Teaching Tips for TAs: Wait Time

DEFINITION:
Wait-time is the amount of time that elapses between an instructor-initiated question and the next verbal behavior (e.g., a student response or question, the instructor talks again).

RECOMMENDED PRACTICE:
Allow at least 5 seconds of wait-time after asking a question.

RESEARCH FINDING:
It has been reported that most instructors allow their students less than one second of wait-time. When wait-time is increased to three to five seconds, the following changes have been found to occur. Some of these changes are fairly immediate, while others occur over time.

The number of student responses increases, and the incidence of non-response decreases.

Students offer more evidence in support of their responses, offer more speculative thoughts, and give more complex answers. There is also evidence that student confidence increases (i.e., the number of "Is this right?" intonations decreases).

Student-to-student interactions increases as do conversational sequences (i.e., sequences of three or more related interchanges increase in number).

INCREASING YOUR WAIT-TIME:
It is not uncommon for instructors to comment that it is initially difficult to increase their wait-time. If you think about it, it is likely that your own wait-time patterns extend beyond your teaching and into your everyday interactions. Many people indicate that they are uncomfortable with "long" silences. Thus, allowing such silences in your teaching can be unsettling at first.

When you begin experimenting with wait-time, you might find it useful to count the seconds out in your head. (For example, one-one thousand, two-one thousand, etc. If you have the urge to break the silence simply bite your tongue!) You might use this time to study the faces of your students for indications of confusion or comprehension.

WHAT TO DO WHEN STUDENTS DON’T RESPOND:
If there are no student responses after five to ten seconds of wait-time, you might want to do one or more of the following:

- repeat the question;
- rephrase the question;
- simplify the question;
- ask a student to attempt a rephrasing of your question;
- break the question down into its component parts;
- make your question more specific;
- ask students what it is about the question that they are finding difficult.

After each of the above alternatives, it is recommended that you allow another 5-10 seconds wait-time.

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http://www.id.ucsb.edu/IC/TA/main.html
ORIENTING STUDENTS TO A CHANGE IN PRACTICE:
Since the classroom is a social system, it’s very easy for TA’s and students to quickly learn to expect certain behaviors of one another. When students are not used to having an instructor give them sufficient wait-time, they may not immediately respond to the opportunity to think, respond or ask questions. Students, much like their instructors, may at first be uncomfortable with the added seconds of silence. Therefore, it may be a good idea to tell students that you are experimenting with giving them more time to think and respond to your questions.

Letting students know the purpose of any changes you plan to make in the classroom or in your teaching behavior helps orient students to the change.

Written by Drs. Nancy Lorsch and Shirley Ronkowski, 1982. Instructional Development, University of California, Santa Barbara.

REFERENCE:
Rowe, Mary Budd. "Wait-Time and rewards as instructional variables, their influence on language, logic, and fate control: part one - wait-time." Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 1974, 11, (2), 81-94. This study was conducted with elementary teachers and students. Studies with high school populations found similar results.