

# Discussions and Class Participation at Grinnell

Ryan Miller

# Introduction

- ▶ Most classes at Grinnell rely upon active, participatory learning
  - ▶ This requires substantial effort from students and instructors
- ▶ To begin today, we'll look at the results of an internal study at class participation at Grinnell
  - ▶ We'll use this as a starting point for setting expectations in our Tutorial

# Background

- ▶ In 2017, Grinnell College interviewed numerous faculty members and students about barriers to classroom participation and strategies for helping students make their presence felt [1]
  - ▶ Faculty interviewed came from: English, history, political science, sociology, religious studies, and anthropology
  - ▶ Students were recruited to participate in a 2-hour workshop

1. Document link

# What did students say?

Things leading to increased participation:

1. Positive affirmation from professors
2. Open-ended/flexible questions
3. Pair-sharing, games, being in small groups

## What did students say?

Commonly reported obstacles:

1. Shyness or anxiety (you're not alone!)
2. Condescending responses or being "shut down" by peers
3. Lack of confidence when material is complex/difficult
4. Residual effects from high school (limited practice, bad experiences, etc.)
5. Feeling their comments are uninteresting/unworthy

# What did students say?

How students can help each other:

1. Seconding or building upon points made by others
2. Pausing before jumping in if you've already talked a lot
3. Asking their questions/comments towards peers rather than the professor
4. Recognizing one's own identity as well as the identities of their peers

# What did students say?

What students want professors to do:

1. Set clear expectations and talk openly about participation
2. Mix up groups and seats
3. Validate points respectfully before offering a rebuttal or correction

# What about the professors?

## Barriers:

1. Lack of preparedness and/or lack of confidence
2. Legacies of past experiences (high school, upbringing) and issues related to belonging (gender, nationality, privilege, etc.)

## Advice to students:

1. Professors don't expect brilliant comments, they just want engagement
2. Set goals for participation (ie: 2 comments during this class)
3. Pre-plan questions/comments based upon readings
4. Don't assume that more talkative students are more likely to be "right"



## What do you think?

- ▶ Did anything from this study surprise you?
- ▶ What sort of “ground rules” or “procedures” should we use in our classroom?
- ▶ This study focused on the *humanities*, do you think anything is different in the *sciences*?

## Additional guidance

The committee in charge of the study put out this 1-page handout:

- ▶ Document Link

We've already covered most of this, but a final thing to remember is that **negative experiences leave lasting marks**. We all make mistakes and we should be positive, forgiving, and supportive of each other.