# Building active student participation in higher education

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## Abstract

Purpose. The aim of this work is to understand the reasons behind students' difficulties in classroom interactions.

Methodology. After a literature review on public speaking and mindfulness, a survey was carried out during two management courses at Verona University. A single, open question was posed to the students: "Why is it that students do not participate actively in lessons?" Each student could write anything they deemed relevant, without limitations.

Findings. There are some common underlying causes of difficulty related to communication and to students' exposing themselves to public scrutiny. These are directly related to psychological problems that give rise to negative states such as agitation and anxiety. The most important of these emotional impediments are identified as fear of failure and fear of being judged by others.

Practical implications. difficulties for students during lessons become barriers to active participation in young people's future lives, with collateral damage to themselves and the community. To combat this phenomenon it is necessary to learn to manage these emotions and not suffer from them. An important technique to achieve this is 'mindfulness'. In this way, universities could train students in public speaking techniques and in how to act to spread self-awareness and mindful awareness of reality.

Originality/value. The paper also suggests that meditation techniques should be included in educational institutions and universities for their positive effects on students' personality and character.

**Keywords**
active students participation; growing anxiety; mindfulness; university

## 1. Purpose: The aims of the study

‘You never get a second chance to make a first impression’: Oscar Wilde’s witty but rather disconcerting aphorism will or should run more or less consciously through the mind of the lecturer at the start of the academic year. Like an actor meeting his public for the first time, he must gain their attention and emotional participation in what is essentially a shared project. This does not mean that the lecturer should be intent on making a good impression for the sake of his own ego.

There is an awareness that interactions in the lecture theatre hinge on the first session, or even its first few minutes. It is there in the gaze; the glance; the voice that demands dialogue; the ability to produce expectation and inspire trust; and the desire for involvement and for the whole group to enter into dialogue.

Consideration of the first impression is guided by a desire to lay the foundations for a relationship that brings together exchange of knowledge in every way possible so as to ‘co-produce’ the content of the lessons and foster the development and spread of further knowledge. It is one thing for a lecturer to convey knowledge and quite another to build and exchange knowledge through the involvement of students who make full use of the Internet and all available mobile communications technologies.

Our observations of trends in personal relationships in the lecture theatre over recent years have led us to reflect on this issue and have suggested the study described here. Of particular interest are those interrelationships that are not mediated by technology; relationships that are founded on listening, looks, silences and the living word as experienced by and between people capable of constructing something together. If this does not amount to the plot of the lesson itself, it is certainly relevant to the manner of its unfolding, where the exchange of knowledge and of joint experience enrich the content and add value to the event.

What exactly have we seen happening in the last five years in the lecture theatre that concerns us? We have observed a decrease in students’ willingness or ability to actively participate in the lesson by offering their own comments and ideas, both to their teacher and to the other students. This situation began gradually but has been gathering pace over the past two years.

It should be pointed out that we are talking about freshers, for whom lecture theatres are crowded with around 200 students; that is, 400 ears and eyes that ‘hear’ and ‘scrutinise’. This is a large number for a student to face when they wish to speak out. It is also something of a challenge for the teacher, who must conjure up all of his dramatic skills to capture the attention of the audience, or there will be little spread of knowledge or effective communication. Galileo said that ‘good teaching is a quarter preparation and three quarters theatre’. Marshall McLulan also liked to say that ‘those who separate entertainment from education maybe do not know that education has to be fun and fun has to be educational’.

What, then, are the reasons behind this trend? The possibilities include at least the following:

1) a reduction in our ability as teachers to motivate students to participate
2) the huge spread in mobile internet-based technology
3) insecurities due to the loss of their old school ‘class’ as a reassuring group of well-known colleagues
4) the accentuation in schools of the need for obedience rather than encouraging critical faculties and creative personal contributions
5) the construction of a life project becoming a more distant aim due to growing anxiety about an ever more fuzzily delineated future.

It may that we can dismiss number 1) because a survey of student appraisals found that the teacher’s ability to arouse their interest in the subject was considered satisfactory; thus we

may be justified in moving on to briefly look at the remaining reasons, with the suspicion that at the core of the problem is the spread of mobile technologies.

