
**Categories:** Pedagogy, Active Learning, Student-Centered Learning

**Summary**

This article offers straightforward definitions of active learning and advice on how to employ it in the classroom. According to the author’s, active learning is, in essence, when students are “doing and thinking,” rather than passively listening to information. Additionally, they define the basic characteristics of active learning: students engage in activities (reading, writing, discussion); there is an emphasis on developing skills rather than the transference of knowledge; stress is placed on the exploration of attitudes and values; student motivation is high; students receive immediate feedback through interaction with the instructor and their peers; and students are engaged in higher order thinking (analysis, evaluation, synthesis, etc.).

Active learning, according to the authors, is crucial for a number of reasons. First, research shows that most students lose focus and therefore retention of information after ten minutes of engaging in passive learning. Subsequently, research also shows that students in active learning environments experience greater success in attaining learning outcomes than those in predominantly lecture based classes. Finally, from a theoretical standpoint, active learning constitutes the only form of “real” learning.

Unfortunately, several obstacles prevent many professors from employing active learning strategies in the classroom. Foremost amongst these are the sense that active learning takes too much time, and subsequently results in a loss of content coverage. Instructors also fear that shifting to an active learning approach will take up too much of their time, as they have to create whole new lessons, that they lack access to the requisite materials, and that students will resist efforts to teach them in this manner. These fears, however, are largely unfounded. This is especially true as it concerns the primary fear of faculty: the loss of content. Active learning does not ignore content. Rather, it simply alters the means by which content is engaged by the students, as they are still learning content when they discuss it, write about it, or work on projects based on content. Moreover, while lecture may allow professors to cover more content, this does not mean that students are learning it.

Another key factor that reduces instructors’ willingness to employ active learning strategies is the sense that it poses risks for both themselves and their students. Because of this, it is necessary for professors to think of active learning as existing on a spectrum that runs from low risk to high risk, and to utilize methods that they are comfortable with. Low risk options generally take up less class time, are highly structured and centered on concrete concepts, and focus on interaction on a teacher-student model. Examples of such activities are short writes, surveys or questionnaires, and ungraded quizzes. In contrast, high risk activities take up much more time, examine abstract concepts, are loosely structured, and focus on student to student interaction. Examples of high risk activities include student group discussions, individual or group presentations, role play activities, and peer evaluation.
The article concludes by noting some additional factors that promote learning in the classroom. The authors advise instructors to utilize humor in the classroom, when appropriate, encourage students to talk, praise students regularly, pursue further discussion of topics or issues raised by students, even if they are tangential, ask questions about students’ viewpoints, and engage students outside of classroom. Ultimately, the purpose of these approaches is to make students feel comfortable with the professor and in the classroom, so that they will be willing to take the risks inherent in active learning.

The article also includes a highly useful appendix that offers examples of various active learning strategies that can be used at the beginning, middle, and end of class. Some examples of these would be to have students brainstorm about some personal experiences that might relate to the topic of the day (beginning of class), do a short write or engage in a role play activity (middle of class), do a group outline of the topics covered in class or engage in journaling (end of class). The examples provided are both plentiful and detailed. Finally, the article offers an extensive bibliography broken down into general content and sources related to active learning in specific content area fields.

Application

Widely regarded as a seminal work in the scholarship of teaching and learning, the article presents a host of valuable, practical ideas for improving both teaching and learning. Any professor who employs active learning strategies in the classroom, or is desirous of doing so, would benefit greatly from reading this article. Beyond the immediate utility of providing examples of how to conduct active learning, this article provides a guideline for the type of work that U.D.C. could and should seek to replicate as it moves forwards with its efforts to institutionalize advanced teaching and learning. While research in this field is useful, much of it is theoretical and obdurate, given its penchant for heavy employment of jargon. This undermines the field’s purpose of revolutionizing the world of teaching and learning in higher education. In contrast, this article offers a set of very clear “how tos”. It is, in essence, a publication of best practices that allow for easy application, and therefore immediate change.

Citations of Interest

The citations offered by the article are so extensive and useful that any attempt to summarize them or select a few relevant sources would greatly undermine the utility. Those the bibliography is dated, as this article is over twenty years old, it offers an excellent selection of sources related to active learning on a field by field basis.