Motivating Students to Participate in Class

**Peer Carding:**
Ask students to arrive at class each day with two thoughtful questions written on a 3x5 index card based on the reading assignment. The instructor collects the cards and then returns them to different students, who read the questions and then reflect on them. Students are then asked to read the question, identify who wrote it, and then discuss or debate the answer as a class. Instructors should be sure to model what qualifies as a thoughtful question.

**Anonymous Paper Swap:**
Students respond to a question posed by the instructor and then the answers are redistributed anonymously. The instructor calls on a student to read the answer written on the paper they received and the student also comments on how the answer is *useful* (not wrong or right) and then elaborates on it to make it more useful. Anonymity and the focus on usefulness encourage student participation by eliminating fear of not knowing all of the answers.

**Ask Before You Tell:**
Before launching into a new idea, give students the opportunity to form a foundation for this new information by asking them what they already know. Doing so helps students to focus their attention, to relate the concept to previous knowledge, and stimulates student interest.

**Use the Pause Procedure:**
Pause for two minutes about three times during a lecture to give students an opportunity to discuss their notes with each other. Schedule these pauses to occur after parts of the lecture that cover difficult material, allowing students to probe further into complicated content. It may help to ask them to follow three steps:

  * **Step 1:** Comparing notes, look for *matching* information that both students found important enough to record.
  * **Step 2:** Comparing notes, look for *missing* information that one of the students did not write down.
  * **Step 3:** Discuss how the information relates to previous lectures and why it is important in the current lecture.

**Consider Eliminating Participation Grades:**
Grading participation may encourage students to have grades, not course content, at the front of their minds when they speak up in class.
Think-Pair-Share:
Ask students to think or write about a particular question, then allow them to discuss their answers in pairs. Once students have had time to consider two perspectives, ask them to share answers with the entire class.

Minute Papers:
Give students one minute to reflect on a particular question or point out aspects of the course that they find important or confusing. The papers help students to focus their thoughts about a particular subject and give them confidence to speak up in class. The instructor can use the papers (or a sampling of the papers) to get a sense of how the class is dealing with the subject matter or to learn about issues preventing students from participating in class.

“The Ideal Student”:
Early in the semester, ask students to create a “Top Ten List” of the characteristics of an ideal student, such as coming to class with notes about the assigned reading or asking questions during discussion. Once students agree upon ten items, ask students to make a contract in which they agree to follow several of the guidelines on the list. Offer them a chance to review the contract at midterm.

Use “Spiraling Questions”:
Give a single topic – for example, the Great Pyramid – and ask students to deduce as much information as possible about the topic. Each piece of information (such as the notion that the Great Pyramid involved organized labor) yields a new question (what are the aspects of a society that allow for organized labor?). This process forces students to draw conclusions about relationships and to understand that they have the ability to drive the conversation.