Mobile devices allow young people to create a virtual world, a sort of Pinocchio's 'Toyland' in which, on the one hand, barriers between people are broken down so that there can be direct contact with anyone in the university network, irrespective of their roles, but that on the other hand inhibit the physical gaze and stifle the courage to enter into real-life dialogue. Neither teacher nor student look each other in the eye. Mobile technology also fails to contribute much in terms of 'written dialogue' outside friends and groups, '*verba volant e scripta manent*', because putting down the written word makes the writer uneasy and embarrassed by leaving words there as a 'window to the self', making them vulnerable; once written down, words stay there forever.

Despite the many advantages offered by these technologies, we should not underestimate negative effects of the type described above on the behaviour of young people. Those particularly prone to these problems have interacted with the technology from the earliest years of their lives. It leads us to wonder whether there might be a need to teach primary school children about mobile technology in a way that it does not put up a screen between them and reality, and leave us with an army of automatons guided by just a few external forces, in the way we have so often seen imagined in science fiction.

As for the question of the growing insecurity of students, lecture theatres provide evidence of an increase in the use of the word 'class' in an effort to provide a kind of protective shield for the group. A sense of insecurity is also manifest in the growing tendency for students to occupy the same places in the room, as if they had been individually numbered and allocated.

To put one's own ideas forward means having to adopt an attitude of listening, which is a precondition for dialogue. Passive listening, followed by meaningless and absolute silence, as the preacher Dinouart said, is induced by an education system stifled by order and discipline. This curbs the behavioural ferment of young people at school and clips their wings, only allowing creative expression by the courageous minority who by their own nature have no fear of sharing their ideas.

Thus, in the eyes and in the silences in the classroom there is a tangible sense of fear for a future, which, in a society that has for years been plagued by crises in economics and in values, is not experienced as an exciting new world but as a source of unease that fuels flight into an extended present from which there is no desire to escape. The present in question seems to be dominated by technologies that respond in real time to various questions, rewarding speed and superficiality at the expense of reflection and deeper analysis.

In the light of our experience and our thoughts about this, we decided to ask students a direct question about these difficulties. We asked them simply, "Why is it that students do not participate actively in lessons?" The goal we set ourselves was to understand the reasons behind the behaviour and identify and consider what obstacles stand in the way of students' actively engaging and 'coming out of their shells' in the classroom.

After a literature review on public speaking and mindfulness, the following pages present the results of our survey. We then outline some proposals to address this current drift towards the diminution in young people's critical and intellectual contributions. We absolutely must not lower our guard as these are the men and women of tomorrow.

## 2. Literature Review

A large numbers of researchers has studied public speaking from different viewpoints over the last three decades. Studies have tended to focus on the fear of public speaking, public speaking skills and the use of visual aids in business presentations. This paper addresses the

first of these areas, which is the most widely studied of all; we then turn to the importance of mindfulness training as a tool for efficacy in public speaking.

Fear of public speaking is one of the top ten fears among Americans (Wallechinsky et al., 1997; Kessler et al., 1998; Tancer, 2008). All speakers are afraid and many Americans fear the thought of public speaking more than that of dying (Bottles, 2010). Core research findings are presented mainly in the psychology literature (Klinger et al., 2005; Slater et al., 2006; Botella et al., 2010) as well as in that of management (Miller & Stone, 2009).

Writers in psychology journals consider fear of public speaking as part of a social phobia (Hofmann et al., 1997); that is, a strong and pervasive fear of being embarrassed in public. They refer to the subject in particular using the term *glossophobia* as the fear of public speaking. Being judged, rejected or humiliated are the three major underlying aspects of glossophobia and they have one thing in common: they all feed off the speaker's lack of self-confidence (Kitchen, 2011; Ekanem, 2015).

In the management area, communication studies have mainly explored anxiety state patterns (Behnke & Sawyer, 2001) and have highlighted that worries about public speaking are greatest immediately before the speech time (Durlik et al., 2014) or during the first moments of the talk itself.

Other studies explore effective public speaking, its antecedents and its results as a source of competitive advantage in the corporate world (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015). Numerous books and articles has also been written by managers recounting their personal experiences of public speaking, and in particular their fears. The most frequently expressed worries for the manager include being judged, being boring, not meeting time limits, not speaking fluently, being too brief, and not having anything important or original to say.

