

AN **A-Z** OF
CREATIVE
TEACHING
IN **HIGHER**
EDUCATION

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A is for **ACTION**

HOW TO MAKE LEARNING MORE ACTIVE

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Why promote 'active' learning and what does it mean?

In our call to action, this chapter seeks to place active learning at the heart of our practice. We look at why this really works to enhance learning and what it can look like in different contexts, including virtual learning environments. Addressing some common concerns about active learning, we unpick these to reveal the full extent of the teacher's role in this work. Finally, we offer some 'dos and don'ts' when facilitating activities for learning.

You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.

(Rabindranath Tagore, in Sen, 1968)

TASK 1

Think of an occasion where you learnt something effectively – not necessarily in an academic context.

What did you learn and how did you learn it? What was helpful about this way of learning? What barriers were there?

REFLECTIONS

Maybe you felt you learned well because you were so motivated, maybe because the teacher was passionate about her subject or maybe because it touched your experience. We look at all these aspects of learning in other chapters. Did you respond to the above by describing learning by 'doing' – like tying shoelaces or cooking a particular dish? That's what we're looking at in A is for Action. It can sometimes be tricky to say exactly how such learning took place and what role was played by the 'teacher' if there was even one involved. Later in the chapter, we suggest ways to facilitate such active learning.

Why a chapter on active learning?

For us, to learn is to construct, to reconstruct, to observe with a view to changing.

(Freire, 1998)

This book is predicated on the idea that learners should be involved in their learning. It is tied not only to the theory that *conscious learning emerges from activity* (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy, 1999: 61), but also to the political notion that learning is about change and empowerment that can only come about when we are all actively involved in the process.

It's important to note that direct learner–learner or teacher–learner interaction is not the only way in which learning can be active. Even listening to a lecture, you can still be actively constructing and reconstructing knowledge (we look at this in P is for Presentations). Here, however, we focus on using activity as a tool for learning, whether face-to-face or online.

TASK 2

Read the following story, then answer the two questions posed.

In an undergraduate session on Healthcare Policy, Kiran presents some slides that critically analyse government strategy on alcohol consumption in the UK. She assumes that the students are familiar with the arguments in this area, so she talks through the slides quite fast. Afterwards, she asks for questions. There is a long and embarrassing silence. Kiran doesn't know if this is because the students have understood everything so well that they feel no need to ask questions (though she doubts this, from the expressions on their faces), or if it is because they have understood so little that they don't even know where to begin in terms of asking questions.

1. What might be the issue here?
2. How could Kiran actively engage the students to assess their understanding of the topic?

REFLECTIONS

Active learning and formative assessment are closely intertwined. Kiran could have asked her students to spend one minute (or longer) working in pairs sharing what they already know about alcohol consumption in the UK and listing any questions they have. She could also have set them an open-book, collaborative quiz on the subject – in fact, regular use of this approach has been shown to increase conceptual learning and raise student performance (Rezaei, 2015). See C is for Communicating for more on quizzes.

The teacher's role here may be to circulate, or to stand back and observe, or even to allow the students a few moments of space and privacy to get on with the task (or a combination of these). The time

(Continued)

could be used to see who has material which will take the topic further in the plenary or to build the confidence of the quiet student and encourage them to contribute later in the whole group. There is an excellent opportunity to differentiate between students here by discussing more complex ideas with some pairings and revisiting more basic building blocks with others as they work in their pairs. In terms of assessment, this task offers a chance to see how close the students are to addressing the session learning outcomes – or indeed, in some cases, whether they are ready to move beyond these.

Kiran would also need to decide whether the whole group would benefit from a plenary and what this would be for – this could be different each time. Maybe every pair came up with similar questions and there is a need to recap some material; maybe it's to look at new and unexpected ideas generated. It could be simply to get learners more confident at hearing their own voices in the room. One of the advantages – and challenges – of active learning is that it is unpredictable. As the teacher, you must act responsively, constantly adjusting your session to your learners while at the same time supporting them to progress towards the intended learning outcomes. Such an approach is an exemplification of inclusive, or enabling, practice – much more so than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach of delivering from a predetermined script. It is where the *interests, needs and curiosity of the student interact with the knowledge, resources and facilitative attitudes of the teacher* (Rogers et al., 2014: 61).

