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## **Doubling Down on Student Discussion: A Simple Technique for Increased Involvement**

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### **Objectives**

1. Students will actively participate in classroom discussion.
2. Students will learn to not “over share,” allowing opportunities for others to speak.
3. Students will be accountable for the material discussed in class.

### **Courses**

This pedagogical idea is appropriate for any Communication course that utilizes class discussion (e.g., Communication Theory, Interpersonal Communication, Organizational Communication, etc.) It is best suited, however, for small to medium sized classrooms – as opposed to large lecture hall settings.

### **Rationale**

Research has consistently indicated that students learn more when they become actively engaged in the learning process (Adler, 1982; Bonwell, 1991; McKeachie, et. al., 1987; see also Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Consequently, this pedagogical idea emphasizes self-exploration and expression. Rather than merely listening to a lecture or passively allowing other students to dominate the class discussion, this idea encourages equal student participation in a manner that is both simple to understand and fun to enact.

### **Description**

Throughout my time as a student, instructors commonly used the “take-a-penny” technique to control classroom discussion. With this technique, students were given 1-3 pennies at the start of each class period. They then relinquished a penny each time they contributed to the class discussion. Although effective in regulating “over sharers,” this technique failed to foster classroom discussion among those who tended to remain quiet. Furthermore, the technique was fundamentally regressive in nature, as students were forced to relinquish their currency with each utterance.

In contrast to the “take-a-penny” technique, the simple pedagogical idea outlined in this paper uses poker chips (or any other form of “currency”) in order to reward student involvement. Each time a student shares her/his thoughts, rather than having to relinquish a penny, the student is given a poker chip. At the end of each class period, students then “cash out” their chips for a

participation grade. Such an approach fosters student involvement with an immediate and public display of praise (by flipping a poker chip in their direction). It also keeps “over sharers” in check via concertive control, without being regressive in nature (Barker, 1999).

## **Time Needed**

The class discussion will proceed as usual. The only additional time requirement is at the end of class when students “cash out” for their personal involvement (approximately 5 minutes). Having used this technique for several semesters, I suggest printing a spreadsheet beforehand of students’ names to expedite this process. As students cash out, the instructor can keep track of how many poker chips each student earned via simple checkmarks; at semester’s end, this spreadsheet can also be used to quickly tally the students’ overall participation grades.

## **Resources Needed**

A package/case of poker chips, or any other desired form of “currency” (e.g., pennies, paper clips, monopoly money, etc.)

## **Directions**

1. Conduct the class discussion as usual.
2. Each time a student offers a constructive comment, insight or response, reward her/him with a poker chip.
3. Instruct students to hold onto each of their poker chips until the designated time.
4. At the end of class or immediately following the class discussion, have students “cash out” by returning their poker chips to you. Use a spreadsheet to record the number of chips each student earned for the day.
5. At semester’s end, use the preceding spreadsheet to tally the total number of poker chips each student received. Determine students’ overall participation scores by grading on a curve.

## **Appraisal**

As aforementioned, the simple technique outlined in this paper is not regressive in nature; rather, it rewards students for their active involvement in class discussion. For this reason, I have found throughout my time using the idea that students are surprisingly eager to receive a poker chip. They often perk up at the end of their comment or question, or even raise their hands in anticipation. As the semester progresses and students become more familiar with the process, I often foster discussion by simply setting a stack of poker chips out on my desk or podium. The mere possibility of receiving a poker chip has a discernible impact on the students’ level of attentiveness and participation.

The process of flipping a poker chip to the students also brings a certain level of activity and excitement to an otherwise sedentary environment. Every eye in the room is on the poker chip as it spins through the air. I have even found that it does not matter whether I toss the chip well or make it to my target. The occasionally errant throw inevitably results in laughter from the

classroom, alleviating any pressure that one might feel about the need for athleticism or “good aim.”

Finally, I make it clear to students early in the semester that they should not corner the market on poker chips, as that will hurt their peers’ participation grades. Consequently, I have found it common for students to offer one another gentle reminders of this reality throughout the semester. This form of concertive control not only helps to foster involvement among quiet students, but also keeps “over sharers” from dominating the class discussion.

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