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CHAPTER FOUR



ENGAGING STUDENTS IN YOUR LESSONS

Great teachers engage students so that they feel like part of the lesson. They make a habit of focused involvement in the classroom. While that may already sound easier said than done with the most resistant students, it's doubly challenging since students need to be engaged in not just the class but in the *work* of class. That is, you could easily engage students in class by substituting frills for substance. The techniques reviewed in this chapter will consistently draw students into the work of class and keep them focused on learning.

TECHNIQUE 22

COLD CALL

When calling on students during class, it's natural to think about managing who gets to participate and think, "How do I give everyone a chance?" "Whose turn is it?" or "Who will give me the answer I want?" However, a more important question to ask is, "How can I adapt my decisions about which students I call on to help all my students pay better attention?" The idea, of course, is that you want everybody to pay attention and develop a system that ensures that all students think it's possible that they are about to be called on, regardless of whether they have raised their hand, and therefore think they must therefore prepare to answer. You need a system that ensures that instead of one student answering each of your questions, all of your students answer all of your questions in their minds, with you merely choosing one student to speak the answer out loud. **Cold Call** is that system.



KEY IDEA

COLD CALL

In order to make engaged participation the expectation, call on students regardless of whether they have raised their hands.

When you cold call, you call on students regardless of whether they have raised their hands. It's deceptively simple: you ask a question and then call the name of the student you want to answer it. If students see you frequently and reliably calling on classmates who don't have their hand raised, they will come to expect it and prepare for it. Calling on whomever you choose regardless of whether the student's hand is up also brings several other critical benefits to your classroom.

It's critical to be able to check what any student's level of mastery is at any time.

First, it allows you to check for understanding effectively and systematically. It's critical to be able to check what any student's level of mastery is at any time, regardless of whether he or she is offering to tell you. In fact it's most important when he or she is not offering to tell you. *Cold Call* allows you to check on exactly the student you want to check in on to assess mastery, and the technique makes this process seem normal. When students are used to being asked to participate or answer by their teacher, they react to it as if it were a normal event, and this allows you to get a focused, honest answer and therefore check for understanding reliably. This means that while using *Cold Call* to assist you in checking for understanding is critical, you'll also do best if you use it before you need to check for understanding. Your goal is to normalize it as a natural and normal part of your class, preferably a positive one.

Second, *Cold Call* increases speed in both the terms of your pacing (the illusion of speed) and the rate at which you can cover material (real speed). To understand the degree to which this is so, make an audiotape of your lesson sometime. Use a stopwatch to track how much time you spend waiting (and encouraging and cajoling and asking) for volunteers. With *Cold Call*, you no

longer have a delay after you ask, “Can anyone tell me what one cause of the World War I was?” You no longer have to scan the room and wait for hands. You no longer have to dangle hints to encourage participants or tell your students that you’d like to see more hands. Instead of saying, “I’m seeing the same four hands.

I want to hear from more of you. Doesn’t anyone else know this?” you simply say, “Tell us one cause of World War I, please, [slight pause here] Darren.” With *Cold Call*, you’ll move through material much faster, and the tedious, momentum-sapping mood when no one appears to want to speak up will disappear. These two results will increase your pacing: the illusion of speed you create in your classroom, which is a critical factor in how students engage (see Chapter Three for more on pacing).

Third, *Cold Call* allows you to distribute work more broadly around the room and signal to students not only that they are likely to be called on to participate, and therefore that they should engage in the work of the classroom, but that you want to know what they have to say. You care about their opinion. Many students have insight to add to your class but will not offer it unless you push or ask. They wonder if anyone really cares what they think. Or they think it’s just as easy to keep their thoughts to themselves because Charlie’s hand is always up anyway. Or they have a risky and potentially valuable thought on the tip of their tongue but aren’t quite sure enough of it to say it aloud yet. Sometimes there will even be a glance—a moment when this student looks at you as if to say, “Should I?” or maybe even, “Just call on me so you’ve shared responsibility if this is totally off the mark.”

Many people mistakenly perceive cold calling to be chastening and stressful. Once you’ve watched clips 7, 8, and 9 on the DVD, you’ll know that it’s not.

With Cold Call, you no longer have a delay after you ask, “Can anyone tell me what one cause of the World War I was?”