In an online context, Kiran may have prepared a slideshow with audio or a screencast video of her presentation. The advantage of this format is that students can pause the delivery or go back and repeat parts of it, but they still need to be actively engaged with the content in order to benefit from it. The online presentation could include, for example, an opening slide asking students to click the pause button and write down what they know about alcohol consumption in the UK, after which they can watch the rest of the video or slides in order to compare the content against their own ideas. In an asynchronous session with pre-recorded content, it would not be possible for her to adjust her input in response to the students' answers. However, students can be encouraged to self-assess their knowledge against that presented on the screen. Online quizzes can also be used as a self-diagnostic tool – perhaps to be taken at the start and again at the end of an online session in order to assess knowledge before and after.

In our experiences of observing teaching and learning in HE, a number of teachers appear to be reluctant to use active learning approaches. In the next section, we examine some of the reasons why.

Common concerns about active learning

The problem is, there's simply no room in this approach for sharing the knowledge and experience of the teacher.

You need to be sure in your planning that any activities in the session will provide time both for the learners to construct knowledge for themselves and for you to build on this by filling the gaps or extending knowledge using your own subject expertise. You may need to synthesise new material offered by your learners on the spot rather than just deliver material you have prepared and answer questions to which you know the answers (Cowan, 2006).

Also, it's not really teaching, is it? I mean, the teacher's role in activities is passive and you don't need preparation.

The teacher's role includes assessing learning, monitoring engagement and progress, deciding when and how to intervene or prompt, asking questions to develop or consolidate understanding and much more.

Active learning also requires that you ensure that both you and the learners are interacting in an inclusive and enabling way. This means, among other things, being alert to oppressive behaviour, being prepared to intervene and challenge this, finding ways to engage reluctant learners and being watchful for any prior assumptions that you are making about the learners.

Yes, but at the end of the day active learning is basically a waste of precious time which could be spent 'covering material'. Right?

It is indeed true that you can fit lots of slides and presentation into an hour and maybe in this time you can only do one activity, but let's go back to the underpinning philosophy of active learning and look at formative assessment, which shifts the focus from teaching to learning.

Learning can be defined as being a change that has taken place in your learners. What can they do, what do they know, what have they created that is different from when they joined you for that session? The key question then becomes not what *you* can cover but what the *students* have learnt. And you may just find that the more you 'cover', the less they 'learn'. Besides which, part of the content can be flipped into directed study outside the session (see F is for Flexible).

What if students refuse to cooperate with activities? Or what if the learning is online and they are simply not engaging with it?

Students who have not been used to being active participants in their own learning may find it hard at first to see the value of this approach. Normalise activity in your face-to-face teaching. You can establish from the beginning an ethos where learning is seen as a joint venture. That's what we are trying to model through the tasks that occur throughout this book. Make sure that students do not get used to sitting in the same place, working with the same people, experiencing the same passive format in every session. Add a question to your evaluations that asks 'what was your contribution to the learning?' rather than focusing entirely on teacher performance. Talk to the students about the benefits of active learning (see M is for Meta-learning), including graduate attributes and the employability agenda (see O is for Occupations). However, be aware of students with identified needs and of any sensitivities within a group (see Q is for Quiet).

In an online context, establish an expectation from the start that students are expected to contribute to activities that are set, and get them to introduce themselves via a blog post or similar. Experiment with different media for feedback from tasks (discussion boards, interactive conference tools, social media, etc.) to see which work best for everyone. Set deadlines for contributions and make sure that you respond to input from the students – this can help to deepen their understanding of the knowledge that is being created.

I feel like I might lose control of the group if I'm not standing at the front, lecturing.

If students are carrying out activities, then you may find that they go off-task, that they complete tasks more quickly or more slowly than planned, that something goes wrong or that they simply lose interest.

However, if you lecture from the front (or indeed, remotely), your students may disengage, fail to keep up or become bored without you even being aware of it. In one sense, you have less control in this sort of teaching, because if you're not giving the students opportunities to evidence their learning, you can't adjust your teaching appropriately, whether on the spot or in the following session. You can also use active learning for part of a session rather than the whole session, gradually increasing the amount of time devoted to interactivity.

