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### Motivating Minds: Active Learning in the Classroom

Students generally want to engage in subject matter beyond simply coming to class and listening to the teacher “lecture” to them about what they need to know. Through reflecting on my teaching and attending CETL workshops, I have realized the need for less “lecturing” and more “active learning” in my classroom. I myself am an advocate of active learning because I believe that it helps students actually retain the material they are studying. This paper validates the reasons for active learning, explains what active learning entails, and reflects on my own use of active learning in the Composition classroom.

#### **Why Active Learning?**

Many Composition and education scholars are exploring this idea of “active learning” in the classroom. I discovered more research on active learning than it was possible to include and digest in only one paper. The most helpful overview of active learning came from Chet Meyers and Thomas B. Jones in *Promoting Active Learning*, a helpful tool that defines active learning as a strategy that requires students to move from being passive recipients of information to active retrievers of the information. Active learning, then, “Provides opportunities for students to talk and listen, read, write, and reflect as they approach course content through problem-solving exercises, informal small groups, simulations, case studies, role playing, and other activities-all of which require students to apply what they are leaning” (xi). Meyers and Jones write that two key concepts behind active learning are that learning is an active process and that different

students learn through different methods of teaching. Hence, Meyers and Jones conclude that teachers need to engage students in actively learning the material for themselves, and teachers need to rely on new techniques that will accommodate the overwhelming number of students in their classes.

### **Why Not Active Learning?**

For all the positive attention active learning has received, it is not without criticism; skeptics of active learning are out there. One such skeptic, Kevin Mattson, writes heatedly about the downfall of active learning in his essay “Why ‘Active Learning’ Can Be Perilous to the Profession.” He writes that active learning places a heavy responsibility on teacher’s shoulders, while ignoring the real problem of an unfair ratio of students to instructors. Mattson is upset about money used to promote active learning such as Centers for Teaching Excellence or the Centers for Writing Across the Curriculum. While he does not condone what these centers teach or the workshops they hold, he does believe that this money could be better spent in making investments that would create a more realistic student to instructor ratio.

Mattson’s defensive and sarcastic tone in this article, however, makes the reader question his own teaching style and attitudes toward students. He writes somewhat bitterly that “I couldn’t help but conclude that professors who didn’t go to coffee with students, learn four hundred students’ names, or scurry around the classroom asking students for their ideas simply didn’t care and were to blame for student passivity” (2). Mattson does not sound like a professor who is overly passionate about his students. Instead, he sounds more concerned about the politics of the academia and his own expectations from the University. Yet he has a valid point in writing that active learning is sometimes used to cover over the problem of overloaded classes. However, Mattson’s criticism of active learning does not address the issue of how students actually learn

best or how teachers can make lectures meaningful when they are presenting to over 400 students.

### **What is Active Learning?**

Active learning does seem to be taking colleges and Universities by storm and for good reason. However, before continuing on, it's important to explain what active learning is and how it works in the classroom. For this definition, Meyers and Jones provide the best overview and validation of "active learning." Meyers and Jones recognize the importance of the traditional role of the teacher as that of lecturer, but they also point out that one's brain can only process so much lecture at a time: "Of course, students can and should learn from our insights as teachers; talk by teachers can be a valuable prelude to active learning. The problem, however, is not that teachers talk; it's that they talk too much" (21). Instead of the traditional lecture mode of teaching, Meyers and Jones highlight the need for active learning that engages students in processing and applying course content. The basic elements are foundational to create active learning. They refer to these basic elements as the building blocks: talking, listening, writing, reading, and reflecting. It is necessary to have all five building blocks because the brain functions differently as it processes each one. The first building block Meyers discusses is the role of talking. Meyers and Jones emphasize that it is important to allow students to talk in order to process their ideas: "The fact is, we often do not know what we think until we try to say it" (22). Giving students time to discuss in class the ideas they are studying increases students' comprehension and processing of knowledge.

