Tales from Real Life

Keep the Magic Alive

BY TODD D. ZAKRAJSEK, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

If variety is the spice of life, it is fairly clear how you can spice up your class: introduce more controlled unpredictability.

It is a rare faculty member who talks about having fun in the classroom. I know it happens, because I have seen it first hand. Why we don’t see it all the time? Not more often, but all the time. Ask students whether they like learning; most say “yes.” Ask the same students if they find their classes interesting and too many respond with a “no.”

What do we do to students to dim the spark of academic learning? I believe too often we focus on teaching, and as a result, forget to involve them in learning. The good news is that there are many ways to actively engage students in the learning process. The even better news is that many of the techniques to bring students alive in classroom are very easy to implement.

The first order of business is to find ways to meaningfully include student input in the course. After all, if you lecture all the time you know exactly what is coming next, and students feel there is, or should be, easier ways to get the prepackaged material you are delivering.

If students are regularly participating during class, you really never know what is coming around the next corner.

That variety will increase interest and learning in the class, for both you and your students. On that issue, the research is clear.

MEET TODD D. ZAKRAJSEK

Todd D. Zakrajsek is the Executive Director of the Center for Faculty Excellence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was previously the founding director of the Faculty Center for Innovative Teaching at Central Michigan University and started the Center for Teaching and Learning at Southern Oregon University where he taught in the psychology department as a tenured associate professor. Todd also directs a National Lilly Conference on Teaching and Learning and co-directs the International Conference on Improving University Teaching. He received his Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology. He has published and presented on the topic of student learning, including conference keynote addresses throughout the U.S. and Europe. He can be reached at toddzak@unc.edu.

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Easy Ways to Incorporate Active Learning

Being an educator means constantly striving to not only educate others, but also assisting others in wanting to actively engage in the process of being educated.

Here is a well-kept secret: teaching is really difficult. Most of us learned teaching is lecturing and “covering content.” You end up lecturing over material that used to be exciting while your students text friends and update their Facebook accounts. As a complicating factor, as diligent as you are to creating an exciting lecture, many students seem apathetic or disinterested in learning the material covered.

The good news is there are easy ways to get students involved in the learning process, and the result of greater student engagement is often very positive. It has been demonstrated time and again that actively engaging students in the educational process greatly enhances their learning. The concepts below take very little time to learn to implement and do not require much class time. In addition, examples were chosen specifically because they do not result in a great deal of additional work for you as the course instructor.

Preparing Students to Participate

A primary consideration in using active learning is to create a classroom that is conducive to sharing. Learning the names of your students and setting ground rules for respectful discussions will greatly aid in class participation. Essentially, if students feel comfortable and know their ideas will be supported they are much more likely to contribute.

It is also critical that students be prepared to engage in whatever activity you structure for the class period. If students have not completed the reading or learned the basic concepts assigned, they will not be able to engage in any meaningful discussion about the material. Therefore, the first, and perhaps most important first step is encouraging students to be prepared.

Regularly hold your students accountable for out of class work. If you assigned a chapter to be read, have them demonstrate what they have learned in the next class period. This can be done by having a low stakes quiz over the foundational material at the beginning of the class, asking students to bring a 100-word summary of the homework assigned, or e-mailing a short application of the concepts learned. It is surprising the number of times instructors will assign material and then either lecture over the material or have students participate in class in such a way as that completing the assignment, regardless of the value pertaining to learning the material, is not needed for the day’s activities. Students quickly learn when they can skip the assigned readings with little consequences to themselves, until the next exam.

Stimulating Class Discussion

Once students are prepared to participate, think about how to stimulate responses from students. Simply calling on students is not enough. We have all faced blank stares from students when asking for responses. Don’t leave classroom participation to a test of wills.

First, keep in mind that much of classroom behavior is about expectations. If you ask the class a question and then, facing no responses, continue to answer your own question, the stage is set. Your questions will be seen as rhetorical, with the expectation that you will both ask and answer your own questions. Silence during wait time, moving closer to students, and maintaining direct eye contact will often create tension that facilitates responding.

If your class is primarily lecture-based, include a few specific applications of the course material. Recognizing and understanding concepts is very different from being able to apply concepts to a new situation. Provide one or two examples applying the concepts in class and then ask students to volunteer additional examples.

Another popular technique is to use student response systems. There are several possible systems to use, and they are becoming very easy to incorporate into the class. Others, such as Poll Everywhere, allow students to use either their cell phones or laptops to respond.

A final relatively easy change to make to a course is simply to encourage students to write out quick responses to questions you ask. Give about 30 seconds for students to write a response after you pose a question, and then call on students to read what they have written. The opportunity to think and write for a short period before speaking in front of an entire class often encourages better responses.

Involving Students as Contributors

As the instructor, it is your responsibility to determine how best to facilitate learning in the course. This may or may not involve you explaining the material. Although there may well be essential and extremely complex elements that are important for you to teach, there are certainly other aspects of the material that students can teach to one another.