Many people mistakenly perceive cold calling to be chastening and stressful. Once you’ve watched clips 7, 8, and 9 on the DVD, you’ll know that it’s not. When it’s done right, it’s an extremely powerful and positive way to reach out to kids who want to speak but are reluctant to be hand raisers. It says, “I want to hear what you say,” even if Charlie’s hand is up for the tenth time in twelve questions.

ask her to join the conversation. But this works only if your questions propose to ask students to contribute to a real conversation rather than to catch them out and chasten them. This is the aspect of *Cold Call* that teachers are most likely to get wrong. There's part of many of us that wants to use it as a "gotcha"—to call on a student when we know he was tuned out to show him that fact or prove some sort of a lesson to him ("What did I just say, John?" or "Isn't that right, John?"). But this rarely works since causing a student to publicly founder on purpose and with no potential benefit at stake is more likely to make him ask questions about you ("Why's she always picking on me?") than about himself.

The goal is for the student to get the answer right, not learn a lesson by getting it wrong.

A positive cold call is the opposite of a gotcha in two ways. First, it is substantive. "What did I just say?" is not a substantive question. It's a gotcha, designed to "teach a lesson" that in fact it rarely teaches. "Do you think Lincoln declared war on the South primarily to eradicate slavery?" is a real question. "What is the subject in this sentence?" is a real question. You might ask a peer such a question in the faculty room, and this shows that you respect the person of whom you are asking the question. Second, the goal is for the student to get the answer right, not learn a lesson by getting it wrong. You want your students to succeed, to feel good and maybe even a little surprised by that success, even while they are challenged and stretched by the healthy tension of *Cold Call*. Remember that *Cold Call* is an engagement technique, not a disciplinary technique. It keeps students on task and mentally engaged. Once a student is off task, the *Cold Call* opportunity has passed. Then you should use a behavioral technique.

You can ensure a positive cold call by asking questions that pertain to the lesson and suggest you are making a genuine invitation to a student to participate in the conversation. Use *Cold Call* in an upbeat and positive tone, suggesting that you couldn't imagine a world in which a student would not want to participate.

One final aspect of *Cold Call* that leads to a positive tone occasionally eludes some teachers when they aren't prepared: the question and what an answer could look like should be clear. Every teacher has had the experience of asking a student a question that in retrospect wasn't clear, where even a well-informed and engaged student wouldn't know what to say. It's doubly important to avoid this kind of question when cold calling, and many teachers address this challenge by planning their exact questions in advance and word for word as part of their lesson planning process.

• **Cold Call is scaffolded.** This technique is especially effective when you start with simple questions and progress to harder ones, drawing students in, engaging them on terms that emphasize what they already know, and reinforcing basic knowledge before pushing for greater rigor and challenge. This will often require “unbundling,” or breaking a single larger question up into a series of smaller questions.

Consider this sequence from the classroom of Darryl Williams as he teaches his third graders to identify the complete sentences from among a list of several choices:

Williams: Read the next choice for me, please, Kyrese.

Kyrese: [reading from the worksheet] “Have you seen a pumpkin seed?”

Williams: Do we have a subject, Japhante?

Japhante: Yes.

Williams: What’s the subject?

Japhante: “You.”

Williams: “You.” Excellent. Do we have a predicate, Eric?

Eric: Yes.

Williams: What’s the predicate?

Eric: “Seen.”

Williams: “Seen.” Excellent. Is it a complete thought, Rayshawn?

Rayshawn: Yes.

Williams: Is that our complete sentence?

Rayshawn: Yes.

Williams: So we just keep going? What do we need to do, Shakaye?

Shakaye: We need to look at the other two [answer choices] because that might sound right but one of the other two might sound right too.

The sequence involves calling on five students in rapid succession and follows a careful progression of increasing difficulty. The first question merely asks a student to read what’s in front of him. The difficulty level is low. Williams is

scaffolding; anyone can get it right. The next question (“Is there a subject?”) is an incredibly simple yes-or-no question designed for the student of whom it is asked to get it right. When he does, Williams comes back with the more difficult question (“What is the subject?”), but that question now comes on the heels of the student’s previous success and after Williams has engaged him in the process of thinking about sentence structure. After asking another student a similar sequence, he goes on to harder questions about whether the sentence is complete and what strategy students should take next in answering the question. By breaking the basic question, “Is it a complete sentence?” into smaller parts and starting with simple questions, Williams successfully engages students and ensures their readiness when he asks more difficult questions. By parsing the question out to five students instead of one, he also ensures fuller participation and the expectation that participation is a predictable and systematic event.

