – rather, they are concentrating fiercely on making sense of it.

In teacher-managed methods like lecturing, it is up to teachers to maximise the method's potential for learning. One place to start with supporting better engagement lies with teachers decoding the true meaning of students' behaviours, and then adopting strategies that support students in adopting teachers' preferred forms of engagement.

Interactive teaching in student-centred pedagogy

Interactive teaching methods are the bedrock of constructivist pedagogies. Weilekala and Watkins (2008), in their book about international students' experiences in interactive teaching, have characterised constructivist conceptions as requiring active efforts to make sense of experience and to understand the human world. Understanding happens, they say, 'through human beings interacting and sharing meaning with each other' (p. 24). Constructivist learners engage in meta-cognition, that is, they think about the process of learning. They can see that others have arrived at their knowledge in ways different from their own and 'are capable of making choices of opinion from different versions of the truth' (p. 24).

In lectures that are conceived and delivered in line with constructivist learning theory, a lecturer should not be implying 'Listen to me', but instead 'Think with me'. Lectures should ideally build understanding and support the creation of artefacts (notes) for later study, meaning the participating students must be able to understand and apply lecture material and, in time, to analyse or evaluate it. Students may only fully understand what the lecture delivers when they later think about it, perhaps using the material they acquired through the lecture to apply theory in practice or to solve problems or explain ideas. Re-use can happen in a seminar, in an examination or in coursework. This makes a lecture ineffective if students cannot understand the words, or follow the argument or grasp the

structure of what is being said. They need to make sense of the content by hooking new ideas to familiar contexts and previous knowledge. If they do not, they cannot take away a rich enough record for future use.

An increasing number of students in diverse classrooms will have problems doing all these things without explicit adjustments by teachers. Many will find the process especially challenging in the early days of study, as they adapt to tertiary conventions for lectures. Many will also be Non-English Speaking Background students or students from a NESB and will need language adjustments – again, especially in the early days and months. However, you can never be sure which students will benefit from teacher adjustments, with assumptions based on appearance or nationality being especially unreliable. To reinforce this point, I offer experiences from touring Indian higher education institutions in 2011.

Experiences in Indian lectures

These are just my experiences, based on habits acquired over more than two decides of going into hundreds of lecture rooms to observe and provide feedback to UK teachers in dozens of disciplines. For me, making sense of what I saw in India involved making comparisons.

The majority of lectures I saw in India looked like one-way transmission sessions, and they were in many ways similar to lectures I had watched in the UK. One difference was that Indian students were expected to regularly chorus answers to closed questions. Lecturers did not let students off the hook until the students gave the expected answer in sufficient numbers (another difference). Students looked distant, perhaps because attendance was compulsory, but more likely because lecture material closely followed the single textbook. Few if any students made notes while I was watching (a similarity), but when the teacher started to dictate the possible examination questions, all heads came up and pencils were busy for five minutes. In one session, I watched a teacher dictate examination answers for two hours and students transcribed the correct answers, including punctuation, which they would subsequently memorise before returning the next week for four or five more answers (a surprising difference). Once, in a small and not very highly ranked place, I heard undergraduate students complain that the teacher only wrote single words on the board but in examinations, they had to write whole sentences – could he not be more helpful? Here, I was simply confounded.

Such observations may support an assumption that your Indian students would find it shocking to be expected to hold personal views or to be independent thinkers. However, that would be unjustified for all. I visited one programme with a zero lecture policy, where students only learned and were assessed through projects, by giving presentations and through going on placements. No spoonfeeding here. In one postgraduate school, I sat in lectures where students used response software to interact with the lecturer, and students looked to be on the edge of their seats as they followed him through complex, theoretical material

in English in order to answer questions in the lecture itself, none of which were right/wrong questions. Once, when asked to lecture myself, I was hard pressed to get through the material because students wished to challenge, question and extend what I was hoping to cover, jumping in to make their views known. The conclusion? That Indian students (and surely all national groups) will have had a range of experiences and that differences are more about assessment regimes, about expectations and the way in which teaching sessions are structured than they are about nationality or 'heritage' (whatever that might be).