There are several methods used by faculty members to involve
students in assisting with providing explanatory material. Several years ago I began using YouTube clips to explain psychological concepts. The videos are short, and often very good examples. Then I began having my students find clips to be used in class. I now ask students to find online clips of the material to be covered in the next class period and send them to me with a short explanation of why they selected the clip and the concept illustrated. These have proven to be very effective both in illustrating good examples to use during class and generating discussion.

A few other techniques include having students serve as discussion leaders for the day, having students bring a “question of the day” to class, and asking students to provide a good example of a specific concept to be covered in the upcoming class period. There are many techniques designed to have students bring material or explanations to class to share with others. Student contributions increase the variety and interest in your course, as you never know exactly what the students will contribute.

Using Groups to Engage Learners

Another possibility to encourage active learning is to have students work together in small groups and then hold a class discussion. There are three techniques that I have used with great success in this area: think-pair-share, concept tests, and card passing.

The think-pair-share has been around for many years and is one of the easiest ways to introduce active learning in your classroom. In the most basic form, you propose a prompt and first ask students to think or write about the concept for one minute. At the end of the minute students turn to one neighbor (pair) and discuss what each has written or thought about. Finally, individuals are called on to share what they have discussed as pairs with the entire class.

Concept tests were developed by Eric Mazur and have many beneficial features. This process involves first giving a short lecture of about fifteen minutes. At the conclusion of the lecture, project a typical multiple choice example test item. Go through each response, asking students to raise hands if they believe the correct response is “a,” “b,” “c,” or “d.” Ideally, the question will be difficult enough so that approximately 60–75 percent of the students will get the question correct. At this point instruct your students to turn to their neighbors to convince them of the correct answer.

Included in this article are just a few of the many techniques currently being used to engage students in the learning process. Overall, it is critical to think about what it is you wish for your students to learn and then decide how best to get your students involved by making sure they are ready to participate, creating an environment that encourages and supports participation, and then giving your students an opportunity to share ideas with one another. Overall, you will be amazed at how much students can learn from one another, and also what you will learn from them.

BEST PRACTICES

More than a “Guide on the Side”

Several faculty members have told me ways they adjust commonly used active learning strategies to meet the needs of their individual students. There are many active learning techniques in use, but slight variations often work best for a specific situation. The changes you make will depend on the needs and abilities of your students.

One faculty member indicated that she used quizzes at the beginning of every class period. Not only did the quizzes encourage students to read the material, it also resulted in everyone showing up for class on time. The quizzes also let students know what to expect on the first exam. In addition, she had students work on quizzes individually and then again in small groups. The group work promoted additional learning.

Another faculty member indicated he adapted several classroom assessment techniques to assist in helping students to know when they knew the material. Essentially, this helped his students to develop metacognitive awareness.

I constantly adopt and adapt classroom strategies to create the best learning environments given all of the factors involved. To do so requires me to understand the content of the course, the students in the course, my own strengths as a teacher, the resources available, and a host of other factors impacting the way my students learn. Even thought it does not make a cute rhyme, perhaps most faculty who use active learning effectively are really a “sage on the side.”
ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Tips For Success

Suggestions for implementing active learning in any class.

Start with outcome in mind. For any change in your course, start with the end in mind. What do you wish to accomplish? Keeping this question in mind will reduce the probably of changing for the sake of change. It will also help you to document teaching effectiveness.

Build from your strengths. Identify what is working well in the class and start from there. If you are a very good lecturer, keep the lecture and include one or two short active learning strategies in the course. If you are very good as a moderator, try classroom debates.

Keep it simple, especially at the start. Your new active learning component should not result in a lot of work for you or your students. I have seen very complicated systems that looked good on paper, but students could not figure out what they were supposed to do. I have also seen activities that were very difficult to grade. You can always expand later. Start small.

Don’t try too many different things in class. Variety is important, but too much variety is confusing. I feel three to four different active learning strategies during a semester is usually plenty. Most strategies require a few trials before they are effective. If it takes two or three trials for students to understand what is being asked of them, there is certainly no value in changing types of tasks every class period.

Tell the students what you are doing, and why. One thing that most instructors could do to easily improve learning for students is simply to explain what is being done and why. Students are much more likely to put energy into something to make it successful if they know why it is being done. Also, the explanation may well reduce confusion regarding some aspect of what they are being asked to do.

Assess for effectiveness. Always take the time to see if the strategy you have implemented had the desired effect. If you had students learn each others’ names with the expectation of better discussions, determine if that happened. There are several ways to collect data. One of the most obvious is to ask your students. Often students are very good at indicating when something worked well. That said, there are times in which students may have demonstrated more learning in class, yet indicated they did not like the classroom strategy you employed that resulted in the additional learning. Think about what outcome you desire and strive to find a way to measure the result.