
Preface

Years ago, when I was a central office instructional coordinator, I remember a teacher who complained that his students would not sit still and pay attention for a full fifty-five-minute class period. There were two implications close to the surface of that complaint, of course. The first was that if the students would just sit still for any length of time, he could teach them. The second was a tacit request for me to help solve that problem by revealing how he could keep them seated, quiet, and attentive. Frankly, I can't remember what advice I gave, but I know what advice I would give today. I would tell him to quit fighting his students' inclination to get up, move, and socialize; instead, provide a classroom structure *inside which* those students could get up, move, and socialize frequently and productively.

I must admit that, early in my teaching career, my own classroom was a very teacher-centered place. What I saw when I began teaching, I did not question. For example, I realize now what I did not understand then: a fairly high percentage of the classroom furniture in schools is arranged by the building custodians (Jones, 2007). In my first classroom, student desks were in five rows of six, and the space between rows was wide enough for the standard dust mop. As a new teacher, I accepted that configuration because it was what I had been used to in high school and, for the most part, in college. Happily unaware of any *choices* related to room arrangement or methods of delivering content, I simply left the desks the way they were and adapted my teaching style to the furniture, utilizing most often the content delivery method I knew best and had experienced the most: lecture. Completely in line with Goodlad's findings (2004), I spent most of the time in my classroom in what Goodlad refers to as "talking mode," and my students were relegated to "listening mode" as they sat and took notes (p. 229). They would occasionally respond to one of my questions, but structured and purposeful interaction

among my students was rare. For years, I went home far more exhausted than they ever did.

Reflecting on those early years as a teacher, I can truly say that nothing much happened in the way of professional development or mentoring to change how I taught. I blundered along as a novice teacher, unaware that there might be better ways to involve my students to a greater extent in the learning process. Mine was the active role in those days, and my students were relegated (by me) to being passive observers.

I also fell prey to asking my students the very questions I had heard a hundred times during my own days in school at any level; for example, "Does anyone have any questions?" or "Does everyone understand what I just covered during this class period?" Those two less-than-powerful attempts on my part to check for understanding were more often than not greeted with shaking heads or blank looks. I probably thought that meant they understood every word and were ready to forge ahead in the textbook to the next section, chapter, or unit. More likely my students had no questions because I gave them little time in class to process any of the information I had presented in my lecture. Mine was an orderly, traditional, quiet, and passive classroom.

The movement toward brain-compatible learning in the past three decades has made available to teachers a veritable plethora of ideas on how to shift students from passive to *active* mode and how to involve them in their own learning to a much greater extent than lecture or individual seatwork will permit. Any school district that makes professional development a priority *increases the number of choices available for teachers*. This book is meant to make teachers more aware of many of the choices available to them today.

One cornerstone of the active classroom is the notion that students bring with them a great deal of knowledge and life experience from which they can build new understandings by reflecting and processing in structured, active classroom settings. Lipton and Wellman (2001) affirm what can be accomplished when students are exposed to new ideas in a purposeful and structured format: "According to Jean Piaget, learning is a process of disturbing current constructs with new experiences and exposure to novel ideas. These discoveries then need to be assimilated and or accommodated to form new conceptual understandings" (p. 58). This journey on the part of students and their teachers is one of discovery, exploration, and layering new experiences and understandings on the old.

One result of my own educational trek over the past 36 years is an appreciation of the fact that teachers and students reverse those roles often. My greatest experience as a substitute teacher was having a classroom full of special education students teach me how to do something I could not do—add and multiply using a new math program with which I was completely unfamiliar. Those fourth-graders took themselves to a new level of understanding by teaching me, and I once again marveled at how much teachers can learn from students. Those kids experienced the intrinsic motivation that comes from having successfully completed something beyond the ordinary, in this case “teaching the teacher.” At times like this we are reminded that education is a two-way street.

Over the past two decades, I have had the good fortune to attend many conferences and seminars taught by people who understand the constructivist notion of taking what learners already know and building upon it to achieve essential understandings. When I was an instructional coordinator, our school division engaged the services of Dr. Laura Lipton to work with our central office coordinators on instructional strategies that involve students in their own learning. That two-day experience opened my eyes (and my mind) to new possibilities, and it has helped me in countless ways over the years as I have worked with teachers, administrators, teacher assistants, substitute teachers, and other participants in seminars and workshops. That seminar was the first of many that showed me how I could help students make the critical shift from passive to active mode.

