Teaching Tips for TAs: Encouraging Participation in the Classroom

These are strategies to adapt and vary when designing your lesson plans during the quarter. Not all students learn in the same way, so using a variety of instructional activities will bring the material to the greatest number of students and encourage the largest number of students to participate.

Discussion Questions:

Thoughtful discussion questions are a great way to encourage students to do the reading for the class and/or attend lecture. They also enable the TA to gauge student needs and progress.

• Prepare weekly study questions which can serve as a basis for discussion, exam preparation, or paper topics. Distribute the questions in the lecture before the section meets or at the beginning of the discussion as a lesson outline the students can follow.
• Require students to submit questions to you a day or two in advance of discussion so that you can design a class that meets the students’ needs.
• Ask students to write their questions on the board at the beginning of discussion. Let students try to answer the questions themselves. Try to get to all the solicited questions.

Focusing on the Reading:

Focusing on the reading assignments or lecture material is a fine way to prepare students for exams, to review difficult reading assignments, and to encourage students to do their reading assignments and attend lecture meetings.

• Have students direct a close reading of a passage of the text or a quotation from the lecture on the overhead projector.
• Ask students to focus on a difficult or ambiguous passage with role playing. Put a character or historical figure on trial, “perform” a poem, or enact an event.
• Select excerpts from the text that have not been previously addressed and ask students to relate them to issues presented by the professor in lecture.
In Class Writing:

Writing in class allows students to format their responses before they speak. This can lead to more complex discussions and increased participation, not to mention stronger writing skills.

- For the first ten minutes of class ask students to respond to a question about the lecture or the reading.
- Ask students to draft potential paper thesis statements or even paper introductions. Go over their responses in small groups so that the students will get feedback before they turn their papers in.
- If discussion is lagging, ask students to stop for a minute and write about the subject at hand. This may give them time to develop questions they need to have answered or to refine ideas so they will have something to add to the conversation.
- Ask students to respond to a quotation from the lecture or the reading.
- Write an outrageous quotation or a provocative juxtaposition of quotations on the board and ask students to respond.

Outside Resources:

Students respond with enthusiasm to outside resources that help them to see material in a fresh way. Even quiet students will have opinions about popular culture, films, or cartoons. Bringing in information or media from outside the course will encourage students to remember information and to apply what they learn.

- Bring students on a field trip. Go to the library to show students how to begin their research papers. Visit the art museum for a new perspective. Study human nature or take a poll at the UCen.
- Bring in magazine articles, video clips, or photographs that students can process quickly and which expands on, complicates, or provides an alternate viewpoint of the subject in the reading or lecture.
- Use different media equipment to present information. Use the overhead projector, all the chalkboards in the room, slide projectors, video equipment, etc.

Brainstorming:

Brainstorming is a non-threatening strategy for motivating students to participate. For students working on papers, brainstorming can be used as a method for generating fresh ideas about the material.

- In preparation for paper assignments ask students to brainstorm on possible topics. Write the topics on the board and refine them as a group. Ask students to develop thesis statement for the topics and provide textual support for their arguments.
- Using a volunteer’s paper or exam (or a ‘faked’ example), put excerpts on the overhead projector and brainstorm about its strengths, its weaknesses, and different approaches to the same question.
- Begin class by asking students to cast actors for the movie production of a text.
- Go over students’ homework as a group. Ask students to brainstorm on the next step in solving the equation or the problem. Then ask students to write a step-by-step strategy for answering similar questions when they come up.
Small Groups:

Small groups can be employed in innumerable ways. Using groups is an excellent way to increase participation by drawing shy students into the discussion. Groups permit students to do some independent thinking and to try out new ideas in front of a smaller audience.

- Ask small teams to meet early in the quarter in order to design and implement oral presentations introducing material to the class or leading discussion with questions.
- Write the questions students have about material on the board. Divide the students into small teams to answer two or three of the questions and present their findings to the class.
- Ask students to explain, pose questions, or analyze a section of the reading or lecture material for the rest of the class.

Some tips:

- Limit the group size to five students or less.
- Give students the directions orally, and then write the specific tasks on the board.
- Give students a time limit so that they begin to work immediately.
- Circulate to answer questions and encourage slower groups.
- Have students report back through a spokesperson or as a group.