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How to Get the Quiet Ones to Speak Up

Three simple steps to help stymied students participate in class discussions.

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When I first started teaching, my attitude toward students who remained silent in discussion classes could be summed up with the words of Bernard Hopkins, the fistic sage of Philadelphia: "Bernard Hopkins gonna do what Bernard Hopkins gonna do." If students didn't want to talk, that was on them. They were free to choose not to speak and would have to accept a lower grade as a consequence. After all, I had not talked much in class when I was a student, and I had resisted professors who tried to make me talk.

Nowadays I still regard the Hopkins credo as words to live by, but I know that it was a mistake to apply it to silent students. Silence is usually not their preferred state — and, indeed, was not *my* preferred state when I was one of them. I had things to say, and it bothered me that I often couldn't make myself say them.

Silent students may all seem alike to a frustrated teacher — *What's with college kids these days?* — but each student's silence has a particular provenance and texture, a substrate of lived experience, academic history, and inner life. All of that backstory goes into creating a

problem we can resolve with some fairly straightforward solutions straight out of the behavioral-psychology textbook:

- Lower the bar to speaking in class by setting up the moment in advance.
- Gently reinforce a reluctant speaker's participation when it happens.
- And if the problem is really bad, you can even rehearse and reinforce class participation with the student one on one during office hours.

Those simple steps can enable an instructor in a discussion-based course to turn silence into speaking up, and generate the greater engagement and fulfillment that comes with it. And that makes a class better for everyone in the room.

The importance of citizenship in the community of inquiry we try to build and sustain for the duration of a semester is a principle theme of my new book, *What Can I Get Out of This? Teaching and Learning in a Classroom Full of Skeptics*. It tells the story of one semester in a required freshman-literature course of 33 students, all of whom I expected to ante up and contribute to class discussions at least once every time we met.

My interviews with students have since made clear that this requirement led them to do the reading more often, though it also made them anxious. In one chapter, I do a deep dive into the experiences of two students who had things to say but were so paralyzed by fear that they couldn't raise their hands. I share what I learned here in the hope that it will offer some strategies to other faculty members faced with students who are struggling to talk in class.

The two students I wrote about came from very different backgrounds — "Kathi" came from money and attended a fancy prep school, while "Colleen" was a first-generation college student from a working-class family. Yet their difficulties were very similar:

- Colleen: "I just get in my head too much, and I'll be practicing what I want to say, if I have an idea, but then I'm just worried that it will sound like not knowing what I'm talking about or the wrong thing."
- Kathi: "I was this, like, anxious little ball — scared of doing, like, one wrong thing."

To get them participating, I followed the same sequence with both. First, I wrote an email to the student reminding her of my course policy

of consistent class participation. Then I met separately with Colleen and Kathi in my office to talk about their difficulty with speaking up and make a plan of action.

At these meetings I told each student what my first question would be at our next class meeting, which would allow her to prepare an answer in advance. Then when she raised her hand in class, I would call on her right away. Going first would prevent her from building up disabling dread as the class meeting went on. It would also eliminate any need to worry about being preempted by someone else or fitting her comment into the flow of discussion. I asked each of them to think about whether she wanted to move to the back of the classroom so that other students wouldn't see her, or to the front so that she couldn't see them.

If necessary, we could also rehearse our whole exchange a few times right there in my office: I call on you, you raise your hand and offer your comment, I respond positively to reinforce the behavior. A few such repetitions are how we would handle a point of difficulty in a band or team practice, which I think of as good models for what happens in the college classroom.

Both Colleen and Kathi managed to establish a habit of speaking up in class by following this jump-start sequence. Overcoming such an aversion can be life-altering. Colleen, in particular, found that when she pushed herself to do this one thing, she found it easier to push herself to talk in other courses, and in other social situations.

"Looking back now," she told me, "I think I've grown in every way — like academically, socially, even emotionally. In my own friendships, sometimes, I struggle with being quiet. So now I try to say, OK, well, maybe I'll just start the conversation and then the other person will keep going. And instead of being like, 'Oh, I have nothing to say,' well, at least I'll get them talking. It's like participating at the beginning of class, so then you know that you can participate later as well."

The stakes were especially high for Colleen, who had wanted to be an elementary-school teacher for as long as she could remember. She believed that school is where people equip themselves to move up and make good in the world, and she wanted to help kids do that. Speaking up wasn't just expected in my classroom, and it wasn't just part of how a student does well in college: It's what teachers *do*.

The genuine satisfaction I feel about Colleen's and Kathi's quiet triumphs in my class is tempered by the realization that I let them go too long before intervening, and by the even more sobering realization that, over the years, I haven't made the minimal effort to reach other students in their situation.

I understand that you may feel that you don't have the time for this approach. If you have a lot more students than I do, you may not, and you're probably not running your class primarily as a discussion, anyway. But if your class sizes are comparable to mine and you teach a discussion-heavy course, rest assured the effort required is fairly minimal: 10 seconds to dash off a not particularly kindly email, 20

minutes of somewhat more gentle conversation in office hours, a scrawled reminder on your class notes to keep an eye out for Kathi's or Colleen's hand, a little extra reinforcing emphasis added to your response to whatever they've said (but without making an embarrassing fuss). Colleen and Kathi had to make a manyfold greater effort to take what felt to them like a big step, and the payoff was significant and enduring.

As a craft skill, helping students speak up matters more than it used to because many faculty members in my discipline have responded to the rise of AI by doubling down on the humanity of the humanities. In addition to doing more writing in class, bringing back blue-book and oral exams, crafting more authentic and essayistic paper assignments, and banning screens, that means putting more emphasis on the give-and-take of class discussion as the main event of the 15 weeks or so that teacher and students spend together. If you're going to require engagement in the form of participation, then it also becomes more important than ever to help silent students find their way into the conversation.

It's not just the students who benefit. Helping them get into the game also benefits the teacher because the quietly contagious excitement of previously stymied students who have finally found a way to speak up improves classroom chemistry, and nothing makes teaching and learning easier or more joyful than good classroom chemistry. A classroom in which everyone there has anted up as a contributing citizen is a better — more effective, more dynamic, more

transformative — classroom than one in which some people are holding back from being full participants in our communal inquiry.

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About the Author

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Carlo Rotella is a professor of English at Boston College. His newest book is *What Can I Get Out of This?: Teaching and Learning in a Classroom Full of Skeptics*, from which parts of this essay have been excerpted.

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