

Spin the Wheels: Using a Random Name Picker Game to Foster Student Participation and Class

The role of student participation in enhancing student performance and enriching in-class situations has been well established in literature (Bekkering and Ward, 2020; Gainor and Precourt, 2017; Echiverri et al., 2020). According to the London School of Economics Teaching and Learning Centre (n.d), class participation encourages students to take responsibility for their learning, prepare for class, develop their communication and critiquing skills, and makes them better team players, among other benefits. In addition to these benefits, a class with more participation is likely to be less monotonous and boring. While these benefits are highly desirable, the actual engendering of participation in classroom situations can be a difficult task for instructors. For one, students tend to shirk from in-class discussions because they believe it is the instructor's responsibility to pass information to them, while they act as receivers of the information. An extension of this is for students to expect others, that is, other students and the instructor to engage in the discussions. This is akin to the social loafing problem in group dynamics, where people tend to exert less effort or free ride when they are in a group setting, than if they were acting alone (Schippers, 2014). Irrespective of these reasons, instructors must devise creative ways to engage students in classroom settings. This teaching tip explores the use of a random name picker game to foster more student engagement and participation in classroom settings.

Random Name Pickers

As the name suggests, the random name picker is an online tool for randomly picking names from a pool. Different versions of random name pickers can be found on the internet. Wheel of names (wheelofnames.com) is the freeware online tool discussed in this teaching tip. To use the wheel of names, a list of student names is inputted in the text box (Figure 1). To randomly pick a student, the instructor clicks on the multicolored wheel which spins until a student's name is picked. The wheel of names also has other advanced features. One feature allows for sampling (picking) a name without replacement, while another allows for putting more weight on some names (to increase the probability of those names being picked). It is also possible to customize the wheel by adding images and sounds for each student.

Applying Random Name Pickers in Classroom Settings

As previously mentioned, increasing student engagement in classroom settings is very desirable, though not always the case. The age-old way that instructors have used to do this is to call on students. However, this method can lead to the same group of students being selected to participate, leaving the others to free-ride on in-class activities, or feel disaffected (Willms, 2005;

Thomas et al., 2014). By implementing random name pickers, the instructor introduces a creative, and impartial way to get the attention of a greater student sample. This approach not only enables the instructor to become more conversant with students, but also can provide students with an increased sense of belongingness, that can improve excitement and participation (Rhoads, 2021; Rosales and Torres, 2021). Additionally, the random name picker is also amenable to both in-person and online classroom situations.

Another way that the random name picker can be used is in group formation settings. For some class activities like group projects and presentations, there are two common methods for group selection. One is for the instructor to randomly select students into groups. The alternative is to allow students to self-select into groups. The latter method can often lead to students only selecting friends and may limit cross-pollination of ideas and insights, as well as group diversity. Moreover, an additional creative technique the random name picker can be used for is randomizing in-class activities or experiments where students are participants.

Recommendations

While the random name picker can be a very effective way to facilitate in-class engagement, there are some points that the instructor must consider to maximize results. First, for in-person classroom situations, the instructor may want to be considerate of the class size, as well as the room size. Smaller classrooms with less than 15 participants tend to be naturally more engaging. In this context, the random name generator may not be needed for getting student attention. In the author's experience, random name pickers are best suited for medium sized classrooms with 20 to 40 students and less-spread seating arrangements. Another consideration to note is how often the random name picker is used. When used too frequently in class discussions, students may become distracted from the subject at hand. Overall, the instructor must be sensitive to gauge student reactions and adjust use frequency.

So go ahead... spin the wheels

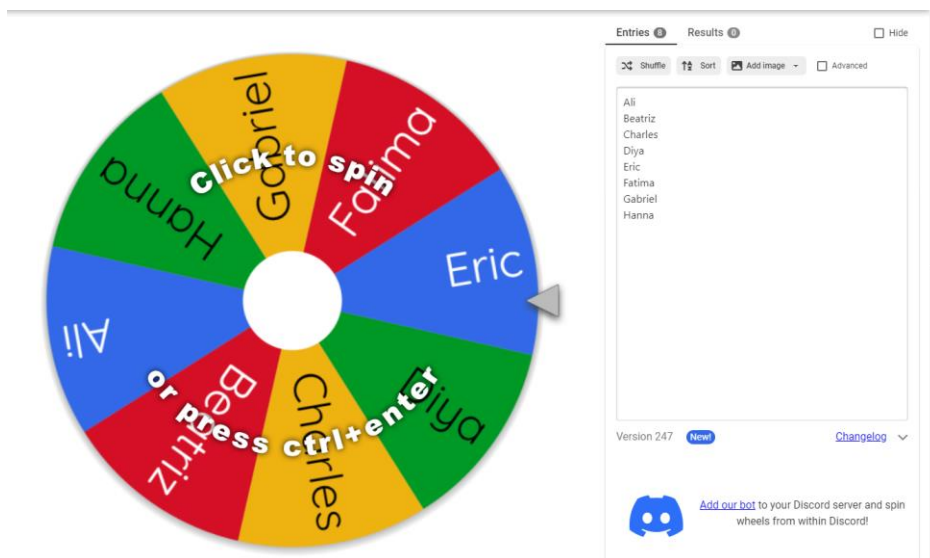


Figure 1. Screenshot of the Wheel of Names Random Name Picker Interface.

Source: wheelofnames.com

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