I now understand what I wish I had understood during my early years as a teacher: *that students must be actively involved in the learning process if their classroom experience is to lead to deeper understandings and the building of new knowledge.* Students (and adults, as I have discovered) need to hear it, touch it, see it, talk it over, grapple with it, confront it, question it, laugh about it, experience it, and reflect on it in a structured format if learning is to have any meaning and permanence. Our job as teachers is to facilitate those discussions and experiences in a purposeful and meaningful way.

This book is intended to help teachers discover ways to structure classrooms where what Kagan (1994) calls simultaneous interaction is king; where music energizes and helps facilitate process; where the kinesthetic and the visual join the auditory to create impact; where the teacher becomes part process-facilitator and part relationship-builder; and where students can’t wait to get to class . . . and then get up, get down, get energized, and get to work.

So let's get to work ourselves. The book is divided into ten chapters that, I trust, each follow in a logical sequence.

Chapter 1: Creating the Right Environment

Before students allow themselves to become actively involved in classroom activities, they want to know that it is safe to do so—physically safe, certainly, but emotionally safe as well. Bailey (2001) stresses the need for a classroom environment free of humiliation, sarcasm, and threat. Students who are afraid to share or speak out about something will be reluctant to take part in classroom conversations with fellow students, or with the teacher, for that matter. Group dynamics being what they are, any interaction between a teacher and a student affects the rest of the class. From the first day of school to the last, students are observing how the teacher treats individual students, looking for patterns, and adjusting their own reactions and behaviors accordingly (Grinder, 2000). Paying attention to the dynamics of the group is critical to the creation of a safe climate. Procedures and routines are an important part of that process as well. In this first chapter we will look at ways to create a classroom environment in which healthy interaction can occur.

Chapter 2: Incorporating Structured Conversations

Once students feel perfectly safe within the four walls of the classroom, my experience has been that they will take part in the discourse and simultaneous interaction that is an important part of any collaborative classroom. There is, of course, still a place for lecture in the active classroom. Short periods of lecture that are followed by time for processing that information are essential (Lipton & Wellman, 2000). "Learners need time to make sense of new information and ideas on their own; they also need time to think aloud and exchange thoughts with others" (p. 73). This second chapter will explore strategies for creating an interactive environment where students move toward becoming interdependent learners. This involves seeing a student's proclivity for socializing not as an obstacle, *but as an opportunity*.

Chapter 3: Managing Movement in the Classroom

Anyone who has observed children for any length of time knows that they simply have to move. They invent reasons to get up. A student whose pencil is already sharp may break the point in order to earn a trip to the sharpener. A visit to the restroom, preferably one that is farthest from the classroom, may provide an opportunity for a student to stand, stretch, and walk. According to Jensen (2000a), “As learning institutions incorporate more physical activity and less lecture, all of our students, not just the kinesthetic learners or those lacking social skills, will experience increased intrinsic motivation, improved attitudes, more bonding, and yes, even more brain cells” (p. ix). This chapter will provide ways in which students can stand, stretch, walk, talk, and laugh . . . while the teacher facilitates learning through that movement.

Chapter 4: Using Music to Facilitate Process

I have concluded that using music as part of my workshops and seminars has had perhaps more impact on participants than any other tool or strategy. Allen (2002) says that music, assuming it is handled correctly by the teacher, “can unleash the energy of any class and help guide it in a useful direction” (p. 90). Garmston (1997) puts it this way: “Music affects the emotions, respiratory system, heart rate, brain waves, and overall learning capacity of your audience” (p. 157). This chapter will explore some powerful uses of music in the classroom.

Chapter 5: Presenting With Confidence

In my four years of teacher preparation in college, I had exactly one course—Speech 101—that dealt with what is a critical role for any teacher: that of *presenter*. Considering the importance of this aspect of teaching, teacher preparation programs would do well to include a great deal of instruction on presentation skills. The tools of the trade for teachers and college instructors include voice (volume, tone, and pitch), body language, wait time, appropriate humor, facial expressions, purposeful positioning, timing, pausing, listening, and other ways of positively impacting the learning process. We’ll consider these components and more in this chapter.

