# Classroom Learning Activities

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#### Inside This Tip Sheet

- Designing Effective
   Classroom Learning
   Activities
- 2 Effective Learning Activities
- 3 Some Examples
- 4 Other information that might interest you

"...learning is an active, constructive process that is contextual; new knowledge is acquired in relation to previous knowledge; information is meaningful when it is presented in some type of framework."

(Davis, 1993)

# Designing Effective Classroom Learning Activities

Active learning is not a new concept. It "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). When we discuss active learning in the classroom, it is with the understanding that lecture is still important - the foundational knowledge required for students to be able to engage in higher level thinking is essential. However, for the sake of maintaining student interest, and facilitating meaningful, and eventually self-directed learning, it can be very helpful to vary the teaching and learning activities you employ in the classroom. It is likely that you are already using teaching and learning techniques that help students to engage actively with the concepts you are teaching, and there are still more ways to expand the learning experiences you create - some very low risk, some more complex, but all can be effective, especially if you establish this pattern of interaction from the first day of your course.

# **Effective Learning Activities**

There are a wide range of activities used both inside and outside the classroom that promote active learning. While each discipline has traditional ways of teaching certain subject matter, and activities used in seminars and large lectures may vary, the concept of "active learning" applies in every discipline, in every class size. The types of activities you choose to use, however, might be more applicable in some types of courses than others.

PAGE 2 CELT TIP SHEET



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Some more complex forms of active learning include service learning, problem-based learning, collaborative learning (team based) and simulations. These can all be very effective, especially in upper level undergraduate and graduate courses where holistic learning is emphasized and students are encouraged to think about solving problems in "real world" situations and learning skills relevant to their field. However, there are many low-risk, high benefit activities that you can use that require less time, and can also be very effective, as demonstrated in the list below. Some are individual in nature, some involve groups, some might progress from individual activity to group activity. Be creative!

# **Some Examples**

#### **Dig Deeper**

#### Effective questioning

Something as simple as asking good questions can be as effective as any other method of facilitating active learning if you follow some simple guidelines. Pause after asking any question and wait for a response. Ask only one question at a time. Perhaps let students write their response for a minute or two before sharing. Gather a few responses before leaping into the answer – let other students respond, or build on the student response.

#### Case studies

Using case studies can be a very effective way to explore complex topics, and can be completed in one class session or a part of one, depending on the case and your goals. You can do this in small groups and/or as a whole class. You can either develop your own cases, or often find ready to use case studies online. Current events can also be a source of material for teaching with this method.

# Break it Up

#### Collaborative learning

Very simply ask your students at some point during class to form small groups for discussion and ask some or all groups to report back to the larger group.

#### • Think Pair Share

At some point in the lecture, ask students a key question – have them first sit quietly and write down some notes on their own, then pair them up to discuss the question with another student. Lastly, have a few groups or all groups, depending on the class size, share their thoughts with the larger group.

PAGE 3 CELT TIP SHEETS

### **Keep it Interesting**

#### Debates

Well-structured debates can raise a large number of issues for discussion, and help students learn not only about the material, but critical thinking and presentation skills among others.

Games and simulations

Involve students in demonstrating a concept by using games that either you or they create. Using a base like jeopardy or crossword puzzles can be fun and effective.

## Gauge where your students are

#### • Minute Paper

This is a classic formative evaluation process where students are asked at the end of a class to summarize the key points in writing in one minute.

Reflection papers

Asking students to develop a reflection paper based on readings or an out of classroom assignment can help them to understand their own learning process better.

### Let them walk in your shoes

Learn by teaching

Ask a student or small group of students to read and synthesize material to teach their peers in class.

Student-led review sessions

Have the students create the review questions. Each student should 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.

Student generated exam questions

Sometimes asking students to generate an exam question can help them review material and practice for the exam, and can also be an indicator to you of points you might need to review.

# Other information that might interest you...

Active Learning with Dr. Richard Felder, Professor Emeritus at North Carolina State University <u>YouTube</u> video on active learning.

Always feel free to contact <u>CELT</u> if you would like further information. We have a library of resources available, and we are happy to help you explore any of the strategies proposed above.

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