

Learning Is Not a Spectator Sport: Essentials of Active Participation

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When educators ask, what is the one action we can take to improve student learning, my answer is universal no matter the grade level or domain. Increase the ***Opportunities to Respond***. This action is truly transformative. However, as with many instructional practices, **HOW** we implement the practice makes a difference. The following four *Essentials of Active Participation* can inform and guide our practice.

Essential No. 1: Request frequent responses from students.

While there are many reasons for asking students to respond during lessons, research has emerged with four clear and consistent benefits. (MacSuga-Gage & Simonsen, 2015; Van Camp, Wehby, Martin, Wright & Sutherland, 2020) First, as responses increase so do students' on-task behavior, a definite contributor to learning. Second, increased responses increase academic learning, the primary goal of education. If students are continually asked to rehearse information and to retrieve information from memory, retention is optimized. Third, perhaps the greatest gift to teachers, disruptive behaviors are reduced when students are responding academically throughout the lesson. Finally, increasing opportunities to respond increases the intensity of interventions.

You may be wondering how many responses might be desirable. Again, research provides some guidelines, though they need to be viewed as guidelines not mandates. (MacSuga-Gage & Simonsen, 2015; Simonsen & Myers, 2015) If simple responses such as unison choral responses, gestures, or holding up response cards are requested, effective teachers generally provided three to five opportunities to respond per minute. When the responses were more complex such as sharing with a partner or solving a math problem on a whiteboard at least one response per minute was elicited. In other words, many responses are requested in each lesson.

Essential No. 2: Require overt responses—saying, writing, doing.

To be effective, **overt responses** in which students say, write, or do something must be requested in all lessons in all subject areas. While thinking and silent reading, covert responses, might be embedded in a lesson, overt responses are necessary so we can monitor and check student learning, provide corrective and affirmative feedback, and adjust the lesson based on student performance.

You might want to adopt this motto that is posted and followed in many schools: **Every day, in every class, every student is participating by speaking, writing, or doing.**

Essential No. 3: Involve all students.

To optimize learning and equity in our schools, everyone needs to do everything during instruction; everyone says, writes, or does something to show their understanding. In other words, a “**No Opt Out**” school policy should be adopted paired with classroom practices and expectations. Of course, this policy needs to be coupled with quality instruction, targeted scaffolds that set students up for success, and a safe environment in which students can take risks and make mistakes without embarrassment or bullying.

How might a school start on the **Everyone does Everything** (Feldman, 2021) path? The first step is to adopt a “**No Hands Raised**” policy. (William, 2014) Students can be taught to only raise their hands when the teacher directs them to raise their hands or when they seek clarification or elaboration from the instructor. The dangers of having students raise their hands and calling on volunteers are well known to teachers: 1) The more assertive, higher-performing students volunteer more often and receive more practice than their peers. 2) The same students volunteer again and again. 3) Over time, other students begin to opt out, reducing their learning. 4) The teacher does not have a valid measure of student understanding from this selective participation.

However, the most important reason for moving away from calling on volunteers or even non-volunteers is that these practices reduce the number of responses that each student makes in a lesson. Let’s say that I have a class of 20 students and call on each student once. Each student would make one response. However, if ALL students say answers chorally, share answers with their partners, write

down talking points before a discussion, solve a math problem on a whiteboard, or hold up a response card, each student would make 20 responses. More learning will occur with 20 responses versus one.

Essential No. 4: Structure the active participation procedure.

All high-leverage instructional practices, including active participation procedures, are **intentional**, structured, planned, and consistently implemented. Let's look at a number of common practices and the structure needed for optimum use.

Choral Responses

When answers are short and the same, teachers can request that students say the answer together. However, the teacher must act like the conductor of the school band or choir. The teacher must direct the students using a vocal signal such as "everyone" or a hand signal. Without a signal or cue, students will blurt out the answer and other students will simply mimic their peers.

Partner Responses

When answers are long and different, teachers might ask students to share answers with their assigned partners. Again, structure beyond "turn and talk" should be added. First, to avoid one of the partners dominating the partnership, the teacher should assign designations such as 1 and 2, A and B, or Blue and Red, so the teacher can direct one of the students to share the answer. Second, the teacher can give a job to both partners. For example, the teacher might say, "Ones, tell your partner the answer to the question. Twos, then tell your partner if you agree or disagree and why."

Class Discussions

Class discussions generally engage a small number of repeat participants. To increase the effectiveness and equity of discussions, the teacher can provide a well-planned prompt, give all students time to record their talking points, and have all students share their talking points with their partners. Thus, ALL students have been included. Also, having rehearsed their ideas, more students will join the formal class discussion

Hold-ups

Students can be asked to respond by holding up their whiteboards, their fingers to indicate the correct answer out of four, or their True or False response cards.

However, if students hold-up their whiteboards, fingers, or response cards as soon as they formulate their answers, some students may copy their peers' responses. Instead, the students can form their answers on their desks and teacher can signal, "Show Me."

Truly, **Learning is NOT a Spectator Sport**. If our mission is to enhance student learning, we must request structured, frequent, overt responses from all students. May you and your school make increasing opportunities to respond a priority. Everyone will benefit.

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