

February, 1999 - James Jacobson, Education

A few years ago I became concerned that the amount of class participation in my courses seemed to be decreasing. I concluded that many students did not read the assignments or merely skimmed the pages because they did not see reading assignments as homework in the same way they saw writing a paper as homework.

I developed what I call "Study Guides." For each chapter that the students are assigned to read, I provide anywhere from 5 to 10 relatively easy questions that they must answer in writing and turn in to me at the beginning of the first day that I am covering that chapter in class. The first day is usually a day that I would do more lecturing. I read their answers and return them at the beginning of the second class. I use the second and third classes for most of the class discussion. The discussion centers around the 5 to 10 questions that the students have answered in their Study Guides. Not only can they refer to their papers during the discussions, but because I have read them and noted which students have an interesting perspective on a certain question, I can call on those students to share their points with the rest of the class. The students receive a grade for each Study Guide that goes toward their class participation grade.

Another technique that I began this past semester is the use of index cards to encourage and document class participation. I give each student five 3 x 5 index cards on the first day of class, and I also bring index cards to class every day. Students who answer a question in class or "make a contribution to the class" are allowed to write their names on an index card and submit it to me as they are leaving the classroom. I later record these names in my roll book. At any time during the semester it is easy for me to see how many days a particular student has contributed to our class. I have found that the "reward" of being able to turn in an index card motivates many students to participate. I use assignments that they do in class to write students notes either thanking them for their contributions or encouraging them to make contributions. Keeping a record of the index cards also helps me to document and quantify criteria for a class participation grade.

Both methods have helped me to increase the amount of class participation in all of my courses.