

## Giving Reluctant Students a Voice

**Ava:** *Janice, if you have all these good ideas about the topic, why don't you say them in class?*

**Janice:** *Well, by the time I think of them and figure out how I want to say them, the discussion is over or has moved on, and I would look stupid.*

All teachers know them—the students who sit in the back of the room and never make a peep. If prodded, they may reluctantly offer a comment or opinion, but they are so obviously uncomfortable about participating that a teacher may wonder if it's even worth trying to engage them.

The dialogue transcribed above was an actual conversation Reynold Redekopp's daughter had with one of her university classmates, but it typifies the experiences of many high school students.

Are they unprepared or just shy? Do they lack ideas or merely need more time to formulate them? Are they uninterested in the content, or are they afraid their comments will be scoffed at?

We call them level 2, 3, and 4 discussion participants—those who will enter a discussion occasionally, seldom, or not at all. In most classes there are four or five students who will participate in and dominate most class discussions (level 1). A skillful teacher can sometimes get the level 2 students (those who occasionally participate) involved, and there is always a group of students who will join in rarely (level 3). But then there are those who participate only under extreme duress, and with limited offerings (level 4). Small group discussions may garner more participation, but those conversations tend to get lost and not shared with the whole class.

We have found that interesting and valuable contributions and discussions can occur with a change of time, space, anonymity, and voice. Using a teacher blog to post questions and gather student responses gives students that time, space, and anonymity so that far more of them add meaningful contributions. An added bonus is that the comments are available for the whole group to read, reflect on, and respond to.

The first class to participate in this process was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade Advanced Placement English class. Students participated in blog assignments and in regular class discussions. We then ranked students in the four categories of



participation based on observations during the regular discussions. There were six regulars (level 1), five occasionals (level 2), and four each in the rare (level 3) and duress (level 4) categories. We looked at results of the blog comments in light of these rankings.

To start the process, the teacher created a free blog that allowed for controlled comments. Students were randomly assigned a number so they would respond, for instance, as Student 1 or Student 14. Students were then given 12 possible questions on the blog about *Twelfth Night* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and had to respond to at least four. Each question was a separate blog entry. The teacher also posted the classroom Online Forum Standards as follows:

- Respect others.
- Constructively criticize ideas and not people.
- Use appropriate language.
- Do not identify yourself or others by name.
- Comment and expand on previous posts you find interesting.
- Ensure that your posts are relatively short (under 150 words).
- Keep in mind that the teacher must approve comments before they are posted for others to read.

We found that many of the students in levels 3 and 4 made interesting and interactive contributions. Here are some sample questions and (unedited) responses from some of the reluctant students. The first two are from students who rarely participate in class discussions (level 3). The first one illustrates the length of, and interactivity from, reluctant participants.

By Reynold Redekopp and Elizabeth Bourbonniere

**Question:** Shakespeare wrote to entertain a varied audience. What examples of humour in the play would have entertained an educated audience? What would have entertained the groundlings?

**Response:** I think that the character of Sir Toby was put into the play because he probably acted like many of the common folk would've acted because he drank a lot more than an educated person probably would've acted and because he talked and used speech and words that a people of the common might have used and not an educated man or woman might have used. He probably put the character of Count Orsino into the play because he was of a noble class and used words and humour that would've been appealing and possibly even remindful of how other nobles watching the play might have acted towards one of their subjects during their own lives. And like student 21 hinted on, homosexuality might have been used as humour to entertain both classes as they watched the play. The homosexuality being Viola disguised as a man (Cesario) and Count Orsino being the pursuer. This play has both comedy for common people and humour for people of a noble class which makes this a very versatile play and one that is appealing to everyone.

**Question:** Twelfth Night contains many examples of dramatic irony, where the audience knows more than some of the characters do. Identify examples of dramatic irony in the play and discuss how they contribute to the audience's enjoyment of the play.

**Response:** I agree with student number 6. The audience knew the whole time that Cesario (Viola) was indeed a girl, but the ones in the play of course did not. I think this made it all the more enjoyable for the audience to know something the one's doing the play didn't even know. I think it gives the audience something to look forward to and something to enjoy throughout the whole play.

These are some examples from students who would participate in class discussions only under duress (level 4). Again they illustrate that these students do have something to contribute to the discussion, but regular discussions are unlikely to include their voice. Below is a response to the same questions above.

**Response:** I agree with all of the above examples, especially since it was quite funny to see Malvolio cross gartered and in yellow. Another example of dramatic irony was found in the clown, who was probably the smartest character in the book. He could act the part of a fool expertly, but seemed to

always be more informed than the other characters, such as when he proved that Olivia was mistaken and a fool through some quick thinking when she was displeased with him. This the audience saw, and in general formed the opinion that the clown was indeed the smartest person in the play, even though he was perceived by many characters to be nothing more than a raving fool.

In this next example, we see a student who responds only under duress (level 4) in class discussions post a comment that refers to another student who responds only rarely (level 3) in class discussions. The student accepts most of the previous post but feels free to disagree at one point.

**Question:** How does this novel (To Kill a Mockingbird) represent a search for identity?

**Response:** I think that Scouts aunt should leave her alone regarding being more like a lady, its scout's decision who she wants to be so no body has the right to take that away from her. I think she will grow more ladylike as she gets older naturally, so she shouldn't be pressured into maturing faster than she is ready for. That pretty much defeats the purpose of a childhood. So, I agree mostly with student 7/6, except for the fact that i think Scout still has alot to discover about her inner self, and that it will take more than just recent events to figure out why so many Maycombers are so prejudiced against African Americans. She needs to find out how wrong it is, and i don't think the trial was enough for her to see how harsh/unfairly black people were treated everyday in the Jim Crow period.

We found that the reluctant participants could and would make valuable contributions to the process. We also see this trend in a second group now involved in the process. This proves to be very important, as we have not seen an increase in regular classroom participation, and this is the only voice we are hearing from these students.

For teachers seeking to encourage student involvement, discussion, and collaboration, blending blogs and online discussions with traditional classroom activities during a unit or semester may help to achieve a higher rate of student involvement and collaboration.

—Reynold Redekopp has taught junior and senior high school for more than 25 years and is currently teaching technology courses on the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba.

—Elizabeth Bourbonniere teaches senior high school English language arts at River East Collegiate in Winnipeg, Manitoba.