The literature suggests that exercise is a useful means for controlling nervousness and reducing apprehension related to public speaking (Schullery & Gibson, 2001). Mindfulness is another way to govern these concerns.

The literature on the two great currents giving rise to the origin of mindfulness considered in this paper is vast. A preliminary but nevertheless accurate approach is provided by a number of authors who have sought to retain the essence of mindfulness while adapting its principles and traditional content to the modern Western mind, both with respect to Japanese Zen (Deshimaru, 1981; 1983; Suzuki, 1970; 1989; Watts, 1994) and the Vipassana meditation of Theravada Buddhism (Pensa, 1994; 2002). An approach that is decidedly more scientifically oriented has been taken by numerous authors who focus on the neurophysiological and clinical aspects of meditation in relation to the management of stress and its possible effects on physical and mental wellbeing (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Austin, 1998; Bottaccioli, 2003; Segal et al., 2006; Mingyur, 2007; Siegel, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 2015).

Other authors note the quality of focusing on the present, the ability to concentrate on an action at hand without being distracted or caught in the grip of tension about the outcome or deflected by considerations extraneous to the process. Although not dealing solely with this subject, this literature helps to provide a better understanding of the concept and the process (Herrigel, 1948 e 1975; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Baccarani, 2008; Mascherpa & Lamberti, 2011).

With respect to the specific question of the management of emotions, essential reading is offered by Daniel Goleman, who has written extensively on both the positive and negative effects of emotions (Goleman, 2000; 2009; Goleman & Gyatso, 2009), and their relationship with these meditation techniques (Goleman, 2003).

## 3. Method

The survey was carried out in the management course of the bachelor degrees in Business Administration and in Foreign Languages and Cultures for Tourism and International Commerce, at Verona University. The students taking part in the study were in their first year of study and their average age was 20 years.

The single, open question posed was 'Why is it that students do not participate actively in lessons?' Each student could write anything they deemed relevant, without limitations. The structure of the survey is described in Table 1.

**Table 1. The numbers**

| ***Bachelor Degree*** | ***Number of respondents*** | ***Number of arguments*** |
|---|---|---|
| Business Administration | 132 | 324 |
| Foreign Languages and Cultures for Tourism and International Commerce | 137 | 253 |

Our Sources

Despite the similar numbers of students responding from each course there was a large difference in the number of subjects raised by the students. The business administration students considered more than one factor in each of their replies.

Because of the large number of arguments collected, identical issues were first grouped together to avoid duplication. Second, using association by analogy between arguments, we considered the main reasons for why, in their own opinion, students fail to actively participate in lessons.

## 4. Findings

Tables 2 and 3 shed light on why there is a 'silent and worried atmosphere' in lecture theatres. It is evident that the five most commonly cited factors discouraging interaction in the class with the teacher and with fellow students are shared between the two groups of students. In the case of the business administration students, these top five factors are clearly separated from the others in terms of the frequency of mention (see Table 2).

There was a different pattern for the students of foreign languages, who at the time of the survey were attending a management course, which meant that they had to deal with quite different subjects from those they were used to studying. Normally the teaching method with which these students were confronted involved being lectured by a teacher who sat or stood opposite them at the front of the class. For this group of students, there a sixth important variable was mentioned in their responses, connected with the difficulty of interacting in what was largely a new subject for them (see Table 3).

Examining the reasons given by students it is evident that there were numerous difficulties directly related to their own character that induced them to avoid dialogue. These included psychological problems that give rise to negative states such as agitation, anxiety, shame, embarrassment and fear at the thought of tackling social and interpersonal relations directly. The most important of these emotional impediments are identified as the fear of failure and fear of being judged by others, with shyness as a particular trait hindering students from entering into interpersonal relationships.

