

Active Learning PD Session
Friday February 3, 2023

What is active learning?

“Instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” ~ Bonwell & Eison (1991)

This definition emphasizes the metacognitive, as students learn not only by doing something active, but also by “thinking about what they are doing.” It is important to debrief any activities that students do. And when designing activities, it is imperative to consider their purpose and intended learning to be able to unpack this with students.

How do learning spaces “speak” to instructors and students?

A design feature of many active learning classrooms (such as the ALC in Riddell) is tables that seat groups of students around the perimeter of the room, with the instructor podium in the center. Interestingly, this placement functions to de-center the instructor, who cannot easily lecture from such a location because their back will always be to some students, and some students will always have their backs turned to the instructor. The room “tells” instructors that they should not be the focal point of student attention.

This message differs greatly from lecture halls and traditional classrooms, in which students all face in one direction, with their attention directed toward the instructor and the screen or blackboard. The implicit lesson from the room design is that the instructor possesses the only knowledge worth imparting, and students are meant to receive this wisdom.

That doesn’t mean that active learning can’t take place in traditional learning spaces, but it may take additional explanation and coaxing to get students to believe that they, too, have insights and knowledge to share with one another, and that learning can happen in their interactions with one another. Indeed, active learning requires careful planning and preparation of everyone involved. It is a constant task for instructors to remind themselves that their role is to facilitate student learning rather than simply telling students what they want them to know—especially since most of us were trained in a very transactional model of education.

Activity 1: Getting to know you/Getting comfortable with you (Andrea Phillipson)

Team activity - At each table, do a quick round of introductions (name, department, one course you teach). After introductions, each table member writes down one thing that they love about teaching on scrap paper. Fold the paper and put it in the middle of the table. One team member should volunteer to pick up one piece of paper and read it aloud. Everyone should get a chance

to guess who wrote the statement, then the person who wrote it reveals themselves. Repeat until you reach the final statement.

Debrief: This kind of fun activity is important for establishing trust amongst students. Start with a low-stakes activity before scaffolding up to more difficult discussions in which students will share their thoughts and ideas in ways that can feel vulnerable.

Activity 2: Team Leader Silent Activity (Peter Ryan)

Peter presented via pre-recorded video, which you can access here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nWKBD0-BybmnQ8XtujkQHZ_FNqdTdkMq/view?usp=sharing

Slides:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1yYqENHHJXFXHn_RTAKeJTF_sIHVh1Ra9vbkFyT7RuRw/edit?usp=sharing

Helpful Resource:

Barkley, E.F. (2020). *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook of College Faculty*.
Jossey-

Bass. https://librarysearch.mtroyal.ca/permalink/01MTROYAL_INST/1qa1aqk/cdi_askewsholts_vlebooks_9781119686897

Team activity - Each table nominates 1 leader, who goes to the instructor podium to get explicit instructions about a task their group must complete without anyone speaking. The leader can be creative about getting the group to complete the task, which must be done in 3 minutes.

The task is: Use the whiteboard closest to your table and write a list of the Top 5 Leaders in History (dead or alive)

Debrief: When the group completes the task, what do we see? For example, are they all dead white men? Are women included? People from a variety of places around the world? The debrief is an important opportunity to discuss how diverse answers may be less common when groups are under pressure (time and silence).

Activity 3: Compare/Contrast/Decide Matrix (Tammy Sherrow)

Tammy facilitated a team activity in which teams were asked to do research and reach consensus about a decision to make in the following scenario:

Assume you are a Canadian kid who just finished a University degree as a Division one NCAA athlete with a full scholarship at an American University. You are considered average in your talent in both sports and have offers from both NBA and NHL. Compare and contrast various

aspects of each of these professional sports based on the themes in the matrix and make a decision...WHICH ONE WILL YOU CHOOSE?

Teams were given a decision matrix with instructions:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gQCcVLyQiWXE8ltBv7K8rv1ar2deWjpu6roKLC8NIvw/edit?usp=sharing>

Debrief: Can you imagine using an activity like this in your class? Are there any topics you'd like students to research on the spot independently? Any decisions they can practice making in this low-stakes environment?

Closing Discussion (John Cheeseman and Luciano Santos - leaders of the ADC Active Learning Initiative at MRU)

The MRU [Active Learning Initiative](#) exists to support instructors wishing to enhance their teaching through active learning. The initiative includes facilitating use of the Active Learning Classroom (EL2463) and encouraging faculty using this space to engage in SoTL projects.

Basic principles of active learning:

- Students are active
- Intentional design
- Focus on interaction (student-instructor; student-student; student-content; student-technology)
- Student ownership of their learning
- Targets higher-order thinking skills
 - Critical thinking
 - Creativity
 - Problem solving

Setting expectations is key when using active learning strategies. One useful analogy to try:

Many students expect that learning is like going to the grocery store: you pay money to select the items you want, and you leave the store satisfied. But learning is actually like going to the gym: you pay money and in return you get access to experts who can guide you, and equipment you can use, but you will only benefit if you do the workout.

An important facet to active learning is making the purpose of all engagement explicit to students: explain why you're doing what you're doing the way you're doing it.

- Better "buy-in" from students who may be accustomed to a passive understanding of learning
- Better learning occurs when students don't have to focus energy on trying to decode why they are doing particular tasks