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Promoting Equity and Engagement with Randomness

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Promoting Equity and Engagement with Randomness

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Teaching Practice & Need it Addresses

- I cover homework assignments and case discussions in class with a random calling technique, using a random number generator.
- This practice encourages preparation and participation, and it prepares students for real world scenarios where an employer or client asks them to report on their work without warning.
- When I call on students, I am not just looking for the “right answer” but also their explanation for why that answer is right and why other answers are not correct. I often follow up with “what if?” questions.
- I keep the stakes low and help students who are uncomfortable with the process. This creates a safe setting for students to practice important communication and critical thinking skills.
- **Importantly, the random call approach reduces instructors’ unconscious biases and creates a more equitable environment where all students have an equal chance to participate.**



How Others Can Adopt This Practice

- Explain the purpose up front and work to reduce student anxiety.
- Keep the stakes low. I make this part of their participation grade, which is only 5% of their total grade. I mark “full credit” if they demonstrate thought and effort, half credit otherwise. Only students who are not present get zero credit, unless excused from class.
- Respond enthusiastically when they answer correctly and find teaching opportunities in incorrect answers. To the latter I often say some variation of, “I’m glad you provided that answer, since it gives me an opportunity to clarify this concept.”
- Apply this practice consistently so students become used to it.
- Use a random-number-with-replacement approach so that students remain engaged even after being called upon.

Resources & Where to Find Them

RANDOM.ORG

[What to Know When Using Random Calling | Trends and Issues in Higher Ed \(washington.edu\)](https://www.washington.edu/trends/what-to-know-when-using-random-call/)
[<https://www.washington.edu/trends/what-to-know-when-using-random-call/>]

References

- Waugh, A., and T. C. Andrews. 2020. Diving into the details: Constructing a framework of random call components. *CBE-Life Sciences Education* 19 (2): 1-17.

Evidence it Benefits Students

- Students tend to be well-prepared for class and we have productive in-class discussions around homework problems and cases.
 - Examples of comments from student evaluations:
 - “The use of random selection with homework helped me put more effort into understanding the subjects.”
 - “At first, I didn’t like the randomly calling on students thing, but it helped me become more proactive.”
 - “The fact that the students are picked randomly each class to present homework for a participation grade makes the incentive to do homework higher.”
- Of course, there are students who don’t like the random call. Over the last 7 years, I’ve had about 5 – 6 students comment in my evaluations that they don’t like the random call (out of over 800 students). However, many students tell me they understand the point of the random call approach and appreciate it.*
- *Regarding the approach of encouraging students to explain why they did not pick other answers: Students improve performance when they explain why other answers are wrong. This practice reduces confirmation bias by engaging in a disconfirming approach (as opposed to simply confirming why one answer is correct). This helps students understand concepts more deeply and improves exam performance.*

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