**Table 2. Business Administration Students' items**

| Items | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Questions of character, agitation, anxiety, insecurity, self-consciousness, embarrassment about speaking in public | 90 | *27.78%* |
| Fear of making a mistake | 73 | *22.53%* |
| Fear of being judged by others | 65 | *20.06%* |
| Shyness | 38 | *11.73%* |
| Too many students and unknown people | 37 | *11.42%* |
| Little experience of speaking in public | 3 | *0.93%* |
| It was easier at school | 3 | *0.93%* |
| Probably nobody wants to start answering, and this causes a chain reaction/Nobody wants to break the ice | 2 | *0.62%* |
| Not paying attention | 2 | *0.62%* |
| Miscellaneous | 11 | *3.40%* |
| *Total* | *324* | *100%* |

Our Sources

**Table 3. Foreign Languages and Culture for Tourism and International Commerce Students' items**

| Items | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Questions of character, agitation, anxiety, insecurity, self-consciousness, embarrassment on speaking in public | 59 | 23.32% |
| Fear of making a mistake | 52 | 20.55% |
| Fear of being judged by others | 50 | 19.76% |
| Shyness | 27 | 10.67% |
| Too many students and unknown people | 18 | 7.11% |
| Difficulties in understanding new subjects that have never been previously studied; it is hard to know what to say when you know little about the work in hand | 17 | 6.72% |
| The lessons or questions are not interesting enough | 7 | 2.77% |
| I am a foreigner and have difficulty in expressing myself well | 5 | 1.98% |
| Since primary school you are been praised for being a quiet one in the class, the one who never talks. It is difficult to adapt to university methods where discussion is encouraged | 4 | 1.58% |
| Can't be bothered to talk, tiredness from previous lessons | 2 | 0.79% |
| Miscellaneous | 12 | 4.74% |
| *Total* | 253 | 100% |

Our Source

In addition to emotional factors, the students drew attention to discomfort in relation to attending classes characterised by the presence of so many unknown people, which was in strong contrast with the more reassuring environment experienced in their last year of high

school. Both groups of students referred to this problem, saying that ‘it was easier in high school’ and there were ‘difficulties in adapting to university methods where there is more emphasis on discussion’.

Other issues that feature in both groups of responses are simply not being bothered, fatigue from attending other courses, loss of concentration and a resulting lack of interest in an interactive teaching style.

As mentioned above, the three-year foreign language degree students undertaking the management course had particular difficulties related to new topics and the need to have their interest stimulated; whereas in their experiences of other lessons the teaching was directed towards them from the front of the class.

However, the business administration students also point out a less specific issue: the lack of training in public speaking and lack of practice in doing so. Both of these contributed to increasing difficulties in managing negative emotions arising in the face of opportunities to participate in front of a large group of people.

## 5. Discussion

An examination of the results suggests there are some common underlying causes of difficulty related to communication and to students exposing themselves to public scrutiny.

The first factor to consider is not specific, but is no less important for that: the general levels of stress endured by those taking part in the survey. They referred to ‘anxiety’, ‘agitation’ and ‘insecurity’, with apprehension being experienced in the face of any event that deviates, even if only slightly, from normal routine.

According to the classical theory introduced by physician and researcher Hans Selye from the 1930s, and still regarded as the main point of reference in this area, stress is an organism’s a-specific response to new situations to which is must adapt through the making of structural, functional or behavioural changes. Any change in the environment is thus a potential source of stress, to the extent that it requires the organism to put mechanisms in place so it is able to deal with the new situation without suffering harm. However, it may be that the stressful stimulus is too much for the organism to be able to react to, that it lasts too long, or that it is adding to other stimuli that the body is already in the process of trying to adapt to.

In this regard, almost every area of contemporary life presents a mental and sensory overstimulation that is ever more intense, requiring us to continuously process data, with decisions to be taken, and emotional and physical adjustments to be made at every turn. The structure of the cities in which we live; the rhythms imposed by hyperactive social models; the pressures of a consumer society; the complexity of the equipment with which we have to interact in our daily lives; and the continuous adaptation of skills and knowledge they demand can all result in moments of anxiety and stress that are additive, and converge and merge in the same person.

In a typical adaptation reaction, the first stage is ‘alarm’, the second is ‘attempted adaptation’ and the third is ‘the exhaustion of resources’, which occurs in those where the psychophysical machine gives up, succumbs and becomes ill, or reacts in an abnormal or dysfunctional way. It is this ‘bad stress’ that is evoked every time we complain of being overloaded with commitments, or about the ‘stressful’ nature of the task or circumstance with which we have to deal.

