Encouraging Student Participation in Tutorials

What We Know?

Research in cognitive psychology suggests that memory is affected by how deeply we process new knowledge (McKeachie, 1999). Listening, repeating or copying is insufficient to store information in such a way that it can be retrieved. What we need to do is link a new idea to other concepts, to talk about it, explain, summarise, have a go ourselves and question information. In other words, to learn effectively, students need to think actively about information and situate it amongst their prior learning.

Participation in a tutorial is valuable because it helps students to:

- develop and test their own understanding
- clarify material presented in lectures
- discuss and analyse key texts, theories and/or concepts
- apply general concepts to the solution of specific problems
- think deeply about various aspects of a topic or problem
- define new problems and seek solutions to them
- develop communication skills – the ability to practice as a subject specialist and work with others
- develop a critical approach to inquiry, debate and discussion

Your Role

It is up to you as the tutor to create an atmosphere in which students are able to participate. Many students expect to be passive. They may not join in for a number of reasons: they may be bored, have not done the work or be afraid of public embarrassment. There is no one strategy, rather, you should draw on a number of techniques to develop more active participation in your tutorials.

One possible strategy is to ask students to form small groups or pairs for part of the tutorial. This can help reduce students' fear of making mistakes in front of all their peers. If students have had a chance to discuss a problem before they are required to answer a question to the whole group, the risk may be reduced. A friendlier, more trusting environment will therefore be created and students should feel more confident about the material they may be required to discuss.

Things that inhibit

- doing all the talking yourself (i.e. giving a ‘mini-lecture’)

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### Encouraging Participation

#### i. Set up of the room
Feel free to move the furniture around prior to the start of the tutorial. Straight rows of chairs and tables do not facilitate participation, however having tables arranged in a circle or semi-circle can. Tables arranged into small groups also encourage students to talk to each other rather than always directing the conversation towards you. It’s also important to spend some time sitting down at the same level as your students and interacting with smaller groups.

#### ii. Introductions
The first tutorial is probably the most important as it establishes (a) relationships and (b) ground rules that are the basis for subsequent classes. Introduce yourself carefully, write your name on the board, tell students how you like to be addressed and write down your contact details and consultation times. This is particularly important for students whose first language is not English.

Let students know that you are pleased and excited to be teaching this subject (enthusiasm is an important aspect of successful teaching). Discuss expectations so that they are clear from the outset. If you explain how the tutorial will be run and your reasons for this, you will not have to put as much effort into managing expectations later in the semester.

#### iii. Icebreakers
Well-constructed icebreakers help to lessen any tension that may be present in the first session, so the group can begin its work for the semester in a friendly, positive atmosphere. A quick search in Google will retrieve lots of ideas, however there are some commonly used icebreakers included in the guide *How to Start the First Tutorial*.

#### iv. Learn students’ names
This is a very useful skill and makes students feel valued. It is also very helpful when asking (and answering) questions to refer to students by name. If you have difficulty remembering names, provide name labels and ask students to wear sticky labels or use paper tents on the tables (a folded A4 piece of paper with the student’s name written on one side). You should collect the paper and redistribute before each class to help you to remember.
v. **Ground rules**
Most groups function better when there is a clear understanding of the rules. If this shared understanding is not established in a small group setting such as in a tutorial at university, students can become very confused and this can affect their participation.

Below are a few suggestions for ground rules/expectations – they are not exhaustive and you may prefer to develop your own for a particular group and subject. It will probably be fruitful to spend a few minutes discussing each with the students. Ideas for example ground rules are also included in the guide *How to Start the First Tutorial*.

vi. **Orientating students to learning**
Students attending small tutorials, labs and/or other small groups often arrive from different parts of the University, from home or, increasingly, work, and it is helpful for them to be oriented to the session or topic. Consider starting small group sessions with an orientation exercise to focus students on their learning. For example:

- ask students to reflect on the past couple of lectures and write down either a question that they would like answered or a comment about the content of these classes – these questions/comments could then be selected at random and discussed by the whole group
- ask students for an overview of what was covered in the last lecture
- ask each student to share one fact, idea, concept, question or anything at all related to the subject that they have learnt recently
- put an issue/item on an overhead transparency or on a handout with students in pairs or small groups either discussing key points, finding mistakes or identifying what information is needed to solve the problem – ensure the exercise is quick and useful
- raise a relevant issue that has recently been in the media and ask students for their views
- ask students if they have any concerns about the previous week’s material

vii. **Small groups and pair work**
Students often find it easier to speak to other students in small groups rather than in front of the whole class. They may also be more comfortable asking questions of peers in a small group setting. In a small group students are also more engaged with the material.
viii. Avoid the traditional model
The traditional model with the tutor or teacher at the front giving a mini-lecture is something we are all very familiar with, and for many students, it is what they expect. However, if you want to encourage participation and students to think, you need to use other modes of teaching. Group work, pair work, quizzes, games, students presenting answers, and student use of the whiteboard and overhead projector, are all ways of avoiding the traditional model. The aim is to take the focus away from you and direct it onto the students.

ix. Questioning technique
Effective and varied questioning techniques are central to facilitating participation. The guide Tutorial Questioning Techniques is devoted to this topic.

x. Reflect and evaluate
Reflect about the ways in which you have attempted to facilitate participation and act on your reflections. A key characteristic of effective teachers is their ability and willingness to continually evaluate how effectively their teaching enables student learning to occur and then to make adjustments where necessary.
In classrooms, aim to reduce your own talking time

- try to have every student participate at least once in every tutorial (even if it is only minimal) where reasonable. Discuss your teaching with a colleague

### Student Activities

- Explain to students why participation is important to their learning and how it will help at the beginning of semester and remind students throughout the semester
- Use small group or pair work (even if it is not set out on the teaching plan) – get them to solve a problem or discuss an issue together
- Divide questions between groups and ask students to present the answers to the rest of the class
- Have students work on questions using whiteboard/poster paper /PowerPoint presentation/document camera so that their answers are easy to present
- Organise activities so that students write the answers to a tutorial problem on the board (and then justify them) – this moves the focus away from you and onto the students, is more interesting and educationally valuable for them, and less exhausting for you!
- Use group games or quick quizzes
- Ask students to bring a written question to class or email you a question which you will address to encourage two-way dialogue between you and the students and without putting students on the spot
References and Further Readings


A number of other sources were used in the development of the guide series. Significant elements have been developed with the assistance of the *Department of History Tutors’ Guide* and John Fernald’s paper *Taking Economics Tutorials* from Harvard University.