Students respond to what is valued and to what is being assessed. Where reticence is valued, '[t]he absence of argument may signify a ... genuine effort to understand the material they encounter [and] a better learning strategy than a premature attempt to appropriate and redeploy it' (Chanock 2010: 548). Where independent use and critical analysis are valued, students can and do produce them although, even here, caution is needed about assumptions. In a recent study of American college students by Arum and Rocksa (2011), the authors describe a pedagogic system where critical thought and independent, evidence-based argument are espoused as values, yet the authors found situations where students only rarely showed either, often because of the assessment system. Where assessment consists of multiple choice questions and students must know the correct answers, then lecturing is designed to prepare students for this type of assessment. Where students used to this system move to a new set of assumptions and expectations, whether within or across national boundaries, then they will need guidance in adjusting, plus in many cases a new set of skills.

Making structure explicit in lectures

A first step to helping students shift from a system that encourages memorising of right/wrong answers to one where the stress is on how information is used, compared and evaluated is to help them make sense of the organisation and structure within which information is placed. No one can understand or remember facts that seem to come in an unconnected list or stream of ideas and concepts – including those memorising Indian students I described above. As one Chinese student told me about a similar assessment regime he was used to, you cannot remember things unless you first make sense of them and understand them. He explained his own system and credited it with his considerable academic success. First, he tried to understand, then he thought hard about things, then he tried to accurately remember them, usually for many hours at a time. However, in Anglo-western discourse, such as that used in lectures, the ideas and the links between ideas may come in surprising places. For example, it might be a deductive structure when students are used to an inductive one. Other students may expect to have the full background and context laid out before they are given any facts, opinions, evidence or new ideas. My students in Ghana generally wanted that approach of setting our the context, whereas my Swedish students usually became impatient: 'get to the point!'

Teachers who have tried to make it clear to students where they were in the flow of the lecture and where they were going next have used a variety of techniques. These include:

Sign posting – As in 'I will now illustrate that point about *x* by…', 'I made the point that *x*, but here is some of the evidence that supports it.'

Naming the parts – As in 'This is an introduction…', 'So, in a summary of the last section …'

Providing a one-page summary – One lecturer used an overhead projector to show an outline of the lecture alongside the main PowerPoint slides screen. At various points, he showed students where he was on his one-page outline.

Signalling importance explicitly – As in 'The evidence which was used – that is what is important. The evidence. It was important because…'. The alternative is implying importance – for example, by stressing a word ('It's the *evidence* from the controlled study which…') or raising an index finger at its mention. Both these signals are culture- and language-specific, and thus they may not be universally understood. Lecturers can also be careful not to have too many 'key points'.

Making language adjustments in lectures

If students are working in translation (and many NESB speakers will be at the start of their educational studies), then attention to lowering the language load will allow them more space for thinking and give all students more opportunity to make sense of what the lecturer is talking about. All students, both ESB and NESB, might be dealing with new accents, slang, local references and unfamiliar use of particular types of formal and informal language. There are detailed suggestions for lowering students' language load on pages 77–8.

Often, whether or not students have an appropriate vocabulary will be an issue. They may lack academic terms or be unfamiliar with the words used regularly in the discipline. This is often referred to as 'jargon' and assumed never to be appropriate but, in fact, jargon is often the way in which members of the discipline communicate. When discipline-specific words, phrases and forms of speech are used, their meaning needs to be made explicit so that those new to the community can use them too, and use them with understanding. Acquiring a useful vocabulary will take more than just the dictionary definition, but a definition is a useful place to start.

To build students' vocabulary, one teacher I encountered described creating a bespoke glossary that started as a webpage on their blended learning platform. He added words as he designed the course, and worked for several months, on and off, to create the resource. Then, when he started teaching, he handed out

yellow cards to students, asking them to flash one when an unknown or unfamiliar word *that was specific to the topic* was used. At the beginning, he feared frequent 'flashing' but students became quite careful. When he saw a yellow card, he stopped, wrote the word on a flip chart and carried on, perhaps offering a brief definition. The purpose was not to define it then and there – that took too much time – but to identify words to look up. Many classroom words eventually went into the glossary; some didn't. The next year, he moved to a Wiki so that the students could make changes too. The result was a useful working document for all. An unexpected benefit was that students reported far fewer instances where they lost the thread, then worried about losing the thread, then worried about the consequences of worrying about losing the thread and so on, sometimes for up to two minutes of lost content before being able to reconnect.

