

From Passive to Active Learning

Guest Author

According to my understanding, the teaching style/methodology in the majority of the acupuncture and Oriental medicine (AOM) and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) schools is still passive learning. This is mainly because the majority of the faculty is from China, Korea or Taiwan, where the main teaching method is passive learning. The teaching/learning style is moving from passive to active learning, however, especially when most AOM schools are seeking regional accreditation.

This topic is the most critical issue for Southern California University of Health Sciences, as we are seeking re-accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). We are currently in our last phase for WASC accreditation - Education Effectiveness. When we work on education effectiveness, the transition from passive to active learning is the key factor.

What Is Active Learning?

Active learning refers to engaging students in classroom activities by using several interactive and collaborative teaching methods, including pre-planned discussions (small-group discussion), dialogue, exercises, simulations and games. Faculties all over the country are moving away from sole reliance on the lecture method of instruction. Instead, they are experimenting with various other teaching methods that allow us to effectively connect with more of our students.

If you have been teaching for more than 10 years, you probably already notice that the students sitting in your class today are a lot different from students a decade or two ago. Our classrooms are largely filled with a generation of students raised on television, video games and MTV. The classroom learning style is totally different than before. Our present challenge is what we can do to teach in a more effective manner than just simply lecturing. Many school administrators and faculty are investing time and energy to determine if developing an active-learning environment that encourages student interaction and collaborative learning may help to bridge the educational/motivational gap that we are facing right now.

Active learning can be applied to most commonly used course activities, depending on whether they involve the student or they position the student as a receptacle, passively receiving content. Even lecturing can be an active-learning experience if the following are integrated: providing students with a set of questions, as well as instructions to look for answers within the lecture; and asking students periodically throughout the lecture to (silently) make connections between the current material and course materials covered previously.

Experimenting with active-learning techniques is not relegating the transmission of knowledge to the background of teaching. Rather, it is an attempt to set the stage for more powerful learning by fully engaging the learner in this vitally important educational enterprise. The following are some of the active-learning methods you may consider using.

Active-Learning Techniques

Think-pair-share. This activity starts with each student working individually on a problem for two to five minutes (Think); then pair students to compare, synthesize and finish the assignment for another two to five minutes (Pair). Later, they will report/discuss their ideas to the whole class for three to five minutes (Share). This can be expanded to create a pyramid when those two students now work with two more, then report to the class later on.

Paraphrasing spoken statements. Students pair up. You don't have to classify students as those who understand and those who don't - simply ask students to pair. Have one student explain a concept, principle or method to another. The listener then paraphrases what the teller has said and seeks clarification if necessary. The listener may use such phrases as: "What I hear you saying is..." and "You're saying..." The listener seeks mainly to accurately reflect the teller's statements back to them and does not try to analyze, judge or lead the direction of discussion.

Note-taking and revision. Have a "notes completion" session three to five times during each term (semester/trimester/quarter). Ask students to exchange notes and fill in any gaps of missing information. Notes taken by students in class are hardly sufficient. This technique will help the students generate complete notes as they review the course material.

Editing other students' work. Ask the students to write short papers/essays, and then ask them to exchange their work. Each student has to edit each other's work. The key for successful reviews of this method is to provide a guided peer review of written work to the students. Thus, they know how to review and provide a constructive criticism to their classmates. This process could be done several times before the final paper is due.

Collaborative learning groups. These may be formal or informal, graded or not, short-term or long-term. Generally, you assign students to heterogeneous groups of three to six students. They choose a leader and a scribe (note taker). They are given a task on which to work together. Often, student preparation for the CLG has been required earlier (reading or homework). The group produces a group answer, paper or project. These work best in small- to medium-sized classes.

Group problem-solving. Stop the lecture to ask groups to solve a problem/case/task, do an activity, create an outline for the assigned project, or create a test question based on the assigned information. Students will learn more in-depth through this problem-solving exercise.

Teaching a topic. Divide the students into several groups. Each group should be composed of five to eight students, depending on the number of students in each class. Assign a student-teacher for each group. The student-teacher will act like a real faculty member and have a real teaching session with an assigned topic. Instead of choosing topics in the required readings, choose topics that will supplement the class. This ensures that students do research and preparation on their own. You can select some of the more effective student-teachers to teach to the entire class. You may wish to participate as a student and ask helpful or follow-up questions that require the student-teacher to extend themselves.

One-minute papers. At the beginning or end of class, ask students to submit a one-minute paper. Ask them to write on something they should have learned in class that day, something that is still not clear, questions they have, the main point of the lecture, critiques of the material presented, or the part of class that helped them learn more. To limit the size of the responses in large classes, ask students to write their responses on a 3x5 card. You can provide feedback during the next class to selected

questions, comments or concerns.

Research summaries or abstracts. Ask students to write a summary, analysis and/or their reflections of a particular research article. This project can help them learn how to search articles from the library. You can also assign this as group project. Students then can pair up together to do the research. They can exchange their findings among students in the same group and reach a consensus for submission to the instructor.

Journal club. Ask students to find a journal related to the topic you teach in your class. Ask them to select their best entry and mark it for you to read. Some successful journal activities have students relate theory to practice and concepts to reality. Students can also show evidence of their learning, individual insights and questions about course material.

Analysis or reactions to videos. Select videos that are related to the topics you teach to show in your class. Videos offer an alternative presentation mode for course material. The video presentations should be relatively short (five to 20 minutes). Prepare students ahead of time with reaction or discussion questions, or a list of ideas on which to focus. This will help them pay attention. After the video, have them work alone or in pairs to answer critical questions, write a review or reaction, or apply the theory to clinical application.

Student-generated exam questions. Ask the students to generate three to five exam questions and provide your feedback on those questions. This can be used for review or for the actual exam. This technique helps students actively process material, gives them a better understanding of the difficulties of writing reliable and valid exam questions, helps them review material, and gives them practice for the exam.

Mini research proposals or projects: a class research symposium. Have the students work on designing a research study on a topic from the class. In some situations, you may be able to have them collect data during class time (observe some situation or give out some short surveys) or you may have them doing this as part of an out-of-class project. Either way, have students present their research in a class research symposium similar to what we do at professional meetings. Invite other faculty and students.

Analyze case studies. Bring in case studies for students to read. Have students discuss and analyze the case, applying concepts, data and theory from the class. They can work as individuals or in groups. To enhance the learning effectiveness, you can consider combining this with a brief in-class writing assignment.

Write and produce a newsletter. Have small groups of students produce a brief newsletter on a specific topic related to class. Students should include articles with relevant research, post information on the Web site and include any other upcoming related public events/activities. You can share the newsletter with other faculty and students in related courses.

Games. Games such as "Jeopardy," crossword puzzles and "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" can be adapted to course material and used for review or exams. These games can be used at the individual, small-group or full-class levels.

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