

Two Participation Strategies That Work

As you read through the strategies below, keep in your mind an image of your most reluctant student. The student who rarely participates, who routinely answers with “I don’t know,” who completes little or no work, who acts out or remains silent as a way to disengage from the learning. Let’s call a mythical version of this student “Sally.” Here are two ideas to try with your “Sallys.”

Answer or Echo

How it Works: You call on Sally to give a response. Offer her the choice to “answer or echo.” If Sally knows the answer, or has something pertinent to share, then she answers. If Sally does not know the answer, or has nothing to share, she replies “echo” and stands up. You move on and call on a different student. The next student has the same choice, but if the next student also chooses “echo” that student also stands up. Eventually you will call on a student who is willing to share an answer. After that student shares, each of the previous students who had said “echo” must repeat the response given before they can sit down again.



Why it Works: It’s tricky to hold Sally accountable while not simultaneously humiliating her if she is unprepared. This strategy allows Sally to “pass” if she is unprepared to answer, but keeps her “on the hook” for paying attention because she will still have to repeat the answer given by someone else.

Tips from the Trenches:

Tip #1: Sometimes having Sally stand can create unnecessary anxiety or confrontation. You can alternately just use a seating chart and mark the names of the students who choose “echo,” so that you remember who to return to for the repeated responses.

Tip #2: The first time you try this strategy you will probably get many students saying “echo.” But once you go back to each one for the repeated response, and they realize they don’t get “off the hook” by saying echo, the number of echo-ers will significantly decrease.

Advance Warning:

How it Works: Give Sally some advance warning that you are going to call on her to share a response. There are many variations of this strategy. Here are three.

- One minute warning- While Sally and her classmates are writing down a response to a question you posed, circulate and note what students are writing, especially Sally. If she has written anything appropriate, quietly tell her you like her answer and you are going to call on her first to share out during the upcoming class discussion. If she's too shy to share her own answer, read her answer to the class yourself and give her the credit.
- Several minutes warning- Catch Sally entering class (at the beginning of the period or after recess) and tell her you will be calling on her to share answer number #5 from last night's homework. Even if she didn't complete last night's homework she has several minutes to work it out before you get there in the review.
- One day's warning- Catch Sally leaving class and let her know that tomorrow you will be calling on three students, including her, to share what they thought was most important, interesting, or memorable about the content in today's class. To reduce any potential anxiety she might feel, let her know that she doesn't have to write it down, it won't be graded, there is no wrong answer, and she can share her response privately with you if she isn't feeling comfortable sharing out to the class the next day.

Why it Works: This strategy gives Sally some time to emotionally and physically prepare to share out, which in turn lowers her anxiety and puts you on the same side.

Tips from the Trenches:

Don't use this strategy with just Sally and other reluctant students. The rest of the class will notice and Sally will feel singled out. But make sure you include Sally regularly in strategies like this so she remains safely "on the hook" for paying attention and participating.

