

Active Learning

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Active learning refers to techniques where students do more than simply listen to a lecture. Students are DOING something including discovering, processing, and applying information. Active learning "derives from two basic assumptions: (1) that learning is by nature an active endeavor and (2) that different people learn in different ways" (Meyers and Jones, 1993). Research shows greater learning when students engage in active learning. It is important to remember, however, that lecture does have its place and that you should not do active learning without content or objectives. The elements of active learning are talking and listening, writing, reading, and reflecting (Meyers and Jones, 1993). Bonwell and Eison (1991) state that some characteristics of active learning are:

Students are involved in more than listening, less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on developing students' skills, students are involved in higher-order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation), students are engaged in activities (e.g., reading discussing, writing), and greater emphasis is placed on students' exploration of their own attitudes and values. (p. 2)

There may be some resistance to active learning by students who are accustomed to lectures, students who prefer passive learning, or students in large classes (who don't expect it). Thus, you need to prepare students. Explain your objectives and the benefits of the active learning techniques explicitly to students. Expect both successes and failures as you try active learning techniques. Solicit feedback on the activity afterwards from the students to improve it in the future. Some active learning techniques take little faculty preparation and may be done spontaneously; others require much more preparation. Active learning techniques can occur in class or outside of class (e.g., computer simulations, internships, WWW assignments, class Internet discussion lists, independent study research). Active learning can be used with all levels of students from first year through graduate students. Teaching a mass class does not prohibit the use of active learning techniques; in fact, they may be especially important to promote interest and learning in a mass class. Below, I offer a few examples of **in-class** active learning techniques used in small and large classes, and with all levels of students.

Think-Pair-Share

Give students a task such as a question or problem to solve, an original example to develop, etc. Have them work on this 2-5 minutes alone (think). Then have them discuss their ideas for 3-5 minutes with the student sitting next to them (pair). Finally, ask or choose student pairs to share their ideas with the whole class (share). I have used these in classes ranging from 12 to 340 students.

Collaborative learning groups

These may be formal or informal, graded or not, short-term or long-term. Generally, you assign students to heterogeneous groups of 3-6 students. They choose a leader and a scribe (note-taker). They are given a task to work on together. Often, student preparation for the CLG has been required earlier (reading or homework). The group produces a group answer or paper or project. These work best in small to medium size classes, but I have also used them in a class of 340 students. If interested, see my short paper on "Collaborative Learning Groups in the Large Class: Is it Possible?" in *Teaching Sociology*, 1993, 21, 403-408.

Student-led review sessions

Instead of the traditional instructor-led review session, have the students do the work. For example, in my review sessions, we spend half the time working in small groups. Each student is to ask at least one question related to the material he or she doesn't understand, and to try to answer a question raised by another student. Students can also practice discussing, illustrating and applying difficult material or concepts, or drafting exam questions. For the second half of the review session, the whole class works together. Students may ask questions; other students volunteer to answer them. All students who ask or answer questions receive a "treat" (I bring small candy bars, gum, and boxes of raisins). I try to only speak if there is a problem. Again, I have done these in classes as large as 340 students. Be sure to explain what will be going on ahead of time so students are less frustrated when you don't stand up there and simply review the material or give the answers or tell them what to study!

Games

Games such as jeopardy and crossword puzzles can be adapted to course material and used for review, for assignments, or for exams. They can be used at the individual, small group or full class levels. There are now some computer programs, for example, to help you create crossword puzzles.

Analysis or reactions to videos

Videos offer an alternative presentation mode for course material. Videos should be relatively short (5-20 minutes). Screen them to make sure they are worth showing. Prepare students ahead of time with reaction or discussion questions or a list of ideas on which to focus; this will help them pay attention. After the video, have them work alone or in pairs to answer critical questions, write a "review" or reaction, or apply a theory.

Student debates

These can be formal or informal, individual or group, graded or not, etc. They allow students the opportunity to take a thesis or position and gather data and logic to support that view, critically. Debates also give students experience with verbal presentations. Some faculty members ask students their personal view on an issue and then make them argue the opposite position.

Student generated exam questions

This can be used for review or for the actual exam. This technique helps students actively process material, gives them a better understanding of the difficulties of writing reliable and valid exam questions, helps them review material, and gives them practice for the exam.

Mini-research proposals or projects; a class research symposium

Have the students work on designing a research study on a topic from the class. In some situations, you may be able to have them collect data during class time (observe some situation or give out some short surveys) or you may have them doing this as part of an outside-of-class project. Either way, have students present their research in a class research symposium similar to what we do at professional meetings. Invite other faculty and students.

Analyze case studies

Bring in case studies for students to read (for example, I will put a case example of sexual harassment on an overhead). Have students discuss and analyze the case, applying concepts, data, and theory from the class. They can work as individuals or in groups or do this as a think-pair-share. Consider combining this with a brief in-class writing assignment.

Keeping journals or logs

Have students make journal or log entries periodically (on paper or computer, in or outside of class). Require a brief critical reflection or analysis of each entry as well. For example, in my gender class, students must record instances of sex inequality (sex discriminations, sexism, sexual harassment against women or men) they observe. They then discuss this instance applying course terms and theories. Be aware of ethical issues if you ask students to record and analyze personal events or issues.

Write and produce a newsletter

Have small groups of students produce a brief newsletter on a specific topic related to class. Students should include articles with relevant research, post information on upcoming related public events, and so on. Share these with faculty and students in related courses or in the major.

Concept mapping

Here students create visual representations of models, ideas, and the relationships between concepts. They draw circles containing concepts and lines, with connecting phrases on the lines, between concepts. These can be done individually or in groups, once or repeated as students acquire new information and perspectives, and can be shared, discussed, and critiqued.