DEVELOP

Active Learning for Block Mode Units

Why use active learning in the Block Mode?

Adopting a purposefully designed series of activities in the Block Mode varies the pace and focus of a three-hour session and is particularly effective in engaging students. Active learning is effective for both group and individual tasks. Targeted activities have the potential to:

- Develop in-depth understanding though scaffolded higher order thinking activities
- Improve critical thinking through activities requiring justification of position/conclusions
- Consolidate application of new information/skills through contextualisation such as case studies and scenarios
- Provide a safe context for all students to actively participate. Students can share ideas in smaller groups before sharing with the whole class
- Enhance individual insights and motivation through exposure to others' contributions
- Develop interpersonal skills as a consequence of having formed relationships in small group work, thus improving the effectiveness of collaborative work

What is active learning?

Active learning is about engaging students in doing more than taking notes, listening and following instructions. It centres around writing, debating, problem solving and critiquing, and requires students to:

- Do things and think about why they are doing these activities and the connections to content/skills
- Work in learning groups to collaboratively construct an outcome, or work individually
- Engage in simple activities like journal writing and paired discussions, or more involved activities like case studies, role plays, and structured team-based learning

Active learning strategies range from simple to complex, as illustrated in the continuum below, and should be adapted to suit varying learning goals and situations.
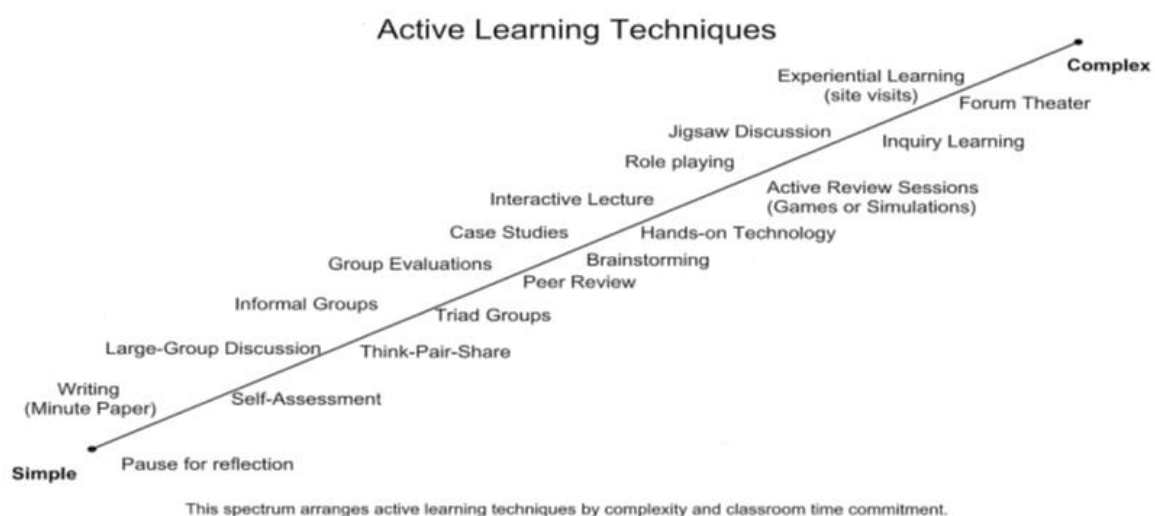
Source: O'Neal, C & Pinder-Grover, T. (n.d).

Tips on getting started

Consider content that must be covered and what can be built on through active learning strategies.

1   Use the 'backward design' approach. Design activities so students achieve the learning outcome.
2   Explain the purpose of the activity to students and assist them to make connections, foster metacognition and consolidate learning.
3   Begin with low-risk, small activities. For example, start with a think-pair-share activity that gives students the opportunity to organise and clarify learning before moving on to more challenging activities.
4   Select activities that are meaningful. In doing so, consider the following:
    a. What should the students have learned in relation to the learning outcome?
    b. What misconceptions and difficulties must be addressed?
    c. Are the students appropriately challenged and extended?
    d. What practice would assist in preparing for the assessment or assignment?
5   Develop a facilitation approach to run the activity
    a. Keep students on task and accountable. Give clear goals and instructions.
    b. Conclude by wrapping up, summarizing, explaining and reiterating connections to concepts and future learning.

Anticipate challenges

1   If students are resistant to engaging in activities
    a. Introduce the concept early in the unit and clearly specify expectations and roles related to each activity
    b. Explain reasons and connections to assessments and further learning
    c. Use a variety of active learning strategies regularly in a targeted way. Include 3-4 learning activities over a 3-hour session.
2   If activities take too much time
    a. Consider whether the task can be shared between several peers.
    b. Consider how pre-class activities can prepare the students for an in-class activity.
3   If students are resistant to group work
    a. Consider whether the activity is challenging enough to require two or more people to work together.
    b. Does the activity require differing perspectives and experience?
    c. Make group work a common activity, with expectations of effective participation.

Websites
- University of Minnesota
  https://cei.umn.edu/active-learning#anchor-rationale
- Cornell University. *Getting started with active learning techniques.*
  https://teaching.cornell.edu/resource/getting-started-active-learning-techniques
- Concordia University. (2014) *Five active learning techniques for a flipped classroom*.
  https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/classroom-resources/five-active-learning-techniques-for-a-flipped-classroom/

Related articles
Brame, C. (2016). *Active learning*. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved 24 Sept 2018 from https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/active-learning/

University of Georgia (2018). *Active learning techniques by instructional goal.* Center for Teaching and Learning. Retrieved 27 Sept 2018 from https://www.ctl.uga.edu/uploads/main/mainmainActLearn175.pdf

References

O'Neal, C & Pinder-Grover, T. (n.d.), How can you incorporate active learning into your classroom?. Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan. Retrieved 27 Sept 2018 from https://twut.nd.edu/PDF/ActiveLearningContinuum.pdf