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An Experiment in Participation

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By Leigh Goodmark, University of Baltimore School of Law

Several months ago, I ran into a student in my Family Law class at a law school event. "Professor Goodmark," she said, "I love your class. I just wish I felt more comfortable speaking up." We discussed her reticence about participating, which she attributed to general discomfort with public speaking. The more we talked, though, the more it seemed that the real issue was with the quick processing required to answer the hypotheticals and policy questions I frequently threw out in class. By the time she had thought through what she wanted to say and felt comfortable with what her answer would be, I had already moved on to another topic.

Together, we brainstormed ways to help her feel more comfortable speaking in class, and finally came upon a proposed solution. What if, prior to each class, I sent her a question that I knew I would be asking in class the next day? The question would call for opinion, rather than a demonstrably "right" answer, so that there would be no pressure around being "wrong." And giving her the question ahead of time would provide her with an opportunity well before class began to think through her answer, so that she would feel comfortable raising her hand at the moment the question was asked. I told her that I would look to her first to answer the question I sent her. If she raised her hand, I would call on her; if not, I would move on, without calling attention to her in any way. She agreed that this might help, and our experiment began.

During the next class meeting, as arranged, I asked the question that I had provided the student with the previous evening—"Should fault be considered in the distribution of marital property?" To my delight, her hand immediately went up, and this student who previously had never volunteered an answer in class gave her perspective on the issue at hand—a perspective, incidentally, that was different than the views expressed by many of her classmates. After class, I e-mailed her to see how she had felt about our experiment. Her reply was very positive, ending with "Expect to hear a lot more from me." I asked her whether she thought it would be beneficial to provide the same opportunity to other students who were hesitant, for whatever reason, about participating in class. Again, the student was extremely enthusiastic, particularly because she believed that it might encourage the expression of a diversity of views in class discussions and allow the class to move away from hearing from the same individuals with no reservations about participating in any of their classes.

> "[G]iving her the question ahead of time would provide her with an opportunity well before class began to think through her answer, so that she would feel comfortable raising her hand at the moment the question was asked."

I sent an e-mail to the entire class that read, "If you are hesitant about speaking in class and would like to work on feeling more comfortable doing so, please e-mail me privately — I have an experiment that we could try." A few students, believing that the e-mail had targeted them specifically, replied with confusion or sarcasm. But about a half dozen students (in a class of 51) affirmed that they were hesitant about participating in class and would very much appreciate trying something new. As students expressed interest, I sent them the following e-mail:

During each class, I tend to ask a couple of opinion questions. Because those questions ask for your opinion, there aren't "right" and "wrong" answers—just what you think, and why. If you choose to participate in our experiment, I will send you one or more opinion questions for the next class the night before. Having the question(s) ahead of time will allow you to think about what you think and why you think it and to formulate your answer. Then, when I ask the question during class, I will look to those of you participating in this experiment first for an answer, before I call on anyone else. If you raise your hands, I'll call on you; if not, not a problem. But I'm hoping this will lessen the pressure around participation somewhat and give you the ability to practice participating in class a little more. Let me know what you think, and if you'd like to try it out."

The night before each class session, I came up with a thought question for my group. The questions included, "Should a court be able to consider race in an adoption proceeding?" and "Should a court be able to order a parent to find more lucrative work?" I sent the question out to the group under a blind

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cc, so that their identities would not be disclosed. Frequently, one of my participating students kicked off the discussion of the question. Most, but not all, of them answered at least one question over the course of the rest of the semester, and some of them began to volunteer to answer questions not previously provided to them.

At the end of the semester, I asked the participating students what they thought of the experiment, and how they might improve the process. All who responded agreed that for them, the experiment had been a success—even those who had not volunteered answers. One student wrote that although he remained silent, the experiment had given him the opportunity to think more deeply about the issues and feel better prepared for class. Others suggested changes that I plan to implement the next time I teach the class: asking the question toward the beginning of class, which might encourage students to participate more frequently throughout class that day, and waiting longer for an answer after the question is asked, to allow participating students to process for a moment before volunteering.

The student who originally kicked off the experiment later enrolled in our Family Law Clinic, which required her to perform regularly before other students—and she did a wonderful job. For me, that's proof enough that our experiment was a success.

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