

CETL Capstone
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Active Learning

During the academic year of 2007-2008, I was privileged to be the graduate assistant for the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). This was a fantastic opportunity to absorb teaching concepts. This year, I began the year as teaching assistant in ENG 101, English Composition. I could now apply many of the principles absorbed through CETL and taught in the Faculty Training Certificate Program. The biggest keyword for me was active learning, but I also learned about teaching in general.

English composition classes have twenty-five students, each seated in front of a computer. This allows me to use the internet as a tool for teaching, use the Desire2Learn program, and enables me to read the writing of the students rather than attempt to decipher handwriting. This opportunity also has a down side. When a student is bored, they log in to facebook.com or myspace.com to read and participate in social networking with other electronic peers. So how does an instructor work through this kind of distraction? I found that applying active learning techniques kept my class on track.

I begin most classes with each student writing in an electronic journal. Journaling allows unpunctual students to join in with the rest of the class without missing information, brings the student's attention toward putting thoughts to word in a non-graded, non-judgmental situation, and allows the physical act of writing as an excellent way to practice and improve writing skills. The R:/ drive on our computers works wonderfully as a place to electronic journal. The "courses" folder only lists the classes applicable to the person logged into the computer.

Once journaling time is finished, I move on to a short PowerPoint presentation. At first, I used the whiteboard for my lectures, but now I avoid them. I discovered that the minute my back faced the class as I wrote on the board, the whispering started. Losing the attention of the students can be avoided by using PowerPoint because with PowerPoint the instructor faces the class. I make sure my PowerPoint lectures are accessible by the students. I load it onto the computer just before class so that students can follow along as I lecture. For some reason, more students remain on task this way. I often ask questions during my lecture time and will generally call on anyone who does not appear attentive. My longest lecture time is fifteen to twenty minutes, which is a small portion of my one hour and forty-five minute time period to teach.

After lecturing, I break the class up into either partners or groups and assign between one and three in-class exercises. Students have a chance to apply one or more principles of the lecture. Student focus remains on task and each becomes more comfortable with the class as they begin to know their peers in class. Collaborating on in-class projects enables critical thinking skills and emphasizes the lesson. I make myself available and approachable by circulating around the room to field questions and guide groups.

Occasionally I attempt to integrate a topic of diversity. When I present a special topic I use the holistic active learning approach. This year I applied this strategy on our reflection papers. First I had each student journal reflect on their knowledge of deafness. Then students broke into groups to discuss what living as a deaf individual might be like. I

had the class view the PBS movie "Through Deaf Eyes" and assigned the reflection paper. Each student had their own personal idea of deafness, then their group's idea of deafness, and then the classroom's idea of deafness. When the movie was shown in class it revealed misconceptions for many students. Each student had ample information to use in their assignment and became more informed in the process.

Since research suggests that stress can block chemical reactions in the brain that are necessary for learning, I provide a relaxed environment to enable each student's ability to learn. By structuring the class period into smaller learning sessions I keep everyone's focus on the topic. Active learning helps me cover the different learning methods used by students because it allows me to present information in different formats. Just by attending class, the student is forced to learn and that is my purpose. I want students to learn how to write and apply their learning to other academic endeavors and in their future careers.