Learning is Not a Spectator Sport
Engage Your Students through Active Learning

Why doesn’t anyone respond when I ask a question?
Why don’t my students read and understand the material?
Why don’t my students seem to care?

As a graduate teaching assistant or lecturer, you might ask yourself these questions on days when things are not going so well, in spite of your meticulous planning. You made the decision to attend graduate school to study and teach a subject that really interests you, but you might not have counted on the possibility that not all of your students would automatically share in or respond to your enthusiasm and passion.

But here you are, faced with a gen-ed or other required course and a classroom full of students who took your section because it fit their schedule. So, how do you get them engaged? It’s not as hard as you think. Think about those moments when your own learning is fun: when you’re wrestling with tough questions alongside your peers; digging up an obscure resource because you really want to know something; or performing hands-on experiments because you really want to see the data. Giving your own students the opportunity to connect in similar ways with the concepts you are teaching is the key. Group activities, discussions and debates, inquiries, problems to solve and short writing assignments—all of these will encourage your students to both engage with and learn the material.

Active learning to the rescue
While we may complain that “students are just memorizing,” they may not know how to learn any other way. When students read or listen to a lecture, there’s no guarantee that they know what to read or listen for, and so they may resort to the one strategy that has worked for them in the past. Active learning strategies are designed to undo student misconceptions about learning, and to ensure that they connect with the material in a more sophisticated way.

When students actually have to do something, they can no longer be passive observers of what is going on around them—they are actively learning. They learn by doing something then reflecting on what they have done. The instructor designs tasks and assignments so that students visibly demonstrate their thinking by way of specific, concrete products or observable actions, such as decisions and choices. The instructor can then see—through these products and/or actions—what is fully understood and what remains unclear. Students become more productive because they are showing you and themselves what they are getting out of your class. By asking students to perform frequent, daily actions, you push them to become more mentally and physically invested in the material. Since they are more likely to care about something that they have engaged in so deeply, they will work harder to understand it.

Case studies requiring an analysis and judgment, short problems, “challenge tasks,” brief in-class writing tasks, collaborative production and/or group decision-making not only let students demonstrate their grasp of the course material, but also provide multiple ways to assess their progress. Because these activities are frequent, instructors can gauge on a regular basis how students are doing, where the stumbling blocks are, where to place more emphasis, and where it’s possible to skip or breeze through material because students already understand it.

Overcoming challenges to active learning
While research has shown that active learning can improve student attitudes in the classroom and enhance writing and thinking skills, there are still some challenges to anticipate. Instructors often question whether they will be able to cover all the content, manage students’ initial resistance, and relinquish control to the unpredictability of class discussions. How do you handle these potential obstacles?

First, you may have students who prefer to remain invisible and uninvolved. If this is a worry, you can make participation an explicit goal of the course, and even include student work on in-class tasks in the grading scheme. We often focus on other teaching objectives first, and let goals regarding student engagement fall by the wayside. You can demonstrate that participation is a goal by asking questions that stimulate student interaction and thought, rather than a recitation of facts.

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These questions are what E. Shelly Reid calls “engagement-focused questions”: They have no “right” answer, can elicit a variety of responses, and allow students to use their own reasoning and experience in order to respond. Examples of these questions might be, “What social or economic conditions are essential for a democracy to survive? Or, which variable did you need to consider first in setting up this problem? You can also give students time to write down their thoughts or talk through their ideas with a partner before starting the discussion.

Second, more student participation does not have to interfere with your coverage of the material if you use the feedback generated by student activities. Student responses and interactions help you determine what students already know or need to know. There may be some topics you only have to briefly explain and then move on. Also, students sometimes know more than we think. Through group work and class discussions, they can improve the knowledge of their peers, and you can also use student statements as entry points into key concepts: “Wes mentioned that he got a parking ticket before coming to class. What type of policy is this and what are its intended effects?”

Third, we can and need to consciously create an environment that makes active learning productive and functional for students. One fundamental way of accomplishing this is to develop a syllabus that specifically lays out the type of learning and thinking you expect students to engage in, the methods you will use to promote that type of learning and thinking, the policies that foster the behaviors you want students to be responsible for, and clear plans for assessment. These structures and boundaries are essential for reassuring students when you ask them to do something outside their comfort zone. If what you ask them to do is consistent with the vision set forth in the syllabus, students will go along with the plan.

Finally, teaching in this way requires you to be approachable: hold regular office hours, talk to students before class begins, and provide lots of feedback on their work. Such actions will cause students to feel less anxiety about participating in class.

Since the class discussion is a common way for students to debrief and process active learning assignments, the table at right provides suggestions for making discussions more engaging. There are also descriptions of some short writing activities that can be used to allow students time to collect their thoughts and to assess what they are learning from the discussion. Please visit the Institute for Teaching, Learning and Academic Leadership’s website (www.albany.edu/teachingandlearning) for more resources on active learning strategies.

Adapted from the articles, Student Engagement: Trade-offs and Payoffs by E. Shelley Reid and Freaks and Brainiacs by Maryellen Weiner, found in the special report “Building Student Engagement: 15 Strategies for the College Classroom,” The Teaching Professor. Maryellen Weiner, Ed. Magna Publications, Inc. (December 2009).

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<th>Leading Classroom Discussions</th>
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| Use short, ungraded writing to deepen thinking (and to let people prepare before speaking up): | Have students write for five minutes, then have them read their writing aloud, or list their main ideas on the board. |
| Slow the flow, probe deeper: | For homework, have students write the questions they have about the reading: “What are you wondering about? What does this make you think of?” |
| Balance students’ voices: | “Others we’ve heard from less?” “If it’s already been said, how would you say it?” Remind people: “No question is stupid.” |
| Track themes to bring discussion back on track or reframe it: | Put guiding questions or ideas on screen or board: “Which one are we addressing now?” Offer your own dawning discoveries to encourage reframing: “Oh, I just realized! Maybe Hector is the real hero of the poem.” “What if we solved the problem this way?” |
| Summarize what was learned (while valuing uncertainty, depending on the content): | In general, use open questions (what/why) over closed questions (“Is this clear?” or “Does that make sense?”) to practice putting complex ideas into language. At end of class, give a “minute paper” about the most important thing they learned from that class or the “muddiest point” (what they did not understand). Begin the next discussion by reviewing what students wrote. |