

From: [Center for Faculty Innovation](#)
To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: How to Help Students Speak Up by Decentralizing Your Authority
Date: Thursday, April 11, 2019 9:01:00 AM

How to Help Students Speak up by Decentralizing Your Authority

By Peter J. Eubanks

Many college instructors hope for invigorating class discussions that actively involve all of their students and create an engaging learning experience for all. This is particularly true for classes that are small enough for such discussions and where individual class participation counts as a portion of the students' final course grade. Yet the reality is that not every class is filled with dynamic conversations and not every student feels ready to participate at every moment. What follows is a short description of one particular useful pedagogical technique—decentralizing your authority—that college instructors have found helpful in fostering interesting and inclusive classroom discussions.

You may have noticed that students will often address their comments to the teacher standing before them in the front of the classroom rather than to their fellow classmates. Instructors can encourage their students to address each other in their remarks and resist the temptation to respond to every comment themselves, instead allowing students the space and agency to respond to one another. With the classroom authority decentralized, instructors may ask students to articulate their reactions to particular points raised by their classmates instead of assuming the role of sole respondent. While it may be particularly tempting to respond when students' comments seem off-topic, by stepping back and allowing students to interact with each other as they learn and grapple with course material, instructors can actually encourage students to become more engaged both with each other and with the subject at hand. As students become more engaged with one another, they practice deep listening and come to realize that learning in the classroom, to a significant extent, involves not only paying attention to the instructor but, importantly, also interacting meaningfully with their classmates' comments and observations (for more on this dynamic, see this previous [Toolbox](#)).

By decentralizing your authority as an instructor, you also avoid the much-maligned "[Atlas complex](#)," wherein the burden of creating an engaging classroom dynamic rests primarily and unnecessarily upon the shoulders of the instructor at the front of the room. While the Atlas model may be tempting to those of us who fear losing control of our classroom, allowing for some of this authority to fall to the students themselves helps them to feel more invested in their learning and can alleviate unnecessary exhaustion on the part of the instructor. Avoiding the Atlas complex also sends a clear signal that students share responsibility for the depth and quality of their own learning. Instructors thus actively collaborate with their students and work together in creating a successful classroom dynamic that is conducive to student learning and engagement.

The pedagogical advantages of having students speak up in class cannot be overstated. Besides increasing student learning and engagement with course material and each other, it also creates a classroom atmosphere that is exciting, at times even thrilling, to be a part of, adding color and flavor to what we do as faculty members.

About the author: Peter J. Eubanks is Associate Professor of French and a teaching area faculty associate in the Center for Faculty Innovation. He can be reached at eubankpj@jmu.edu.