A more subtle method of scaffolding is to allow students to begin answering cold calls about work that they have already done and have the answers in front of them. This again begins the sequence with something they are likely to get right. Darryl Williams began his sequence of *Cold Call* above with a request to Kyrese to “read the next [answer] choice for me.” This engages the student at the outset at a level where he is almost sure to succeed: he merely has to read what’s in front of him. Furthermore, a cold call that asks a student, “Please tell us your answer to the first problem, Milagros,” employs scaffolding because Milagros has done the work and has an answer in front of her. She begins by merely reporting back on her work. Of course, a sequence that begins with such simple questions would ideally progress to more rigorous follow-up questions that did ask Milagros or Kyrese to think on their feet. One of the misperceptions some teachers have about this technique is that it is only a way to ask simple questions. But its questions should be as rigorous as you can make them—something students will come to take pride in as they see themselves able to handle demanding material on the spur of the moment. Starting simple doesn’t mean ending that way, but it does tend to engage and motivate kids and cause students to be inspired by the building level of rigor and challenge.

Using *Cold Call* to follow up on previous comments in class underscores how much you value students’ participation and insight. It also emphasizes that your students’ engagement in what their peers say is as important as their engagement in what you say. There are three varieties to consider:

- *Follow-on to a previous question.* Ask a simple question using *Cold Call*—think of it as a warm-up—and then ask the student a short series of further questions (most teachers ask two to four) in which her opinions are further developed or her understanding further tested.

- *Follow-on to another student's comment.* This reinforces the importance of listening to peers as well as teacher: "James says the setting is a dark summer night. Does that tell us everything we need to know about the setting, Susan?" or "What does *exploit* mean, Stephen? Good and who gets exploited in *Macbeth*, Markeesha?"
- *Follow-on to a student's own earlier comment.* This signals that once the student has spoken, she's not done: "But, Yolanda, you said earlier that we always multiplied length and width to find area. Why didn't we do that here?"

Beyond these principles, there are several elements champion teachers apply, vary, and adapt to maximize the benefit of *Cold Call* in a wider variety of settings. These are key variations on the *Cold Call* theme:

- **Hands Up/Hands Down.** You can use *Cold Call* and continue allowing students to raise their hands if they wish, or you can instruct your students to keep their hands down. Both versions emphasize different aspects of the technique.

Taking hands allows you to continue encouraging and rewarding students who ask to participate, even if you sometimes call on those who don't have their hands raised. You merely move between taking hands and cold calling at your discretion. This continues providing incentives to students to raise their hands while also allowing you to add sophistication to your scaffolding. When you're allowing hands during your cold calling, you can, say, cold call students for the first three questions in a sequence and then save the capper, the last and potentially the toughest or most interesting question, for a volunteer, thus differentiating instruction and making academic challenge a reward in and of itself. One factor to consider in allowing students to raise their hands while you cold call is that it may cause your use of *Cold Call* to be less apparent and transparent and thus less systematic. That's because it may not always be obvious to students whether the classmate who got called on had her hand up or was cold called. Taking hands also gives you an important data point. Even if you ignore it, it tells you who thinks they know well enough to volunteer. Thus, if you want to try to call on students whose mastery is unsteady, you have a clearer idea of who to try.

You can also decide to tell students to put their hands down, that you're not taking hands, and then proceed to cold call whomever you wish. This sends a more forceful message about your firm control of the classroom, and it makes your cold calling more explicit, predictable, and transparent ("I'm cold calling now"). It also tends to make the pacing of your cold calling, and thus your lesson, even faster because you don't spend time navigating hands. Finally, hands down can be more effective for checking for understanding in two key ways. First, it

reduces the likelihood of students' calling out answers in eagerness. While truly a sin of enthusiasm, calling out is corrosive to your classroom environment and specifically to your ability to steer questions to the students who need to work or those you need to assess. Second, because students who do want to answer are rendered less visible (they don't have their hands up), your decision to target your checking for understanding of more reticent students is less patently visible and therefore seems a bit more systematic.

A last caveat is that most champion teachers appear to use both hands up and hands down as a matter of habit, with their choice determined by the situation. One possible reason for this is that using only hands up is not as forceful and energetic and using only hands down is a disincentive to hand raising over the long run. With enough time, it risks convincing students not to bother raising their hands at all, since doing so is never rewarded. In that case a teacher had better really like *Cold Call* because she'll have few hands offered and few alternatives.

