Encouraging Student Participation: Tip Sheet

A workshop from the University of Pittsburgh’s TA Services: Center for Instructional Development and Distance Education

-Give a small writing exercise (1 or 2 minutes) in response to your question before eliciting a response, then ask for volunteers or call on students to share what they have written. Ask, “What did you write?”
This is our number one tip.

-Tell your students why they are doing what they are doing. Relate participation directly to course/class learning objectives and communicate this relationship to your students. Tell your students how this participation will help them achieve their personal, academic, and professional goals.

-Learn your students’ names and use them. Talk to your students immediately before class begins about things that may not be related to class.

-Relate in-class participation to some kind of preparatory assignment. For example, provide some reading questions that they must answer beforehand in writing and bring to class with them.

-Relate participation to some upcoming graded assignment or test: “What we are doing now will prepare you to succeed on the mid-term, for these reasons.”

-Draw upon your students’ prior knowledge. Begin with a discussion question that you feel confident they can answer based upon their own experience (whether from earlier classes or their personal life experience). Relate your subject to real life: current events, pop culture, etc.

-Affirm correct answers verbally and with body language, and indicate why it is a good answer.

-Avoid “scaring off” students from participating after a wrong answer. Thank them for their contribution. Then identify what is right (or what could be right) about the wrong answer, even if it’s something small, while at the same time making the correction.

-Wait 20 seconds after asking a question—students should be uncomfortable with the silence, not you, and someone will eventually speak up.

-“Muzzle” yourself. Resist the urge to comment upon a student’s comment immediately. Instead, briefly and succinctly restate the student comment and ask the class, “What do others think of this?” or “Do you agree? Why or why not?”

-Start class immediately with a participation activity: a discussion question displayed overhead, a group activity which serves as a review of skills from the previous class, a “nuts and bolts” or “just the facts” discussion of the reading, which can serve as a foundation for more in-depth discussion later.
-Weave targeted, yet open-ended questions into your lecture, rather than breaking the class up into strictly bounded “lecture” and “discussion” portions.