The second building block of active learning is writing. Of course as a composition instructor, I often assume that I have this active learning skill mastered as students are constantly writing essays throughout the semester. However, Meyers and Jones have a different

understanding of the value of writing. They point out its worth in helping students process their ideas instead of merely regurgitating ideas that the professor has lectured on. Writing helps students to tangibly see their ideas in words. Meyers emphasizes the use of short writing exercises such as writing that only takes students a minute to compose. Meyers also emphasizes the importance of helping students understand what we expect of them when we tell them to analyze or compare. Instead of just vaguely referring to these words, Meyers refers to Toby Fulwiler's ideas in *Teaching with Writing*. Instructors need to be specific in their expectations of students and provide a clear explanation of what they expect.

Interestingly enough, Meyers and Jones consider reading as one of the main building blocks of active learning. When students read, they are processing what other people think. Many professors assume that students know how to be critical readers when often that is not the case. Meyers suggests, based on Mortimer Adler's 1940 book *How to Mark a Book*, that teachers give students a photocopied text and have students mark the text up with comments and questions. Then the teacher goes over the same text, explaining what comments and points he or she has highlighted and why.

The fourth and perhaps most difficult active learning building block for instructors to implement is reflection time for students: "Covering content too often rules out time necessary for reflection" (Meyers & Jones 30). As teachers learn to allow silence in the classroom, they should practice this discipline by giving students adequate time to respond to the teacher's question. Along with reflection, Meyers and Jones recommend that students keep journals on "*what they think and feel* about issues, concepts, and events in the day's class, and not to worry too much about grammar and punctuation" (31). It's important to note that students are not responsible for writing down what they "know," but instead to write what they feel.

Meyers and Jones write that these five building blocks work in active learning because they provide different methods of receiving and processing information that helps students understand the information and “create new mental structures” (32).

### **How do we implement active learning?**

One book that provides helpful strategies to use in active learning is *Engaging Ideas* by John C. Bean. This book provides a plethora of approaches for instructors to engage students in the writing process. After skimming reading this book, I realized that any activity can be made an “active learning” experience for students depending on how the instructor presents the information.

So far this semester, I have tried to do some form of active learning strategies by incorporating one or more active learning techniques into each class lecture. Most of these “active learning” exercises have been borrowed and modified from some of my fellow TA’s or from my own Graduate professors. I have found that students participate the best in activities that involve their physical relocation in the room, their communication with other students, and my own attempt to make some grand statement about the concept.

In assigning free-writes, I have found that the best free-writes are ones that require students to read a prompt that focuses them to think about their writing. This strategy is effective because it incorporates multiple building blocks of active learning: reading, writing, reflecting, and occasionally discussing. Instead of simply asking students to respond to questions in their free-writes, which usually results in dull 2-3 sentence responses, I have students respond to quotes and analogies specifically about writing. These focused, on task free-writes challenge students to think not only about their own experiences, but also about how those experiences relate to other people’s experiences. One free-write that was particularly successful was to have

students write an analogy comparing their writing to some other experience in everyday life. Their analogies were brilliant. One student compared writing the research paper to making a pizza. Another student compared it to going shopping, constantly sifting through the sales and then looking for new items in the store, and one student compared it to riding a horse.

### **How does active learning work for students?**

The most successful class periods I have are when students are responsible for presenting the majority of the information. Each semester, the most active learning day happens when we do an Agree / Disagree activity used in conjunction with teaching the argumentative paper. The activity works as follows: I read different controversial statements out loud and students decide if they agree or disagree with the statement. If they agree with the statement, they move to the designated side of the room; if they disagree, they move to the opposite side of the room. In the middle of the room, I leave a table for those who are unsure. I put stipulations on the “unsure” spot. Only three students can be at this table at a time, and they can only go there one time. Students go back and forth saying why they agree or disagree. Then, I ask students in the middle if they have changed their mind based upon the volley discussion from both sides. Often times, students have changed their mind and walk to one side or the other.

