Foreword

Classroom interaction—after lecture, it’s the most widely used instructional strategy, and it’s just about as widely endorsed. How many faculty have you met who don’t want students asking, answering, and commenting in class or online? But also like lecture, classroom interaction often fails to reach its potential. In many classrooms, participation must be pulled from reluctant students who would clearly rather not. The verbal few make comments for points, not always because they have points to make. Typically participation is a vertical exchange between the teacher and a student. It takes place in the presence of others but without their involvement. When the teacher attempts a discussion, it’s not a lively, engaging exchange of interesting ideas but isolated, superficial observations made by students who don’t comment in light of anything in the text or that’s been covered in previous class sessions.

“If you could change one thing about participation in your courses, what would you change?” I ask in workshops. Commonly the responses are about more students taking part, and some students taking less part, more real questions and fewer pedantic queries about exam content and paper length, more students being less afraid of wrong answers, and students at least occasionally responding to each other. I don’t encounter many faculty who are happy with the extent or kind of interaction that’s occurring in their classrooms.
But what’s starting to sound like a tale of woe here doesn’t have to carry on to an unhappy conclusion. You have in your hands a book full of content with the potential to rewrite the story of student interaction in face-to-face and online courses. Most faculty are not aware that there is an extensive and excellent body of research on students’ verbal contributions in courses. It describes how it occurs, why it happens that way, and how some approaches can produce better outcomes than others. This is research with practical implications. It has findings that can be implemented. And the best part of this happier story is that one of the researchers who has done some of the very best work on classroom interaction has authored this book.

I met Jay Howard on a cold day in January. I was working at a campus north of Indianapolis and I mentioned some of his work in one of my sessions. One of his colleagues was there and asked if I’d like to meet him. Indeed! She called and I stopped by his office at Butler University where he is the Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences. It was only a short meeting but by the time it was over I was all but pleading with him to do a book.

He did and here it is—a detailed map that points the way to better classroom interaction. Along the way you’ll learn about phenomena you’ve observed in your classroom, things like civil attention, the consolidation of responsibility, the role played by norms, and the characteristics of those students who talk a lot and others who won’t talk at all. Jay is a sociologist and that discipline frames how he has studied and understands classroom interaction. It’s a useful frame with much theory and research supporting these more specific conclusions about classroom interaction.

What I especially love about this book is that even though it’s written by a researcher, it doesn’t read like any research article you’ve ever read. The various chapters start with descriptions of classroom interaction experiences we’ve all had and the feelings they engender—the frustration of trying to get students engaged, the anger at how passive their approach is to everything, and
the disappointed tiredness that makes more effort seem futile. And from these familiar places, Jay leads us to relevant research. It explains these student responses and explores alternatives. Suggestions offered in the book come from the research and from practice—what teachers have learned as they’ve tried to cultivate the kind of interaction that promotes learning. Jay draws from his teaching experience and references that of other teachers as well.

The book also highlights the research of others, not just Jay’s work. In fact I kept pushing him to acknowledge his work, to own it in his writing. Many of his studies involved students as co-researchers. They are listed as authors, which makes his work all the more laudable to my way of thinking. The book’s coverage of the research and literature on classroom interaction is extensive. No other resource looks as broadly across disciplines or offers as integrative an analysis of student interaction as you’ll find in this book.

There is a real need for new forms of pedagogical scholarship. A traditional review of research pieces on classroom interaction is fine for those interested in the next studies needed in this area. It is not what those of us trying to promote dialogue in our courses need. Certainly our practice will benefit from a good working knowledge of the research. It explains much of what we see and find frustrating. At an emotional level, it’s comforting. The lack of response, the passivity, the failure to engage and connect isn’t just happening in our courses. It’s not because the way we’re handling interaction is particularly inept. But we need more than a working knowledge of this research—we need help with implications. How do we revise policies and practices in light of it? Here’s a book that responds to both needs. It establishes a knowledge base and guides decision making based on what has been discovered.

That’s not to imply that all the research on classroom interaction is conclusive, that all the findings are consistent, or that all the implications prescribe clear-cut actions. This is social science research, after all, and classroom interaction is a
complex phenomenon. How interaction is handled in a large class isn’t the same as how it’s handled in a small class. How questions are framed in a science class isn’t how they are formed in a literature class. How one teacher executes a Socratic questioning sequence isn’t how another teacher does it. So, not all the answers are easy, obvious, or the same. But the answers and advice given in this book offer places to begin. They provide the foundation for the policies and practices we can use to promote participation and discussion.

It is time for us to move beyond experientially derived how-to-teach books. They were fine when what we had was mostly the wisdom of practice. Our pedagogical knowledge now rests on a firmer foundation. We do learn from experience, but we can learn more from systematic inquiry and analysis, especially when it comes from someone who’s done the research, been in the classroom, and writes with the caring commitment of a trusted colleague. Welcome to Jay Howard’s Discussion in the College Classroom: Getting Your Students Engaged and Participating in Person and Online.

Maryellen Weimer
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As a sociologist, it should come as no surprise that I recognize the importance of context and community. I have been fortunate throughout my career to be a member of communities that have prioritized teaching and learning. This was true in my undergraduate days at Indiana University South Bend where the faculty took an interest in me as a first-generation, nontraditional student and in my graduate school days at the University of Notre Dame where my efforts in teaching as well as scholarship were affirmed and encouraged.

I have been a part of both Indiana and Butler universities—two institutions that value teaching and learning. At IU, I became part of a group, the Faculty Colloquium on Excellence in Teaching, which brought together award-winning teachers from all eight campuses. As the old marketing pitch went, IU was “one university with eight front doors.” However, at Indiana University–Purdue University Columbus, where I spent most of my time, we were not an independent campus but rather a center of Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis; we didn’t qualify as a front door. So we referred to ourselves as IU’s “basement window.” But even from the basement window I was welcomed into the community and nurtured as teacher-scholar.

I have also been privileged to be a part of two professional associations, the North Central Sociological Association (NCSA)
and the American Sociological Association (ASA), which have long and proud histories of focusing attention on teaching and learning. I was silly enough to volunteer to chair the NCSA Teaching Committee as a second-year assistant professor and a year or two later volunteered to run for the American Sociological Association’s Section on Undergraduate Education’s Council. To my surprise, I found myself in both roles. (A little hint for graduate students and junior faculty: these are voluntary organizations. They need free labor.) I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to all the members of these communities who shaped me and nurtured me along the way.

I also wish to thank my family for their love and support: my wife, Brenda, and my children, Amalia and Dylan. I also want to thank Priscilla Cobb and Cynthia Drouin, who faithfully guarded my office door and kept my calendar clear of meetings to ensure that the time I blocked out for writing was not intruded upon. Finally, I wish to thank the many students in my research methods courses over the years who conducted studies with me, especially those who became co-authors of the resulting publications that significantly shaped the content of this book: Lillard Short, Susan Clark, Amanda Henney, Roberta Baird, George “Chip” James, David Taylor, Aimee Zoeller, and Yale Pratt.

It takes a community, or perhaps I should say it takes communities, to raise a teacher. I am grateful for the influence of these communities in my life.