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## Guest Column—The Sound of Silence: Engagement in the Classroom

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# The Weekly Reader

## UpComing Sessions

SC Deferred  
Compensation  
Program 3/2  
Employee  
Performance  
Management  
System 3/4,  
3/11  
Engaging Student  
Learning Using  
Pinterest 3/29  
Strategies for  
Successful  
Class  
Discussion 4/5  
Blackboard  
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## Guest Column—The Sound of Silence: Engagement in the Classroom

**By David Schary, PESH**

Like any college professor, I want *all* my students engaged in the course material. I hope that between classes, students are thinking about the information presented in lecture and from readings, and that they come to class ready to participate. Although this may seem a bit idealistic, I do not think any instructor would argue with me.

What classroom participation looks like, however, is where a lot of instructors *do* differ. Traditionally, a student is seen as participating when he or she talks during class. I know I always appreciate when a student makes an astute comment or asks an insightful question. But for an introvert, talking in front of the class may not be something they are willing to do for any amount of points.

As a new instructor, this has been a hard lesson for me to learn. I intentionally designed all of my courses to include an element of group

discussion to engage students and challenge them to think critically, and I strive to create a lively classroom environment in which I am not the only one talking.

However, I often catch myself assuming the silent student is disengaged and possibly unprepared, while that the talkative student is engaged and prepared. Although sometimes true, both assumptions can be problematic.

I recently attended a Teaching and Learning Conference that motivated me to reevaluate my perceptions of student participation and challenged me to find alternative ways for students participate beyond asking a question or making a comment in front of the entire class. I thought of some of my top students, who received high test scores and came to office hours or emailed thoughtful questions, but never spoke in class. Did I limit them by not providing other ways for them to

participate? Were my courses catering to only one type of student?

As a sport psychology professor, I was a bit taken aback by my own oversight. As a result, I have compiled activities from colleagues to use in my classes. The suggestions below are not all tailored to introverts or extroverts; rather, they are ideas intended to challenge all types of students to push beyond their comfort zone and increase student engagement.

### **Class Environment**

Creating a welcoming class environment is critical for fostering student engagement. For me, a healthy class environment centers on mutual understanding and respect. Not only do I want my students to understand academic expectations, but I also want them to understand and respect each other. To understand each other, each student first needs to understand herself or himself.

*“However, the perfect classroom environment and seamless use of technology cannot compare to the power of knowing your students. Winthrop’s relatively small class sizes allow instructors to learn about each student, particularly their personalities. A quick conversation can provide invaluable insight into how likely or not a student is to participate.”*



## Continued from page 1

This can easily be done with a simple personality assessment (16Personalities offers a free online personality assessment, closely resembling Myers-Briggs: <https://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test>). Following the assessment, it is important to talk about the strengths and limitations of each personality type, paying particular attention to how each one best communicates. In my experience, this has led to some very interesting class discussions, and I have even heard students talk about their personality types when working in small groups on projects. Knowing how they communicate best is a tool that will help students in any relationship, class, or career.

### Technology

Technology provides a useful alternative for students who are not comfortable talking in front of the class. For example, Blackboard can be used in a variety of ways to foster participation, such as discussion boards and blogs for asking questions or reflecting on course information.

In addition, social media can be used to give a voice to students in and out of the classroom. Many instructors use

Twitter as a tool to promote discussion on current events. Some even use Twitter as a backchannel resource, allowing students to tweet about topics during lecture. If you do choose to use technology, I encourage you to make it a required part of the participation grade; otherwise, students will be less inclined to use it (even the introverts). A big benefit of technology is the ease at which it allows an instructor to track participation.

### Know Your Students

However, the perfect classroom environment and seamless use of technology cannot compare to the power of knowing your students. Winthrop’s relatively small class sizes allow instructors to learn about each student, particularly their personalities. A quick conversation can provide invaluable insight into how likely or not a student is to participate. In addition, you can have your students fill out a short questionnaire or require them to come to office hours during the first part of the semester. The personal information you glean from these brief encounters will help you tailor the class to the strengths of the students and enable you to choose activities that will

challenge them to grow.

At the conference, I was reminded that as instructors, we are tasked with the responsibility of designing classes that help students reach their potential. In regard to participation, there is a fine line between coddling students and forcing them into situations that will cause them to cognitively shut down. To prevent either extreme, we should provide a diverse range of participation activities. Some should be comfortable for students, allowing them to leverage their strengths, while others should help them grow by gently pushing them into more uncomfortable situations. This will help ensure that students feel supported and challenged in every class, regardless of their personality type.

--David Schary, PESH

*Editor’s Note:* David has given us some excellent recommendations, and I look forward to trying them out. I would also add the recommendation that you try incorporating quick, ungraded writing into your classes. Instead of asking a question and having students answer, have them *all* write for a few minutes. This ensures that all students participate, and the thoughtful introverts can really shine.

--John Bird, English

## Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

## A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu).

## Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

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## The 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to everyone who attended and presented at our conference on Saturday, February 6. We had 102 attendees, who heard excellent presentations and an inspiring keynote speech by Dr. Dan Mahony. Special thanks to Dana Bruneau for her work in organizing the conference.

## Thought For the Week

"A man's brain (intellect) is stored powder; it cannot be touched itself off; the fire must come from the outside."  
--Mark Twain