Using this sequence—"Question. Pause. Name."—ensures that every student hears the question and begins preparing an answer during the pause that you've provided.

- **Timing the Name.** *Cold Call* can vary in terms of when you say the name of the student you're calling on. The most common and often the most effective approach is to ask the question, pause, and then name a student, as in, "What's 3 times 9? [pause], James?" Using this sequence—"Question. Pause. Name."—ensures that every student hears the question and begins preparing

an answer during the pause you've provided. Since students know a cold call is likely but not who will receive it, every student is likely to answer the question, with one student merely called on to give their answer aloud. In the example, it means that every student in the class has done the multiplication in the pause between question and name. If you say the name first, twenty-four fewer students practice their multiplication. The difference in leverage between this scenario (twenty-five students answering a question and one saying it aloud) and the alternative (one student answering a question and twenty-four watching) is so dramatic that it should be the default approach to most of your cold calling.

In some cases, calling a student's name first can be beneficial. Often it can prepare a student to attend and increases the likelihood of success. This can be especially effective with students who may not have been cold called before, students who have language processing difficulties, or students whose knowledge of English is still developing. In its most exaggerated form, this is known as a

precall. In a precall, you tell a student that he or she can expect to be called on later in the lesson. It can happen privately (a teacher might say to a student before class, "Okay, Jamal, I'm going to ask you to go over the last problem from the homework today. Be ready!") or publicly ("Paul's going to give us the answer, Karen, but then I'll be asking you why!").

Another instance in which it is productive to state the name first is for clarity. For example, if you are coming out of a sequence of *Call and Response* (the following technique in this chapter), in which students have been calling out answers in unison, dropping in a name first and then asking the question makes it clear to students that you are no longer using *Call and Response* and thus avoids the awkward and counterproductive moment when some students attempt to answer in unison a question you had intended for an individual.

- **Mix with other engagement techniques.** *Cold Call* responds especially well to mixing with other engagement techniques. *Call and Response* is a perfect example: moving back and forth between whole group choral response and individual responses at a rapid energetic pace can drive up the level of positive energy dramatically. It can also allow you to ensure that students aren't coasting during *Call and Response*. To take a simple example, you could review multiplication tables with your students by asking everyone to call out answers to a few problems:

Teacher: Class, what's 9 times 7?

Class: 63!

Teacher: Good what's 9 times 8?

Class: 72!

Teacher: Good, now Charlie, What's 9 times 9?

Class: 81!

Teacher: Good. What's 9 times 9, class?

Class: 81!

Teacher: Good and, Matilda, what was 9 times 7 again?

Matilda: 63!

By toggling back and forth, you can cause individual students to review material or reinforce a successful answer by having the class repeat it.

Pepper (technique 24, later in this chapter) is another engagement technique that works well with *Cold Call*. In fact it's very similar to *Cold Call* in that it consists of rapid-fire questions that are often cold called. Finally, *Everybody Writes* (technique 25, later in this chapter) is a preparation for *Cold Call*, as it allows everyone to prethink the topic or questions you'll be addressing; this increases the likely quality of responses.

Teachers often conclude that *Cold Call* questions must be simple. In fact, *Cold Call* questions can and should be rigorous and demanding. Part of their power lies in having students feel the pride of answering demanding questions at the spur of the moment. Following is a transcript of a session of *Cold Call* executed by Jesse Rector of North Star Academy's Clinton Hill campus. Rector is an exceptional math teacher with exceptional results and a following within our organization for his craft. The rigor of his questioning shows why. See how many of the following *Cold Call* questions, asked of seventh graders in rapid-fire succession, *you'd* get correct.

Rector: I'm a square field with an area of 169 square feet. What's the length of one of my sides, Janae?

Janae: 13.

Rector: 13 what? [Asking Janae for the units is an example of *Format Matters*, technique 4.]

Janae: 13 feet.

Rector: I'm a square field with a perimeter of 48 feet. What's my area, Katrina?

Katrina: 144 square feet.

Rector: Excellent. I'm a regular octagon with a side that measures $8x$ plus 2. What is my perimeter, Tamisse?

Tamisse: $64x$ plus 16.

Rector: Excellent. I am an isosceles triangle with two angles that measure $3x$ each. What is the measure of my third angle, Anaya?

Anaya: 180 degrees minus $6x$.