Active Learning

“What I hear, I forget.
What I see, I remember.
What I do, I understand.”
--Confucius

T-N-T
“Telling is NOT Teaching”
--Penn (2008, p.8)

While there are many definitions of “active learning,” it can be described as an “umbrella” term that includes several teaching/learning strategies. All of them involve students being actively engaged in content, rather than passively taking in content (i.e. as with a lecture). This “umbrella” term includes approaches such as collaborative and cooperative learning, problem-based learning, simulation, and experiential learning (Barkley, 2010). The Creighton Virtual Center for Teaching Excellence is an excellent source for more information on many of these approaches.

Active learning suggests that students make cognitive connections that foster deep learning when they are able to, “read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems.” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p.1). Activities such as these allow students to engage in higher-order thinking by analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating the content (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), rather than simply memorizing it.

Active learning strategies are commonly used in K-12 instruction, but have been slower to seep into higher education. Never the less, active learning is espoused as one of Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education:

Good practice in undergraduate education:

1. encourages contact between students and faculty,
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
3. encourages active learning,
4. gives prompt feedback,
5. emphasizes time on task,
6. communicates high expectations, and
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

If you are interested in incorporating active learning into your classroom, start small. Carefully research and plan the activity you would like to try….talk it over with colleagues and most importantly, give clear directions to the students. Here are some ideas and resources to get started!

After 15-20 minutes of lecture, try:

1. **Musical Questions**: Each participant writes a question about the content on a note card. The teacher plays music and has the students pass their questions around the room until the music stops. The students silently read the question they have when the music stops, and formulate an answer. They then turn to a partner to share their question and answer with rationale. They should reach agreement on both answers.

2. **Pass the paper**: Each student writes their name and one thing they learned on a blank piece of paper. While the teacher plays music, the students pass their paper to the person on their right; that person writes down one thing they learned and passes the paper to their right. Students continue passing the papers around the room until the music stops. When the music stops, participants take the
paper to the person whose name is top. That person will read the “list” to themselves to review the content.

3. **PowerPoint Pop Quiz**: Pose a multiple choice question (application level or higher). Give students time to formulate their answers on their own, then turn to a partner to discuss their answers *with rationale*. If partners disagree, they must discuss until consensus is reached. Poll the class by having everyone stand to share their answers (i.e. everyone who answered “A” stand up etc.).

**At the end of the class, try:**

4. **Ticket Out**: Students write 3 things they learned in class on a note card. They must hand the card to the instructor as their “ticket” out of class.

5. **Snowball Fight**: Each student summarizes the most important thing they learned from the lecture on a blank piece of paper. They then crumple their paper into a “snowball.” When the teacher yells, “snowball fight,” the students have 30 seconds to throw, catch, and throw again as many snowballs as possible. When the teacher yells “stop,” each student picks up a snowball and reads it to the group (for large classes, they could form groups of 3-4).

6. **Four on the Floor**: Have students fold a blank paper into four squares. Have them write one sentence in each square: 1.) The most important thing I’ve learned is… 2.) I will remember this information by associating it with… 3.) I will use this information in my future career by… 4.) A question, idea, or comment I still have is… Students hand their papers in when they exit the classroom.

(*)Strategies adapted from various works by Sharon Bowman

**Other ideas:**

7. **“Take a Guess”**: Begin class by having students write down specific content that might be discussed in class. During the lecture, have students circle information from his/her list that the instructor discusses. At the end of class, ask volunteers to share the concepts that he/she feels are the most important concepts on his/her list. This activity helps students identify background information, engages students to listen for the information, and has students summarize information. This idea is taken from Sharon Bowman’s book, *Preventing Death by Lecture!* (2001, page 25)

8. Distribute fluorescent colored sticky dots to students at the start of class. After lecturing for 10-15 minutes, (assuming the students have been taking notes) have students put a sticker in front of the information that he/she feels is the most significant. Ask the students to turn “partner-up”, and share the “dotted” information with each other. **Ask students to explain the reason why the content is significant.** Adapted from the “Nudge Your Neighbor” activity taken from Sharon Bowman’s book, *Preventing Death by Lecture!* (2001, page 41)

9. Each participant answers this question on an index card:

“**What do I expect to get from this class/course?**”

The index card is put in an envelope, collected and redistributed. Each participant gets an envelope, opens and reads the index card to the group. One participant records the responses on a flip chart. Reading a “stranger’s” idea is less threatening to the individual reading the card, because that individual is not responsible for the content being read.
10. Divide class into groups, each group is given the same or different article to read. Each group member silently reads and stars the most important information. Each group member shares his/her starred information. Have the group document content shared and identify information which several members found noteworthy. If time allows, each small group reports to the large group.

11. Similar to the activity above, the class is divided into groups. Each group is given the same or a different document to read. During this activity each member underlines or stars the information that he/she finds most challenging. This information could be characteristics of good nursing, or course content (text or lecture) information. If time allows, each small group reports to the large group.

12. **Incorporate movement into your classes.** Have learners move regularly. Approximately every 20 minutes have students get up and stretch, collaborate with other students, or even jog in place. Make your classroom a fun place to learn! Rationale: Boosts students’ attention level; increases circulation to large muscles and brain.

**LINKS:**

- Active Learning: Buffalo State Professional and Faculty Development
- Enhanced Lecture (active learning activities to break up lectures) UNC Charlotte
- Active learning ideas for the college classroom: California State University

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**REFERENCES:**


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