
ACTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITIES // for large group *learning* sessions

The following are various active learning activities that you might consider using in conjunction with a traditional lecture format to increase learner engagement and active participation. These activities are adaptable for classes of any size.

Simple

Questions

► Questions are the simplest form of interaction and can occur at any time during the session. By asking questions, you not only turn learners into active participants, but you can also get a sense of their interest and comprehension of a topic. Ideally, you would use a variety of questions (ie. open/closed, low level/high level, about knowledge/opinion, etc) to address different elements and keep learners interested.

Brainstorming

► In this activity, learners generate ideas that are recorded in a visible space. When beginning a new topic, you might begin by saying, "Tell me everything you know about..." After collecting ideas, you might decide to put the learners' comments into categories, or you might ask learners to suggest categories and comment on the accuracy and relative importance of the array of facts, impressions, and interpretations. The main rules of brainstorming are to acknowledge every offering by writing it down and save any critiquing until after the idea generation time is over.

Intermediate

Think-pair-sharing

► In its simplest form, learners think about a particular question or prompt and then pair up to discuss their ideas. The next stage is to share their results with a larger group, which might be another pair of learners or the whole large group. Think-pair-sharing forces all learners to attempt an initial response to the prompt, which they can then clarify and expand as they collaborate. This process should take five to ten minutes, depending on the question's complexity.

Jigsaw

► This is a divide-and-conquer strategy for covering multiple topics. Divide learners into as many groups as topics that need to be explored and assign groups one topic on which they are expected to become experts (nb: they will also need access to the resources to accomplish this). Once groups have finished, disband expert groups and reform mixed groups that include members from each expert group. Facilitate peer teaching so all mixed group members leave with a good understanding of each of the multiple topics.

Advanced

Role playing

► This strategy can be effective for helping learners practice and refine key skills that they will use in the future. Often, learners are somewhat hesitant to role play so preparation and set-up are critical to its success. Learners need to understand the purpose and meaning of using a role play (as opposed to using another strategy) and receive clear instructions on activity expectations, their roles, and intended outcomes. Circulate and ensure learners are actually role playing, not just talking about the scenario. To bring closure to the topic, a debriefing exercise is typically necessary to help clarify what was learned and to make the transition to the next topic.

Provocative problem solving:

► Begin a lecture with a provocative question, paradox, enigma, case study, or compelling, unfinished story. The remainder of the session is dedicated to collaboratively solving the problem. You refer back to the problem throughout the session, providing successive bits of information that help learners explore the topic and asking them to regularly update their understanding of what's going on. Often, the instructor guides this process with questions such as: "Now what do you think is going on?" "If you were this patient's doctor, what would you recommend doing next?"

Simple

Pro and con grid

► The pro and con grid lists advantages and disadvantages of any issue and helps learners develop analytical and evaluative skills. It also forces learners to go beyond their initial reactions, search for at least two sides to the issue, and weigh the value of competing claims. Let learners know how many pros and cons you expect and how fully you expect them to develop their points

Mini Writes (ie. One Minute Paper, One Sentence Summary, Muddiest Point)

► Punctuating your session with short writing assignments is a powerful way to assess the degree to which learners understand the presented material. You might ask, “Take one minute and write down the key information pearls from that last section.” or “Summarize the most important point of today’s session (or one segment of the session) in one sentence.” Or “Identify one concept or question you are still struggling with on this topic”. If desired, some responses may be shared with the larger group.

Intermediate

Informal quizzes

► This technique involves writing quiz questions somewhere visible to learners and giving learners an appropriate time to respond. You may wish to collect anonymous responses, or if the question entails multiple choice, learners can raise their hands in agreement as you announce each response (or raise a certain number of fingers to indicate agreement with a statement). A quiz at the beginning of class allows you to determine how familiar learners are with important terms, facts or concepts prior to the lecture, while a quiz that follows a session segment can reveal how well learners understood the material.

Carousel/World Cafe

► Write topics or prompts (ie. subjects, questions) on flipcharts/whiteboards around room and assign groups to one station. Ask groups to respond to station prompts using a coloured marker that they will hold onto. After a designated period of time, ask groups to rotate to new station and address new prompts there. Continue until all groups have visited all stations. Once back at original station, ask groups to summarize responses left at that station.

Advanced

Debates

► Debates allow you to add a participatory dimension to your lecture without compromising your control of the class. One strategy is to divide learners according to where they happen to sit. Another approach is to ask them in advance to seat themselves in the section representing a particular side of the debate. If some learners refuse to choose one side or the other, create a middle ground and invite their reasons for choosing it. Before concluding, ask two or three volunteers to make summary arguments for each side.

Other options:

► peer-to-peer teaching, personal journaling, creating mnemonics, playing a game (Jeopardy, Hangman, Bingo, etc), doing skits, using exit slips, information scavenger hunts, concept/mind mapping, Think Aloud Paired Problem Solving (TAPPS), Value Line, and many, many others (just Google “active learning strategies”).

Adapted from: <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/educational-technologies/all/activities-large-classes>