Using recordings and video capture

The behaviour described in the previous section is a strong argument for making recordings of lectures available to students. Many students make their own record anyway. If students know there is a record, many say they are less anxious during the lecture itself, which makes it easier for them to relax enough to listen.

Making a recording is not a straightforward issue for many teachers, although it is an increasingly common activity in most universities and an automatic one in some. The advantage for students is that they can revisit content several times. I have heard students say they listen many times, not just for the words but also to decode underpinning structure, to check gestures and signals of importance, and to look for overarching themes. Even strong English speakers have told me that re-listening helped them tune in to UK lecturing styles.

The down sides of recording are in part, the fear that students will not attend, although engaged students say they attend because they also need the live element to make sense of the recording (Gosper *et al.* 2007). Students who only use recordings rather than attending and who are successful (i.e. they pass the course) are telling lecturers something about the experience of being in the hall – they are showing it is not an additional benefit. This can spur lecturers on to add value to lectures 'in the flesh' which cannot be replicated in a recording. Where they do, student attendance will reflect the effort (Titsworth 2004). In addition to worries about attendance, teachers might warn students about other negatives linked to recorded lectures. These include spending so much time re-listening that they are not prepared for the current week's work and postponing the work they need to put in to move from using translation to working in English.

The case for language self-awareness

More often than we sometimes wish to recognise, students are confused because their teachers are confusing. ESB and NESB teachers alike can confuse students, implying that all teachers, regardless of their language background, might

become more engaging and comprehensible if they were more self-aware. They might become so by asking themselves questions such as:

- Am I hard or easy to understand?
- Which bits of what I do make it hard for students to understand me? Which make it easier?
- Does my pace leave time for thinking and, if necessary, for working in translation?
- If I have changed my pace to become more effective, has it worked for the benefit of all students or do I need to think again?
- What am I doing to make sure the content is not lost if I invest time in being more understandable in a lecture?
- Do I use metaphors without being aware of it? Littlemore (2001) claims that metaphor, more than any other language practice, trips students up [*sic*].
- Does my use of humour alienate rather than engage (Nesi 2012)?

And so on.

Posing the questions can seem challenging enough but, to find the answers, you will almost always need to seek others' feedback. You could try asking students, although a general request – 'Can you understand me?' – is problematic. A better approach might be to ask for positives, perhaps on post-its at the end of a lecture: 'What is the one thing I do that helps you understand the lecture?' A more complicated variation is to use the traffic lights approach: 'One thing I should stop doing, one I should continue and one I should start doing to make lectures easier to understand'. Again, post-its and some strategically placed flip chart paper as they leave might yield results for future thinking.

Another source of feedback could be from the English language support unit if your university has one. Asking language professionals can be useful regardless of your own language background because language professionals deal with issues of understanding and being understood all the time. Asking one to observe is likely to lead to specific areas for further thought. EAL (English as an additional language) teachers are often genuinely surprised to discover that the issues they thought were blocking students' from understanding and participating are not the same as the issues that the language professional sees as problematic. Mother-tongue English speaking teachers are often surprised to learn that they inadvertently present students with language dilemmas.

Of course, using the answers to such questions relies on you seeing your use of language as open to change and not 'just how I am'. In fact, most aspects are malleable, given enough commitment and perseverance. It might help to start small, to focus on the most significant, and/or identify what you will not change. I can imagine situations where disregarding feedback seems a reasonable choice – teachers do not always have the time, support and personal thinking space to address such issues. However, avoiding action is grounds for taking other steps to making lectures more accessible, such as using recordings (and probably resolving to return to the

feedback at a later date). Those who have made the effort and have tried new ways to become more understandable say that students' growing participation is a motivator to keep trying.

Accommodation to objections to language adjustment

Suggestions that lecturers might pay attention to language issues often trigger objections. For example, I have suggested that teachers try noticing when they use a complex term because it has to be there (and an everyday one will not suffice) and, every time they do, they should define it. The result? They often talk of dumbing down. Or if I present the information about the impact of metaphors (did you spot that one? Metaphors do not actually 'impact'), and they talk of being inhibited. If I suggest it is a good idea if someone, somewhere investigates students' actual language capability at the start of the programme rather than relying on test scores: 'impossible'. Table 9.1 lists some of the common concerns teachers bring up together with possible ways to resolve them.

