DESIGN

Purposeful Learning Activities in Block Mode

While Active Learning is an effective strategy to engage and maintain students' interest over the duration of a Block class, these activities must also serve a clear purpose. Table 1 lists categories of student-focused learning activities in a sequence commonly observed in a Block mode class. Table 2 proposes strategies to embed in Academic-led interactive presentations to minimise these sessions morphing into mini lectures.

Student-focused: Some practical considerations

Table 1: What the Students are Doing

Title	Purpose	Tips
Pre-class Activity	Prepare students for in-class group work by priming students to engage with new material, or to make links between the new material and current knowledge / skills	1. Provide focussed tasks and/or prompting/focus questions. 2. For subsequent paired or group activities allocate some tasks/questions to individual participants who will work together. Each member of the pair/group will have a unique contribution.
Springboard Activity	Specific and direct use of Pre-class Activity outcomes.	1. For whole of class discussions: prepare tools for sharing individuals' insights; i.e. what technology-based tool will assist individuals to post for whole-of-class discussion/action 2. For paired/group activities: design Springboard using jigsaw approach so the group relies on input from all participants (see point 2 above.)
Reading Activity Video or film clips etc	Very useful for cognitively challenging concepts, difficult to master skills or ambiguous topics	1. Allocate focussed reading/viewing for in-class 'specialist' contributions to group tasks 2. Schedule to follow Academic-led Interactive Presentations as a further base from which to apply / practice new material / skills.
Application of Learning Activity	Ascertain see how well students have understood concepts, or how to follow processes or apply techniques	1. Suits individuals, pairs or small groups. 2. Structure activity to uncover commonly-observed student mis-understandings 3. Use outcomes to determine when the class is ready to move to the next concept 4. Consider variety in reporting-back / debriefing strategies (including technology-based tools) to make the learning visible to the class
Assessment-related Activity	Provides an opportunity to ensure that students are on-target with their efforts.	1. Schedule time for students to progress assessment tasks. Even 15 minutes per session is an active prompt to maintain progress on assessment tasks 2. Encourage groups to focus on collaborative aspects of the tasks to reduce the need to schedule mutually convenient times outside of class.
Wrap-up Activity	Students identify what they thought was significant learning	1. An opportunity to be attentive to student perspective (and perhaps re-visit topics later) 2. Academic 'simply' fills in the gaps of any key learning that had been overlooked by the class.

Academic-focused: Some practical considerations

Through the design process, we structure learning to maximise students' opportunities to extend and consolidate their insights and understandings. Through experience, academics from most disciplines can predict aspects/topics of learning that are regularly challenging. (There is much written about the teaching of these threshold concepts.) Threshold concepts are therefore often suited to a more directive instructional approach. See https://hereflections.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/priciples-of-curriculum-design.jpg for a simple diagrammatic portrayal of the relationship between 'threshold concepts', 'knowledge base' and 'application'.

Table 2: In-class Academic-focussed Segments in Enhancing Student Learning

Title	Purpose	Tips
Academic-led Interactive Presentation	Focus on concepts and/or practices that are both important for students to understand and challenging to achieve.	Intersperse small student activities into a more formal knowledge / skills development session. Consider questions / cues including: 1. Think-pair-share 2. Apply concepts to a simple problem, scenario or case-study 3. Minute paper on what was the most difficult part of the presentation 4. Identify 2 or 3 key/big ideas from the Presentation
Academic-led Demonstrations	Amplify key learnings from practice	1. Ask students to evaluate the demonstration (with an evaluation form), interspersing demonstrations of appropriate practice with common errors or exaggerated inappropriate practice 2. This can be an effective pre-cursor to student "Application of Learning" Activity, or a wrap-up following such an Activity

Want to know more?

Websites
- Southern Cross University (nd). *Threshold Concepts* https://www.scu.edu.au/staff/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources/threshold-concepts/

VU Guides
- *Active Learning for Block Units*
- *Considerations for Designing H5P Online Interactive Activities*