Why Cold-Calling on Students Works

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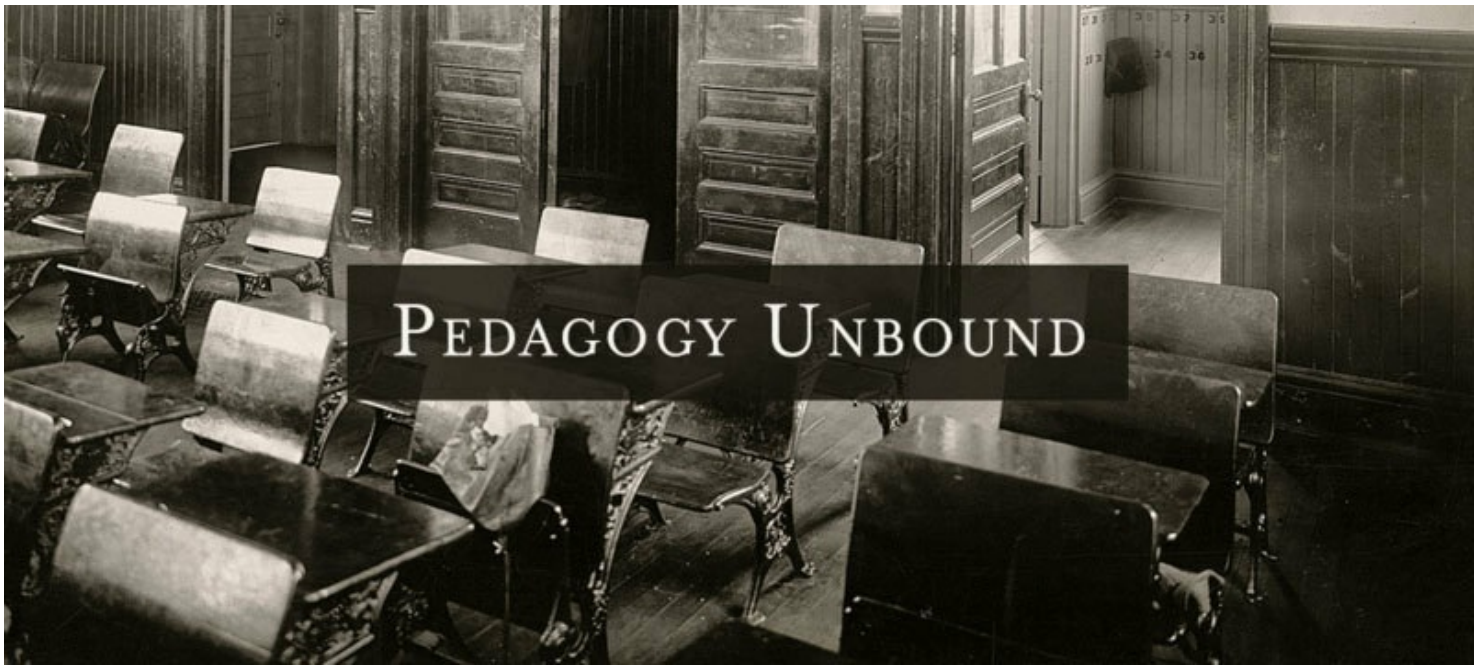

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In an ideal world, we wouldn't need to call on students to get them to participate. They would be fully invested in our courses, and would come to class eager to play an active role in the day's activities. They would understand that more participation equals more learning. We wouldn't be sergeants at the front of the room, putting our conscripts through their paces. Rather, we'd be facilitators — helping our students when we can, asking guiding questions, suggesting new paths of inquiry.

But of course we don't live in an ideal world. Instructors everywhere struggle with quiet classrooms, with discussions that die before they get started. Our questions hang in the air for what feels like minutes, and students seem to be trying to find out how little they'll have to do before the end of class arrives. While there are things we can do to create better class discussions, it's hard to get away from the prospect of cold-calling.

Calling on students is hard for me. It just doesn't fit with the kind of teacher I want to be. I don't want to be the authority figure in front of whom students cower. I get no pleasure from putting students on the spot, from scaring them into knowing the material. I don't teach law, and I have no need to grill students to see how they hold up under pressure. My feeling is that if I have to force my students to participate in discussions, I must be doing something wrong.

But the research I've read on the subject suggests I should be fighting my instincts.

In a 2012 study that included 16 sections of an undergraduate accounting course, Elise Dallimore and her

colleagues at Northeastern University measured the effect of instructor cold-calling on students' voluntary participation. Their results have led me to believe that I need to change my thinking on this front. Put simply, as the frequency of cold-calling increased, so, too, did the frequency of students' voluntary contributions to discussions. What's more: In those classrooms in which instructors regularly called on students, voluntary participation increased as the semester went on.

The study's results suggest that participating in a class discussion in college is a skill — and like all skills, it requires practice. Calling on students gets them to talk, and gives them practice at speaking up. That practice then leads to further, voluntary participation, without the need to be called on. The "practice" hypothesis is borne out by the study, which found that the more practice students got in class participation, the more they spoke up of their own accord.

In the words of the study's authors: "Cold-calling encourages students to prepare more and to participate more frequently; the more they prepare, and the more frequently they participate, the more comfortable they become when participating."

I think the emphasis on student comfort in that explanation can help me shift my model of what cold-calling is, and can be. I don't want a classroom in which students aren't comfortable participating; I'm trying to achieve the opposite. So instead of seeing cold-calling as an antagonistic demand for students to prove they are up to snuff, let's think of it as a warm invitation to contribute to a discussion.

I need to remember: The thing that often keeps me from calling on students — my concern that they might be uncomfortable speaking up in class — is actually a good reason to call on them. If we don't encourage students to come out of their shells for fear of putting them on the spot, we may be doing them a disservice.

So I guess here's one more resolution for the new semester: Call on students in class discussions — but with a twist. You're not trying to put them on the spot. You're curious about their views and their understanding of the issues being discussed. What they think is important — both to their own learning and to that of their peers. An earlier study (also led by Dallimore) suggests that one student's participation has a positive effect on another's learning — student participation is a tide that lifts all boats. So there's little point in frightening students into taking part in class discussions. We need to invite them in.

Now I just need to work on learning all of their names before Thanksgiving break.

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