Table 9.1 Teachers' common concerns and possible resolutions

Concerns	Possible resolutions
That attention to pace, to language use and to facilitating students' understanding takes time, and leaves less time for covering the content.	• Use additional means of coverage (reading, handouts, personal research). • Focus on essentials – fewer ideas covered in more depth (and draw comfort from the wide literature that shows that fewer issues, covered in more depth, improves retention).
That self-monitoring is tiring, unsustainable.	• Make a selected number of changes – with focus on the most significant. • Build in recovery time after an event. If I lecture in English to a NESB audience – even if it is a familiar topic – I take 10 minutes to unwind afterwards.
That students' admission scores should be sufficient guides to their language competence.	• Ask English language professionals for ways to use early tasks and formative feedback for diagnostic purposes (see Chapter 6).
That native speakers will be bored, patronised or sidelined by attempts to adjust language for a subset of students.	• Seek feedback from ESB students. What is their reaction? • Find creative ways to repeat, say the same again, reiterate. • Build in pauses after an important idea. Everyone has time to think. • Think ahead about ways to say things in more straightforward ways rather than talking your way into a clear statement.

There is a strong argument for dealing with teachers' thoughts and concerns about language issues interactively, through workshops and discussions, and for addressing these issues at the level of the programme rather than at the level of the individual teacher.

Encouraging note making in lectures

Lectures are a public opportunity to make a private record. Students might assume they can use PowerPoint slide handouts as notes, but this is almost never a rich enough record for later thinking and does not show the relationships between ideas. The students who did not make notes will have long forgotten the examples, commentary and additional material that went around the slides. You can, however, use slides to improve understanding during the lecture itself, and the words used on slides can create a framework for students' own note making.

Full sentences – One way to make slides richer for learning is to use full sentences rather than single words or abbreviated ideas. Sentences will hold their meaning later, especially for NESB students, and they are more meaningful during the lecture itself. During the lecture, if ideas are presented in a shorthand version, many will struggle to read the abbreviated idea, fill in the gaps in their mind and listen to you filling the gaps – all at the same time. Even with full sentences (edited for brevity), you need to keep to a restricted number of words per slide and to use an adequate font size.

Outline format – Where lectures are supported by PowerPoint, think about not using the slide format at all for handouts, even in cases where students print them out themselves. Instead, create two documents: the slide presentation for the lecture itself and a modified version for handouts. It sounds demanding but, in fact, takes very little time. You can recast slides using the outline format, adopt a small font size and leave plenty of white space to encourage annotation. You could make outlines available before the lecture to help students look up words and point to the outline version during the lecture so that they can follow the structure.

Providing diagrams, data, etc. – Think about diagrams, data, formulae, complex ideas – you might provide them in hard copy or electronically in advance for students to print. Also provide copies for text over four or five lines long (a quote, perhaps) if you are not providing slides in outline format.

Pauses for note making – You could tell students when a note would be useful, then pause to make it possible, especially early in a programme. If you use this approach, seek feedback from students – is it useful or welcome? You could build on this prompting by taking a moment or two, perhaps twice during the lecture, to suggest students compare notes – they might check what their neighbour has written, fill in gaps etc. This signals the value of

making notes, allows students a change of activity (thereby increasing subsequent concentration) and provides a short break from listening to English, perhaps in translation.

Providing 'lost' content – You will cover less content using these approaches – in my experience, up to about 20 per cent less if I judge the audience to be working very hard to follow me in English, and about 10 per cent less in most other cases. If you use measures to lower the language demand, then you will probably need to find other means to ensure students are not short-changed. Handouts, additional reading, and rethinking the role of seminars to provide some additional content might be useful here.

Warning against transcription – If you support students' note making through recordings, you might need to warn against transcribing the content – they need to identify important ideas and to make a record of relationships between ideas and between ideas and the context in which the ideas, concepts and applications occur (Clerehan 1995).