In another successful class period, students analyze various advertisements from magazine ads. They have to decide the target audience of these advertisements, and explain how they figured out the target audience based upon the words and pictures in the advertisements. Then, each group presents their findings to the class by putting their ad on the document camera and explaining their analysis of it.

This type of language awareness approach is based off of the research and exploration of Larry Andrews in his work Larry Andrews, in *Language Exploration and Awareness: A*

*Resource Book for Teachers* provides excellent examples of what teachers can do in order to encourage students to become aware of the language that surrounds them. He is intrigued by the use of language and how it reflects society. For Andrews, working with language involves active exploration and interaction with it. He is actively against the use of worksheets and grammar drills or exercises. Andrews defines how people study language following two main ways: through prescriptive and descriptive approaches. A prescriptive approach involves the rules and grammatical structure of language while a descriptive approach involves the use and social implications of language. Andrews advocates a descriptive approach to studying language and explaining it to students in order to help them become aware of how language affects them and influences their own interpretations of society.

### **What are problems with active learning?**

One of the frequent problems that occurs in the classroom when trying to focus on active learning is that students often do not do their part in the “active student” role especially during classroom discussions. One experienced college professor, Wilbert J. McKeachie, provides some helpful solutions that work well for instructors who are trying to handle the classroom dynamics. In *Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher*, McKeachie provides helpful advice to help teachers motivate students who do not want to participate in classroom discussions. He suggests that teachers have students share and participate in a common experience that involves their response to a situation. McKeachie writes that this common experience can be created in the classroom after showing a video clip, listening to a song, or reading a passage together. Another way to engage students is to start with a discussion that engages students beyond regurgitating a response or responding with a yes or no. Finally, he suggests that teachers introduce a discussion through introducing a debatable issue. In addition,

McKeachie suggests that students write about a question before class and then discuss the question in class. He concludes that even superficial responses to students' answers can encourage more timid students.

McKeachie emphasizes that it is important for the teacher to clarify the role of discussion early on in the classroom because orchestrating class discussion is crucial to maximizing the use of class time. One way McKeachie maximizes discussions in class is to clarify what he expects of students immediately at the beginning of the semester: "You can start to do this in the first meeting of the course by defining the functions of various aspects of the course and explaining why discussion is valuable" (41). Bean in *Engaging Ideas* provides some other helpful advice to engage students in discussions. These include having a discussion about discussions early on in the semester, having a time-out during heated discussion for students or having students do a free-write before or in the middle of the discussion to have something to contribute to the discussion (175). Bean concludes that an important role of discussion is to help students build their critical thinking skills. The teacher is responsible to help students reach this level in the discussion by setting an agenda for discussion and also by providing an evaluation of the agenda or a restatement of the discussion for the class. As instructors work to manage and encourage discussion in the classroom, students "talk" through their ideas and can better understand how their understanding fits within the themes and ideas of the class.

### **What is the role of the teacher?**

The instructor who uses active learning in the classroom should be flexible, encouraging, and approachable. William Strong in *Coaching Writing* describes the teacher's role as that of a coach. The teacher must know how to let the students be the performers or athletes and must

reach a manageable balance in preparing class and giving students the tools to take responsibility for their own learning. His book provides practical and simple strategies for teachers as the “coaches” of student writers: “My message is that good coaching enables writers, whatever their skill level, to pay attention to language and to trust their meaning-making instincts. Language itself is an infinitely patient teacher, for us and for our students, if we can attend to its lessons”

(3). As the teacher encourages students and provides the context with which students interact with knowledge, teachers benefit from understanding that a coach cannot play the game for the players much like a teacher cannot write the papers or take tests for the students. Hence, when teachers facilitate active learning in the classroom, they help prevent their own burn-out and effectively motivate and encourage students to interact with the material in new and meaningful ways.

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