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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Diffusing Discussion Responsibility
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Teaching Toolbox: Diffusing Discussion Responsibility **by Emily O. Gravett**

In [Discussion in the College Classroom \(2015\)](#), author Jay R. Howard identifies a primary challenge facing in-class discussion: “the norm of the consolidation of responsibility.” What this phrase means is that “in the typical college or university classroom, a small number of students (five to eight) will account for 75 to 95 percent of all student verbal contributions to discussion regardless of class size” (p. 48).

Based on his own research, and that of others’, Howard reviews the factors that do, and do not, impact whether a student will take responsibility for initiating and keeping discussion going:

- Numerous studies find no significant differences in participation by student gender. This is contrast to the common belief that male students talk more in class than female students.
- Nontraditional aged students (25 years or older), in mixed-age classes, tend to speak up more frequently.
- Although few studies have observed and measured participation by student race, Howard reports those that do exist find no statistically significant differences in participation. Similarly, few empirical studies exist on the impact of country and culture of origin on discussion. What we do know from more anecdotal accounts, however, is that it is often cultural norms or an unfamiliarity with academic discussion as a learning pedagogy, versus a deficit in interest, ideas, preparation, or intelligence, that inhibit minority or non-native speakers. For example, international students from China and Japan generally tend to be more reluctant to speak up in class than their American counterparts because doing so may seem like a sign of disrespect toward the expert instructor.
- Interestingly, the gender of the *instructor* does impact participation, with students much more likely to participate in discussion with a female instructor running the class. It is unclear why.

So how can we spread out the responsibility for discussion and minimize the impact of “dominant” talkers to ensure that all student voices are included? Howard offers several suggestions, which appear lightly adapted below (pp. 68-77):

- Target who can respond:
 - Example: “Those sitting in the front of the room have had a lot to say. What about those of you sitting in the back half of the room?”

- Encourage other students (not just you) to respond to their peers:
 - Example: “Jie is asking a really good question here... Who has an answer for him?”
- Encourage quieter students through writing exercises:
 - Example: Ask students to write [a one-minute paper](#) and then share what they've written
- Offer alternative opportunities for non-native speakers to practice and participate:
 - Example: Create an online Canvas discussion for sharing ideas and questions
- Make a large class feel smaller:
 - Example: Arrange furniture into circle/horseshoe or take advantage of small-group work

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