Additional guidance – Some students welcome being directed to note-making support sites. These can suggest different approaches and ways of keeping a record. You can find many with a quick online search or ask the student-support professionals for advice. Students are more likely to follow your advice if you ask what they have done. In cases where you believe that note making is an essential skill (perhaps where it is specified in the learning outcome in a unit on interviewing or observation), then it is appropriate to teach the skill, to assess it and to use students' notes as evidence of achievement.

Alternative ways to encourage speaking in lectures

I have seen lecturers ask 'Any questions?' dozens of times – but never with any noticeable success in terms of getting students to speak. Nevertheless, teachers seem to want to use this approach, even with diverse students, as one way to seek feedback and interaction. If you feel this way, there are two ways of looking at making 'Any questions?' more successful: you could go for setting up the 'Any questions?' moment; or you could accept that, for many students, speaking up in a lecture may be just too daunting and difficult, no matter what you do, and seek other ways to create opportunities for questions. In many education systems, students approach the lecturer straight after the lecture, often standing in long lines until their particular question is addressed. You could make time for this, or tell students how they can contact you with questions. Alternatively, if you decide you do want students to speak to the whole group, strategies to make activities less daunting include pre-warning, rehearsal in pairs, clear instructions as to how the activity helps learning, safe ways of answering, such as post-its or appointed spokespeople, and careful pacing and pauses when expecting responses to questions or demands.

Activities in lectures can range from planned interludes, such as a quiz, brief paired discussion, solution of a short problem or testing reactions to content. Even with careful planning, most students – especially those with concerns about their language capability – report finding lecture-based activities strange, and it can be alarming when they see it as falling outside their conception of how learning works.

A last word

This paragraph serves as a model for the need to finish a lecture with some kind of summary or reminder of what has happened. NESB students report summaries as being particularly useful and important. As a summary in your own lectures, you could restate the one or two key ideas – if I was doing that for this chapter, it would probably be the need to make structure more overt and to lower the language demands in the early weeks and months of study to allow more thinking space. You, in your lectures, could tell students what they will do with the information – here, I might suggest you think back over the chapter and perhaps select one idea, suggestion or alternative way of lecturing that you might consider adding to your repertoire or (often just as important) one thing you will stop doing. To round off your lecture, you could ask the students to provide their own summary, perhaps through the widely used device of the one-minute paper (that is, they write for one minute about what the lecture was about then drop the paper at the door as they leave). By reading their summaries, you could discover what they got rather than what you thought you had provided. If I was doing that for this chapter, I think I would be most interested in whether your ideas about encouraging participation had shifted and, if so, how. But since this is a book, I am just left wondering. The fact that I cannot ask demonstrates the value and vibrancy of the lecture as an interactive teaching method where lecturer and students think together. It is the here-and-now immediacy of a lecture that provides further justification for making efforts to encourage those attending to also be full participants in the lecturer–listener dynamic.

Chapter 10

Encouraging participation in seminars, tutorials and in supervision

This chapter

Interactive teaching methods such as seminars and tutorials rely on students being willing and able to contribute; they need to listen and think as well engage in exploratory talk. This chapter explores the issues which support and block students' participation in its full sense. Where studies have probed the students' explanations for their behaviour in seminars, the reasons students give for silence and for apparent disengagement are complex and interconnected. Silence is often explained as a choice. It might be a politeness strategy, a reflection of their overall confidence, a reaction to classroom management and so on. Feeling silenced can be equally complex – it can arise from how others treat the silent student, or from lack of opportunity to speak, or from a judgment that what is happening in the seminar or tutorial is irrelevant or inaccessible.

This chapter suggests practical ways that teachers can encourage all students – not just the confident and talkative few – to interact with teachers and with fellow students. The goal is all students joining in and gaining maximum learning benefit from seminars, tutorials and supervision.

Tools in this chapter

- Structuring and managing student discussions to facilitate participation
- Encouraging students to rethink their self-assessment of language capabilities
- Encouraging students to self-monitor their level of contributions
- Making the links explicit between interactive teaching and student learning
- Helping student to come prepared to tutorials
- Agreeing roles and expectations for tutorials and supervision
- Recording tutorial discussions and agreements
- Checking for misunderstanding