Crucial to the adaptation reaction is the way a stimulus is perceived and interpreted as a potential stressor, because the type and level of response will be directly linked to the intensity of the stimulus. For example, a task that is overestimated in relation to resources deemed to be available will produce a stress level that is not related to the stressor itself so

much as the interpretation of its extent and nature. Stressors are therefore all of those things that weigh down the person, both in terms of actual value and the presumed level of difficulty. Any test facing the person will heighten the level of alarm and the consequent adaptive response.

All this is referred to as 'anticipatory anxiety' or 'performance anxiety', where expectation of a potentially negative event is sufficient to produce physical, emotional and mental effects that inhibit or prejudice performance itself. In the particular instance of speaking in a public forum, the fear of what might happen in the event of any difficulty in expressing their thoughts; not appearing sufficiently 'cool'; or experiencing negative reactions from listeners are enough to make the individual feel anxious to an extent. The build-up of nervous tension may be accompanied by a preliminary, even minor, effect such as increased heart rate, the hint of a blush, the memory of a previous negative experience (of the speaker or of others) or a slight feeling of being muddled. Each of these may be immediately interpreted as a sign of the validity of the fears, inevitably contributing to a deterioration of the situation and a further increase in the level of anxiety.

What makes this overall picture worse is an excessive focus on the speaker's public image (experienced by survey participants as 'insecurity', 'shame', 'embarrassment', 'fear of failure', 'shyness', 'fear the judgments of others' and the presence of 'too many students and unknown persons'). This may result from living in a 'society of appearances', especially that of young people intensely engaged in building their social identity. There is a shift in focus that leads to taking energy and attention away from concentration on the performance, while also leading to a self-judgment rather than a judgment of the performance itself. The judgment is made in the light of their worst fears rather than objectively.

The speaker is like the actor on stage who is more interested in projecting their own character and safeguarding their own identity rather than reciting their part or projecting the character. However, it is through real and total commitment to the role—in the case of the actor—or to what the speaker has to say—in the case of the speaker—that there is escape from the trap of self-referentiality and an intense and effective performance.

We should add that there is a widespread general difficulty, certainly not confined to youth, in dealing with emotional states, which are in most cases suffered rather than 'managed'.

Although the scientific literature has shed much light on neurophysiological dynamics, showing how the emotional response is far more immediate and intense than that of the rational mind, it nevertheless remains part of every person's experiential baggage. Attempts to influence emotions by the power of the mind tend to be ineffectual, as it is useless to tell someone to 'try to stay calm' or 'strive to reason' when they are in the grip of emotional disturbance.

## 6. Practical Implications and Recommendations

Feelings of insecurity lead to a sense that what the person wants to say is unimportant and the fear of making a mistake with a tendency towards inaction. The fear of being judged by others leads to a sense of enslavement and these provide real obstacles to active participation from students in the class. The problem is that these factors also become barriers to active participation in these young people's future lives, with collateral damage to themselves and to the community. It is for these reasons that we need to assess what kind of action can be taken to combat this phenomenon.

We could perhaps borrow from some eastern traditions, especially those of Japanese Zen and the Theravada of South-east Asia, that are now accepted and integrated in different areas

of Western scientific and lay culture. The ultimate aims of these traditions could be described as the acquisition of a 'clear view' that enables the individual to grasp reality 'as it is', in its original essence before the interpretation or interpolation of the mind. These techniques can be summarily described as the quality of attention or a state of consciousness, which is a way of achieving attentiveness to self and to reality.

This idea is now best known under the guise of 'mindfulness' (a term translated from the original '*sati*'), which in practical terms amounts to a series of techniques that are statically or dynamically performed as training in the focusing of attention on perceptual reality of the present moment; that is, focusing on the self and all that the senses can perceive in the here-and-now, registered and observed non-judgmentally, without classification, definition or logical/rational interpretation of the data flowing into consciousness.

This peculiar form of awareness influences the mind, which can be regarded as the 'control centre' that regulates the flows of energy and information in the human structure. The mind in turn, through the mediation of the software—the psyche—on the one hand and of the hardware—the brain—on the other determines the quantity and quality of the processes; in short our psychophysical state (what we are) and our behaviour profiles (what we do and how we do it).