Chapter 6: Teaching to All Modalities

The active classroom is a veritable hub of activity. Students are active participants in an environment that is created specifically for the effective use of discussion, movement, formal presentations, collaborative groups, visuals, and music. Each of the three VAK predicates—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—is honored in the active setting. One problem is that teachers who are strong in one modality may favor it in instruction, giving short shrift to the other two. Sprenger (2002) puts her finger on a related problem for those teachers who, like me, are auditory: “The students soon discover your desire to talk and will have you on several different tangents, using valuable class time” (p. 78). This chapter will explore ways to combine all three modalities into purposeful activities in order to provide balance, engage students, and enhance learning.

Chapter 7: Using Visuals and Technology

I find it amazing that if I purchased something electronic yesterday, it is already obsolete. Technological advances in education come thick and fast and assist teachers in myriad ways. Unfortunately, we can be so captivated by what these technological marvels *can* do that we lose sight of what they *can't* do: replace good teaching. Many of us can remember a presenter who revealed a new slide in a PowerPoint presentation and then proceeded to interrupt our own silent reading of the text in that slide by reading it out loud. This is one example of the misuse of technology that can lead to dissonance and confusion. The *overuse* of technology can result in students being bored and restless. This chapter will provide some tips on working with technology and visuals in the classroom so that what should be *supporting* the lesson does not wind up *becoming* the lesson.

Chapter 8: Unlocking Doors With Storytelling

There is something captivating about a good story. Alida Gersie (as cited in Maguire, 1998) notes that “Whenever stories are told, stillness falls. We cease our restless frittering” (p. 4). I must admit to having my share of restless frittering as a classroom participant, but not when a story was being told by a teacher, professor, or another student. Stories can be true or not. They can be short or long. But a tale

well told has the capacity to transport us to another place, another time, and engage us in a way that few other things can. Take a good story and add the context of historical events, for example, and the two form a powerful partnership. This chapter will provide strategies for unleashing the power of storytelling.

Chapter 9: Considering the New Reality and Practical Applications

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, my expectations were vastly different than those of a child or adolescent of today. I was mesmerized by black and white television where the action was often leisurely and unfolded at a pace perfectly acceptable to a baby boomer like me. By contrast, today's kids are bombarded with TV and movie images that flash before their eyes with the rapidity of a machine gun. Video games that promise action and fast-moving visual images have replaced yesterday's board games that today's kids might consider "bored games." Students must be entertained. Their capacity for sitting still for any length of time has diminished. This chapter will consider, then, what has changed over the years to create a "new reality" that affects how kids learn and how teachers must now plan for success. This chapter will also include lesson plans in all four major subject areas. The lessons will demonstrate how teachers can take a fifty-five-minute period or a ninety-minute block and facilitate movement, conversation, and collaboration while dealing with course content.

Chapter 10: Planning for the Active Classroom

The teacher's key to effective planning for the active classroom is to honor the human tendency to want to *share* with others, *move* hither and yon, *laugh* out loud, *think* individual thoughts, and then *write* them down—all within the kind of safe environment that permits and encourages those tendencies. There are some potential obstacles that can get in the way of success in the active classroom: among them a lack of classroom space devoted to movement and interaction; leadership inconsistencies; breadth versus depth of coverage; an overabundance of lecture and individual seat time; competition versus collaboration; and playing the blame game. In this final chapter we will look at ways to remove obstacles to learning.

Perhaps the role of the teacher best approximates that of the orchestra conductor. The musicians make the music, but the conductor is in a position to influence the flow of the music, affecting, by her actions, the volume, tempo, and timing. She gives feedback when necessary and acknowledges effort constantly. A symphony is the ultimate collaborative effort. Everyone contributes. Everyone has different strengths and varying levels of skill, but in the final analysis, the conductor figures out how to combine it all into a supremely satisfying effort. *It is at once the score, the talent, the practice, the discipline, the commitment, the passion, and the ability of the conductor to multitask and influence process that determines the quality of the performance.*

The active classroom is a place where the teacher effectively influences the flow of process and his students do most of the work. The active classroom is a place where students are frequently encouraged to actively reflect on and process information, skillfully practice the art of communication, purposefully move and share, and continually engage in their own learning. Active classrooms are alternately noisy and quiet places. They are usually colorful places and they are always safe places. *It is at once the lesson, the talent, the practice, the discipline, the commitment, the passion, and the ability of the teacher to multitask and influence process that determines the quality of the learning.*

The purpose of this book is to help teachers energize students and energize themselves in the process. My belief is that learning should be active, contemplative, dynamic, purposeful, spontaneous, safe, constructivist, brain-compatible, engaging, reflective, and *fun* for everyone involved in the process, including the person in the best position to choreograph it all . . . the teacher.