Conscious Teaching
Unlocking the Secrets of Great Teaching

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Random Calling During Class Discussions

You've seen it a million times. You're facilitating a class discussion. You ask your class a question and the same three volunteer hands fly up. By shifting from accepting volunteers to randomly selecting students for question-answering, though, you can immediately improve attention and participation. The increased probability of being chosen keeps students on their toes and ready to engage with the material at hand.

If you've ever felt resistant to using random calling, though, we get it. It's pretty likely a student will eventually answer with "I don't know," and then what do you do? We don't want to embarrass students, especially those who might just need extra time to respond, a bit of prompting, or special accommodations due to learning differences. But we do want to keep all students gently on the hook for staying engaged and participating. Can we do both? Yes - we can!

Below are **three random calling techniques** that effectively keep students engaged in the learning, without confrontation or humiliation. These three strategies ensure that learning remains accessible, even when students don't know or can't immediately give an answer.

Adapted from "Chapter 4: Class Discussions" in our soon-to-be released book on student engagement. Order your copy in 2026 at www.consciousteaching.com/books/

Answer - Echo:

When a student is called upon and struggles to offer an answer, then you offer them the choice to "answer or echo." If the student chooses "echo," they stand up and then a different student is chosen and asked to answer the question. The second student now has the same choice, to answer or to echo. If the second student chooses "echo," then that student also stands up. You now ask for a volunteer to answer the question. After the volunteer shares an answer, each student who opted to stand and be an "echo" must repeat or paraphrase what the volunteer said before they get to sit back down again.

This technique allows students the space to be unsure while also encouraging them to stay engaged in the learning. It also offers a safe way to practice active listening and speaking in front of the entire class.

...Find Three "Pro Tips" & Two "Variations" of this strategy on the next page...

Answer-Echo Pro Tips:

Sitting Works Too. Having the "echoes" stand up as they wait for someone else to answer increases their alertness and reminds the teacher who to go back to if there is more than one. However, if standing feels too exposing, simply jot their names down on your seating chart or a sticky note instead.

Echo Individually. When you have more than one "echo," you can have each of them echo back a given answer individually or chorally, although individually is typically more effective. Individual responses also allow for variations in interpretation by each student.

Incorrect Answers. Only have students echo correct answers! If your volunteer shares an incorrect answer, then offer the option to quickly work it out together - or the volunteer can also become an echo.

Answer-Echo Variations:

Variation #1 – EAR Protocol

When selecting students randomly using cards, sticks, or an electronic randomizer, select two instead of one. If one of them is a particularly shy, hesitant, or struggling learner, ask the other student to answer first. Then ask the second student to use the EAR Protocol (Echo, Add, or Refute):

- Echo = Repeat what Person 1 said.
- Add = Extend Person 1's answer or give another idea.
- Refute = Disagree with Person 1's answer and explain why.

This encourages everyone to listen actively to the answer Person 1 is giving, as any one of them might be called on next to respond with the EAR Protocol.

Variation #2 – Let Me Get You Some Help

When reviewing instructions, try an informal version of Answer-Echo called "Let me get you some help." It works like this: You've given a three-step set of instructions to the class and randomly selected a student to repeat the instructions back. The student answers with, "I don't know," or "I didn't hear you," or "I wasn't listening." The teacher responds, "No problem. Let me get you some help. Who does know what we are about to do?" A volunteer answers. Then, the first student is asked to echo back what the volunteer said.

I Don't Know .... Yet:

When students are called upon and respond with "I don't know," ask them to rephrase their response and say, "I don't know…*yet*." This subtle change can have a profound effect on the learning atmosphere in your classroom. By adding the word "yet," students subconsciously affirm that they *plan* to know the answer shortly. Here is an example of how this might sound during a quick comprehension check during direct instruction:

Teacher: Dylan, how would you answer this question?
Dylan: I don't know.
Teacher: No problem, but can you please say, "I don't know…*yet*"?
Dylan: I don't know…yet.
Teacher: Ah! You're probably not the only one. Let's do a quick turn-and-talk. Everyone, please take twenty-two seconds to discuss a possible answer to this question with the person next to you. Dylan, I'll come back to you first after the turn-and-talk.

Adding "I will come back to you" gently engages the student and clearly encourages them to listen and keep trying. If Dylan is still stumped when the teacher returns with the same question, the teacher can switch to a different technique, like "answer or echo," to keep Dylan participating and moving forward.

The "I don't know…*yet*" strategy also works well for reviewing homework and warm-up questions, like in this example when a student didn't have the answer to problem #2:

Teacher: "Kelly, it's okay that you don't know yet. You keep on working on problem 2. I know you can get there! I'll come back to you.

The teacher goes on, calling on other students for problems 3 and 4, then comes back to Kelly for problem 2. If Kelly still doesn't know yet…

Teacher: "That's okay. Some problems take longer than others. You've got this. Keep on working, and I'll come back to you.

The teacher goes on, calling on another student for problem 5 and then comes back to check in with Kelly again. If problem 2 is still elusive…

Teacher: "You've been working so hard. You deserve a helping hand. Who would you like to work with on problem 2? Two heads are better than one!"

Kelly will probably pick a best friend. You know, one you've deliberately put as far across the classroom as possible! That's okay—we're going to reward Kelly's perseverance. We want to support success.

After another minute or two, the teacher returns to check in with Kelly and friend. If they still don't have an answer…

Teacher: "Okay, how's number 2 coming? You've got it? Great! Let's hear it," or "You don't know yet? This is one tricky problem. Let's all take a look at it on the board together. What have you got so far?"

Keeping students engaged and encouraging participation is key to their growth. By gently prompting them to tackle just one single problem instead of accepting an "I don't know" as a final answer, you empower them to stay actively involved in their learning. This approach also shows the entire class that every effort matters and that they're fully capable of rising to the challenge.

But What I do Know Is… :

When a student answers with "I don't know," the teacher can respond by saying, "Okay, but what *do* you know that is related to this question?" This stimulates more freedom in the exchange, because students often know "things about the topic"; they just might not know the answer the teacher is looking for. This strategy allows the teacher to gently but firmly keep the student on the hook for participating, while also expanding the student's understanding of how much information has, in fact, already been retained.

Math Example:

Imagine that a student doesn't know the solution to a math equation, but has accomplished some work on it. A breakthrough might occur when the student explains which steps were completed before getting stuck. Or, if they haven't gotten anywhere with it, you can get them on the path by asking what the first step might be or, if they don't know, then you can ask what some of the symbols mean or even how many or what types of numbers are involved. This exploration keeps that student—and others who also might be stuck—engaged in the process and allows you to push learning forward.

Social Studies Example:

Imagine you've posed an open ended question like, "Why is Hernan Cortez an important historical figure?" If the student says they don't know, asking them what they do know about Cortez invites the student to share anything about Cortez, even if it is not why he is an important figure in history. Or, alternately, they can share something they know about Spanish exploration more broadly, or the definition of "exploring" as a general concept.

Variation – Pretend You Do Know

Another option is to respond to a student saying "I don't know" with "Okay. But pretend that you do know. What would you say?" Or, "What would you say if you did know?" This takes the pressure off needing to have the *right* answer and frees up the student to creatively explore and express anything they might know related to the material you've presented.

With a bit of practice and patience, you can turn every "I don't know" into a unique learning opportunity, no matter when or where it happens during a lesson.