By now a subject of growing interest to the international scientific community because of its clinical, psychological and behavioural implications,[1] awareness training through mindful meditation could contribute to the prevention of the problems discussed above as well as in countering their effects.

First, a general reduction in stress levels is achieved through primarily physiological mechanisms; in particular, through the modulation of chemical mediators implicated in stress reactions and an increase in the production of hormones and neurotransmitters that have positive effects on emotions and mood (Carlson et al., 2004; Turakitwanakan et al., 2013; Fan et al., 2014; Jung et al., 2010). A state of general mental and physical wellbeing is induced, helped by the peculiar ability of watchful meditation to stimulate certain areas of the cerebral cortex usually active in conjunction with positive moods such as joy, hope and optimism (Arita, 2012; Davidson et al., 2003; Brewer, et al., 2011).

Second, a strict focus on the present, which is a cornerstone of this approach, helps to determine and maintain complete focus on the details of the current action, diverting attention away from every pessimistic projection and anxiety-inducing expectation, depriving them of the 'mental space' within which to act.

A vicious anxiety cycle is fuelled by negative interpretations of even minimal psychological and physical signs, experienced as confirmation of the occurrence of the feared event. Skills in the suspension of judgment that meditation teaches and aims to develop allow the individual to grasp any physical or mental fact for what it is and for what it is manifesting, instead of interpreting it as a sign of impending disaster; thus reducing the anxiety-inducing force until it is removed, and breaking the self-perpetuating anxiety cycle.

Finally, self-distancing from the emotion, developed through objective observation of oneself and one's reactions, makes it possible to deal with states that may have been induced by well-founded and legitimate concerns, without become excessively involved in them. The emotions are somehow detected as if from the outside, rather than experienced from the inside. They are perceived as something that is, that exists within us but that does not overly concern us. It is a film we can choose to get excited about or not pay special attention to because we have got other things to do. We can leave the emotions running in the background

[1] In the Medline database of the National Library of Medicine alone, which brings together internationally recognised scientific journals, a search on the term 'mindfulness' produces a list of over 3300 articles, studies and reviews.

while we dedicate ourselves to the case at hand as we do with environmental noise, which, after a while we end up not listening to. It is still there but has, for us, disappeared.

Interesting confirmation of this particular effect of watchful meditation comes from our own research on a sample of students given mindfulness training. By measuring skin resistance (a real-time physiological index that shows the general state of stress and reactions to stressor agents of an emotional or mental nature), it was shown that the subjects gave signs of having acquired an ability to maintain a condition of relaxation, or at least to reduce the effects of tension and stress even when carrying out intense mental activity and even when associated with particular thoughts and worries.

In the light of this, we feel it is appropriate to propose to the university that they should run classes and seminars on public speaking techniques and to act to spread self-awareness and mindful awareness of the reality being experienced at that particular moment when the individual is on 'public show'. In this regard, the possible contribution of meditation could be raised with the offer of regular short and stage-structure courses to encourage continuous practice and a gradual assimilation of the method. In addition to the positive effects already mentioned, regular practice of meditation techniques can have significant consequences for mental abilities of particular relevance to study and learning, such as memory, selective attention and resistance to distraction (Brefczynski-Lewis et al., 2007; Zylowska et al., 2008; Baron Short et al., 2010; Hasenkamp & Barsalou, 2012).

It is probably because of their combined and synergistic effect on wellness and performance that meditation techniques have begun to find a place even in educational institutions and universities. For example, since 2005 there has been a 'Mindfulness of Students' Club at the University of Minnesota whose goal is to actively help students manage stress, reduce anxiety and increase concentration; the Cass Business School of London's City University launched the 'Meditation @ Cass' programme, which offers all interested parties 30-minute weekly practice sessions.

## 7. Limits and Further Research

We are aware that this paper is not free from limitations. However, these last do not affect the need for monitoring, albeit in a specific cultural environment, the difficulties that prevent students to actively interact with the teacher and among themselves during lessons.

The main limitation of this study is linked to the survey. In particular we have analysed only two groups of students of two different Bachelor degrees of the same University. Moreover we have not collected demographic details about the students involved in the survey.

For further research it would be interest to carry out comparative study in different cultural environments to evaluate the role of cultural conditioning in active students participation.

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