

Fired Up and Ready to Discuss

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As an instructor for large classes, it is a challenge for me to get a range of students to speak up in class. When I invite comments (“Who would like to add or ask?”), there are always a handful of students that rescue me—I think of them as my Hermiones—but the other 100-200+ students remain silent. I contrast this with my small online classes, where I hear from everyone on a regular basis. One August night a couple of years ago, I was lying in bed, thinking about how to incentivize more students to contribute in class, and came up with *Fired Up and Ready to Discuss*. This is how I explain it in my syllabi:

Students have the option to sign-up on Canvas to be Fired Up & Ready to Discuss during one specific week of class. Sign-up is open immediately for all 15 weeks, and is on a first-come, first-served basis. There are the equivalent number of slots for the number of students in class, distributed evenly between Weeks 1-15, but later weeks may fill up quickly. If a student is signed up for Fired Up Week 1, for example, then sometime during week 1 lectures, this student can make a comment or ask a question, while giving their name and identifying themselves as Fired Up (so that TAs can give credit): “I’m Ashley Harvey and I’m fired up. My thoughts on this are. . . [or] One question I have is . . .” Although all students are welcome to contribute to discussion each week, only those who are signed up for that week can receive extra credit.

Since each student has to have equal opportunity for extra credit, I can only offer Fired Up once in my large classes of 200+ students (which translates to up to 15 students per week, but these slots are usually half-full). In classes of 100 or less, I give students two opportunities: one in the first half of the semester and one in the second half. This works within the confines of the self-sign up for group options in my institution's online management system. If students do not share in the week that they are signed up for, they can move themselves to a later week if slots are still open.

I use undergraduate teaching assistants (TAs) in my courses and entering Fired Up points during class is one of their tasks. When a student speaks up and identifies themselves as Fired Up, I repeat their name back to be sure that my TAs can hear it and verify that the person is signed up for that week's Fired Up. The TA then immediately enters the extra credit points into the online gradebook. In addition, we display the students signed up on the first day of class for each week.

I have used this in a dozen courses so far, with over 600 Fired Up students. I find that across all classes there is 45% Fired Up participation each semester, but only 30% for the largest (200+) classes in which students are more intimidated to share. On my custom course surveys, over 70% of students consistently say that Fired Up promotes discussion, but only half say they are comfortable speaking up in class. So, Fired Up is a good extra credit option for some students, but not the only extra credit option that I offer.

Not only does Fired Up promote diverse contributions even during weeks when everyone is tired and stressed, but it also adds more humor. When a student says, "I'm Angela and I'm fired up," the rest of the class invariably grins and giggles. And, in my field of human development and family studies, it enables me to say funny things like, "Anyone fired up about [epigenetics] [casual sex] [substance use]?" or "Great, Angela, thanks for being super-fired-up about APA style—let's hear it!"

One interesting challenge of Fired Up was that by inviting more input students ask more questions, some of them unusual, and thus I found myself saying "I don't know" a little too much. As a result, I have started to emphasize the "comment" part of Fired Up more than the "question" option. Also, now when a student asks something that I do not know the answer to, I call out to a teaching assistant and ask them to do a quick search for research-based information, and then interrupt lecture to report back when they have found the answer.

Lastly, I have found that Fired Up works well in conjunction with polling software. I use polling to invite input, often on something controversial or sensitive that students might be nervous to share about. In my human development and family studies, there are easy opportunities for this: "Do you think marriage is becoming obsolete?" Once students see the

polling results and realize that they are not alone in their perspective, they are more willing to share. After I display the poll results, I usually say, "Anyone want to say why they gave the answer that they did? Anyone Fired Up about this?"

I also use the Poll-Fired Up combination for material that I think some of the class already knows, but I want to make sure everyone understands. So, I will poll the class to see how much they already know about a concept (e.g., reliability and validity), display the results, and then invite someone who answered, "I know this," to explain it to those who answered, "I'm still confused," while earning Fired Up points.

If you struggle to engage students in discussion in large classes, Fired Up and Ready to Discuss may be a good tool. And if this is not a challenge for you, I am hoping you will share your strategies with me.

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