This is all very well in small groups, but what about large group teaching?

Some research suggests that active learning is 'easier' to do with smaller cohorts of students (e.g. Alexander, 2004 in Blatchford et al., 2016: 278).

However, this does not mean that you can't build some active learning strategies into a large group teaching situation – e.g. in a lecture theatre or online with a large cohort. Examples that we've observed which can apply to small or large groups include the following.

- A Computer Science teacher introducing her students to flow charts and asking them each to design such a chart mapping out their respective journeys into university that morning. She checks and feeds back on random examples before showing them one she did earlier. If the session is a virtual one, students can be asked to post photos of their examples to a shared space for comment and feedback.
- A Law teacher asking students to answer questions and collating their responses using an online response system ('voting' technology). Such approaches have been found to increase student engagement and enjoyment in large group settings (Heaslip et al., 2014).
- A Psychology teacher encouraging students to take part in mini-psychology experiments on themselves during a lecture. This can work in both face-to-face and distance-learning contexts.

Note that in these examples there is an emphasis on self-assessment by the students, since it is not always practical for the teacher to assess everyone. This means creating opportunities for students to check their progress.

Dos and don'ts when facilitating learning activities

Do have a strategy to ensure that your activity instructions are understood. Make them available in another format (on screen, board or paper). Ask students to explain the instructions back to you and invite questions. Observe students to see if they are following the instructions as intended (Fedesco, 2014). Online, this might mean providing a medium via which they can respond to the activity and get both peer and tutor feedback.

Don't assume that students will be happy to carry out an activity without a clear rationale for doing so. Make links to assessments, employability, other parts of the module/course and research evidence that promotes the use and benefits of active learning. This links with the principles of 'andragogy' (Knowles, 1980), where adult learners need to know why they are learning something.

Do prepare some 'differentiation' strategies in advance and make sure that the activity aligns with the outcomes for the session. This could mean making support material available to 'scaffold' the learning for those who might struggle (Bruner, 1978), a further task to challenge those who have sailed easily through the first part, or encouraging groups to compare results and discuss any differences. If you're designing learning for an

online context, students can be directed to support or extension materials as appropriate, as well as virtual spaces for small group work.

Don't get caught up with one group of students and ignore the rest. For face-to-face teaching, scan the room regularly to check that everyone is on task. Reassure students that you will come back to them shortly and move on to another group. In a virtual learning environment, if teaching in a synchronous context, you may be able to set up live chat rooms for the groups to work in, where you can pop in and out of each to check progress.

Do try to ensure that the students know more after a plenary than they did before. Avoid simply asking each group to repeat their task in front of the others. Time the feedback – for example, three minutes per group to identify key points. Ask and encourage questions to deepen learning. You could give groups different tasks so that they have a reason to present to each other. In this way, active learning opportunities are planned not only to encourage *the activation of prior knowledge in the small-group setting*, but also to provide *opportunities for elaboration on that knowledge* (Schmidt et al., 2011: 792). If the learning is online and asynchronous, make sure that groups share the results of any activities and that feedback is given promptly and transparently, so that all can benefit from it.

Don't simply disregard the results of an activity with students. Refer to their work later in the session/module. Encourage them to 'capture' their responses – for example, via online message boards, taking photos or typing up results. Create a shared group resource using online presentation slides. Value the results of activities as an authentic piece of work that all have contributed to and all can benefit from, and students will do the same (as evidenced in Cavanagh, 2011).

Do ensure that students don't leave the session thinking, 'Well, that was fun, but did we actually learn anything?'. A well-planned activity should support progress in learning. Leave enough time to summarise the key outcomes and link them to the intended aims of the session, and for students to reflect on what they've learned from the activity.

Conclusion

A final word about A is for Action: as well as being a reference to active learning, it evokes thoughts about a call to action. In a sense, this book is just that – a call to act, to create ways of teaching that are emancipatory and empowering for student and teacher alike. For more on learning in this sense, see Y is for Why? later in this volume.

Further reading

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