

CETL Capstone Project

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I have enjoyed my participation in the FTCP. I have been most inspired by the following four ideas that have been illustrated to me throughout the various CETL seminars of which I attended:

1. active learning can be implemented in ALL courses,
2. active learning does not need to be viewed as too costly to the professor,
3. active learning can benefit EVERYONE in the classroom, and
4. active learning can be facilitated effectively and efficiently.

Current Course Project Involving Active Learning

I currently teach SPEE 101, Interpersonal Communication, to a variety of students (it is a general elective, and noted as a writing-intensive course). Regarding the topic of the course, I have found many students reluctant to openly discuss aspects that are related to the course material due to the personal nature of the material. To overcome this obstacle inhibiting student discussion and engagement, I have in the past utilized a set of participation exercises (i.e., open-ended questions, pair-sharing, role-playing, timed individual writing tasks) that engage the students in different activities to insure they are integrating the material and following with the content that is being discussed each period – without having to formally discuss personal topics in front of the whole class.

I have found my initial attempts to facilitate this type of class participation to be problematic for the following reasons: exercises were too informal, were unplanned, and were completed on separate sheets of loose-leaf notebook paper. This allowed for great flexibility, but not enough structure to insure students would link specific exercises with broader course objectives. Although the student response to this mode of participating was very positive, it was difficult to respond effectively to each student's input in an efficient way that allowed me to assess both what they knew and if they felt the tasks were helpful. Additionally, having the students write on loose-leaf paper made handling the exercises and grading them problematic.

CETL Capstone Project Involving Active Learning

I chose to work on the facilitation of these participation exercises for my capstone project with two goals in mind. First, I want to redesign the exercises to make them more *effective* for the students. Second, I want to streamline the

facilitation of the exercises to make them more *efficient* as a graded component of the course.

To address the effectiveness goal, I will: 1) incorporate assessment techniques into the exercises, and 2) link the exercises with broader course objectives, and work to maintain a sense of continuity in the material covered that students can see evolve over the semester. To address the efficiency goal, I will: 1) plan each exercise ahead of time, 2) grade exercises in intervals (rather than on a daily basis), and 3) formalize the format in which the students are writing.

How will this benefit the students? Regarding effectiveness, I predict that formalizing the format in which a student documents his/her involvement in the participation exercises will make the exercises more tangible and offer more structure to each activity. I plan to do this by having students document their participation in traditional "bluebooks." This format will have a second benefit of offering each student a longitudinal record of their participation that can be easily reviewed. My intent is for a student to be able to compare and contrast his/her earlier thoughts and interpretations with later understandings that develop throughout the course.

Regarding efficiency, I also predict that by using bluebooks students will have a greater opportunity to offer me more feedback, via assessment techniques, over the duration of the course. Having the format more formalized and organized will also allow me to offer each student more feedback. I will be able to respond to his/her thoughts and ideas in a manner that I hope will offer more coherence to the material and improve how each student integrates it within his/her own mental structures.

How will I, the professor, benefit from these changes? Regarding effectiveness, I predict that I will be able to better facilitate not only the integration of the material, but also implement greater continuity across topics and skills that are reviewed throughout the semester by linking various exercises together.

Regarding efficiency, I plan to elaborate my planning for each session of class that will involve one of the participation exercises (which is basically every other session, if not every one). Although I like the flexibility of changing the exercises in order to maximize what the feel of the class is that day, I am realizing that my approach may require more structure to enhance the benefits for students and myself. In this regard, actually writing lesson plans, formally relating topics to course objectives, and focusing on building continuity across the course will help me to build efficiency into the presentation of the course material. In addition, using bluebooks increases the relevance of assessment feedback related to specific activities, and having the information bound so that I can review comments across the semester will also ease my efforts to facilitate collecting this information.

As an aside, why did I focus on the facilitation of these exercises rather than the exercises themselves? I have improved the specific exercise activities over time by framing them in relation to the various techniques that have been reviewed throughout the year in our CETL training sessions. For example, I have been using pair-share and open-ended (timed) writing activities for some time in my classroom. Other examples of activities that I have incorporated are creating pairs or small groups in which students are given a variety of tasks (i.e., creating lists, brainstorming topics, script-writing, role-playing, and creating interaction scenarios). These techniques have all been helpful to illustrate various aspects related to interpersonal communication; however, by improving how I *facilitate* these participation exercises I feel I can strengthen the course in significant ways.

In summary, I have come to the conclusion that active learning is something that I can continually use to enhance my courses. With a little extra effort on the front-end of course preparation, I am convinced that more active engagement of students through both course related activities and assessment of these activities will greatly improve my overall performance as a professor. I have come to realize that thorough planning is necessary, even if it is a bit time-consuming in the initial attempts to design lesson plans and rubrics for assessment. As with any tool, a learning curve is to be expected and active learning “tools” will help me to expand my pedagogical expertise as well as blend my scholarly pursuits with classroom application and learning.