

For Higher-Quality Answers: Ask a Question and Pause for What Seems Like Eternity (Three Seconds)

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I have witnessed many talented faculty members impede learning by unintentionally not allowing enough time for participants to answer their questions. Learning at its peak can occur when a classroom is silent. This is counterintuitive. As teachers, we feel productive when we are talking, but a classroom filled with a participant or faculty member always talking may not be the classroom most conducive to learning.

I encourage you to consider adding wait time to your teaching “tool box.” It is an easy technique for effective teaching. Adopt at least a three second pause after posing a question. This technique is referred to as *wait time*. Delaying a few strategic seconds after you finish asking a question and before you ask a participant to begin answering will more effectively draw upon the great minds in the classroom.

The late Dr. Mary Budd Rowe of Florida State University researched wait time and found the average teacher waits one second after asking a question before speaking again. This small window to answer a question turns brains off because students quickly learn that their answers aren't needed (or important). As faculty members, answering our own questions has a tremendous negative impact on the learning environment. Failing to wait causes the following:

- Lack of depth in answers
- Engagement of only a few classroom participants
- Involvement of only extroverts (if they manage to get a word in edgewise)
- Lower information recall

Faculty who continually answer their own questions or immediately ask leading questions create a learning environment that encourages passivity. Participants can't adequately process a well thought out answer in an environment that moves too quickly. The first answer that comes to mind is rarely the best answer. The learning environment is then adversely impacted because the faculty member needlessly spends time discussing the weaker answer. Every faculty seeks answers that provide examples, and comparisons and contrasts to aid in rich discussions. Beyond wait time, another technique for involving learners is to ask them to write their answers before sharing them. This technique ensures more compelling responses and allows the instructor to actively engage a broader audience.

Minds work fast, but engaging your audience requires patience and teaching know-how.