

# Promoting Active Learning in Online Courses

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## **Abstract:**

With the introduction of the World Wide Web, the learning environment is changing. Online courses allow learners, once bound by place and time constraints in the traditional classroom, new access to education and a more active role in the learning process. Technology enhances the delivery of educational experiences that promote active learning. This presentation will share some ideas for infusing active learning and collaborative learning experiences into online courses in order to help students set goals, make plans, organize their time, and set an appropriate pace for learning. These design elements also help students increase their sense of responsibility for learning.

## **Paper**

Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, and Perry (1993) state that learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience. “Learners confront their understanding in light of what they encounter in a new learning situation. If what learners see is different than their current understanding, their understanding can change to accommodate new experience. Learners remain active throughout this process: they apply current understandings, note relevant elements in new learning experiences, judge the consistency of prior and emerging knowledge, and based on that judgment, they can modify knowledge” (SEDL, 1996).

“Since the late 1980s researchers have been building an understanding of learning that grows out of cognitive and developmental psychology. The key notion in this new “constructivist theory” is that people learn best by actively constructing their own understanding. The constructivist classroom presents the learner with opportunities to build on prior knowledge and understanding to construct new knowledge and understanding from authentic experience. Students are allowed to confront problems full of meaning because of their real-life context. In solving these problems, students are encouraged to explore possibilities, invent alternative solutions, collaborate with other students (or external experts), try out ideas and hypotheses, revise their thinking, and finally present the best solution they can derive”(North Central Region Education Laboratory [NCREL]).

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/contareas/science/sc5model.htm>

In online courses, instructors must develop a careful balance between curriculum, technology and facilitation elements. Instructors are able to build an online learning community by encouraging student participation and collaboration. Effective online education is not centered on technology, but rather on a meaningful learning process (Lewis, MacEntee and Youngs-Maher, 2002).

Collaborative learning is crucial to the effectiveness of online learning environments (Hiltz, 1997). In the online environment, the students and the instructor collaborate to create a dynamic learning experience. Instruction actively engages the learner and encourages the learner to construct and produce knowledge in meaningful ways. Students teach others interactively. This allows for co-construction of knowledge,

which promotes engaged learning. Students need this collaborative learning to feel they are part of a community rather than a loner out in cyber world. It connects the student to other students in the course.

Time is needed to build new knowledge. In an asynchronous online course, the construction of the discussion is not limited by time; students can take as much time as they need. This breaking of real-time constraints allows for a more thoughtful exchange of ideas since students can reflect upon previous and new experiences. They can examine concepts, analyze theories, evaluate the information, or assess the information from the perspective of other students and the instructor. Continuous synergy is generated through this active learning process. <http://www.cssd.ab.ca/tech/learn/engaged.html> Following are excerpts from a collaborative discussion about active learning (MacEntee, 2002).

*“[In this document] you will find a few links to sites that explore active learning. You are not limited to these, however. You may do a search for other articles on active learning. Once you have selected and read at least two articles on active learning, your assignment will be to*

- 1. Create a definition of active learning; use your own words and be succinct. This is at most a three-sentence paragraph.*
- 2. Compare and contrast the articles and distill them down to what you believe are the top 5 key behaviors of an active learner, and the top 5 strategies that should be used in a course to ensure that active learning occurs.*
- 3. Go to the Discussion Area and post your conclusions. Then respond to at least five of your classmates. You are also required to respond to at least five of those who respond to you.”*

*These are a few typical answers:*

*“Active learning is a process where students are actively involved in learning using many different activity based learning experiences. It involves the teacher and students actively participating as a shared effort where the environment is safe and students can take risks and be a valuable member of a team. Active learning can take the shape of many forms but the desired outcome is that all students learn by engaging in reading, writing, discussion, or problem solving which elicits higher order thinking and provides a basis to recall and build upon for future learning experiences.”*

*“This course is definitely active learning. The format of having to respond to other student’s work and get feedback on your own work is very educational. This is my first distance learning course and I hope I get the hang of it quickly”*

*A few of the responses to their colleagues are:*

*“According to John Kellar's ARCS model, you must use four components to motivate students - Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction. By performing these AL activities, the students are engaged by being attentive and by performing tasks they relate to.... Therefore, I feel that these exercises ultimately promote active learning.”*

*“I guess when I think of active learning I always associate it with "group work". The distance learning courses are a totally different type of learning for me. I feel they have really helped me to be a better student. The discussions are great examples of active learning and really give an opportunity to share and reflect.”*

*“I am also not an experienced teacher but I do believe that time is a significant factor in terms of applying active learning to the classroom. One way to possibly combat this is to promote active learning in collaboration activities. For instance, if more teachers worked together on various projects, such as combining social studies and language arts curriculums, perhaps this would make time less of an issue. I am planning to become a school librarian and I think that this is another way to promote active learning without taking too much time- have the teacher collaborate with his or her LMS.”*

*"I agree with you on the distant learning and being actively involved. There are no easy answers. There isn't anyone there to answer them, so I found myself looking for the answers myself. This is very frustrating at times, but I feel that I learned more and retained more."*

Paloff and Pratt (1999) suggested that the successful online learner is a "noisy learner" who is active and creative in the instructional environment. Students who are reticent in on-campus classes may find shared online assignments and discussions less threatening because they can compose, edit, and refine their ideas before sharing them. The perceived pressure of face-to-face critiques has been eliminated. The next page shows a set of active learning activities where students can learn from the experience and each other.

**"Active Learning" written by Pam Youngs-Maher, SUNY Oswego, 2001.  
[Mini-lecture and two assignments]**

Often students come to a course expecting the professor to perform the lead role, and the students then carry out the assignments presented to them as the means to learning the content and passing the course. A transformation is taking place however that places a great deal of responsibility for learning on the students. Many instructors now facilitate their courses in a manner that allows the students to be active in the process of learning. Indeed, the students play a major role as generative learning occurs. So, just what is generative learning and active learning?

There is a term called the "banking system of education" coined by [no pun intended!] Paulo Freire. It means the instructor deposits information in your head and you make withdrawals from that knowledge bank in order to complete tests and assignments. Information in, information out. Active Learning on the other hand engages you, the student, in a process or set of activities that allows you to interact with the content, the other students and with the instructor such that learning is generated out of a whole cadre of experiences and the reflections on those experiences. What else is involved in active learning? How does it occur, i.e. through what strategies does active learning take place? That's part of your assignment for this module!

Below you will find a few links to sites that explore active learning. You are not limited to these, however. You may do a search for articles on active learning. Once you have selected and **read at least two articles on active learning, then your assignment will be to**

1. Create a **definition of active learning**; use your own words and be succinct. This is at most a three-sentence paragraph.
2. Compare and contrast the articles and create a **list of what you believe are the top 5 key behaviors of an active learner, and the top 5 teaching strategies** that should be used in a course to ensure that active learning occurs. You will share these ideas with the class in the assignment area.
3. **Develop an action plan** that you will submit to the instructor to help you gain the most from this course. Evaluation of your performance in the course will factor in your action plan commitments!

When you are done reading the articles, (those listed or the ones you chose to search for on the web), go to the Assignment Area of the course. Read through the instructions for creating an assignment. Then go to the Active Learning Assignment, and see what you are asked to submit (the questions are based on the 3 items listed above). You are advised to create your assignment in Word, save it as an .rtf (rich text file), and then copy and paste the sections into the assignment. More details can be found in the instruction document. For now, explore the information on active learning!

**Hotlinks to Active Learning Sites:**

<http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/91-9dig.htm>

<http://www.acu.edu/cte/activelearning/focus.htm>

<http://www2.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Columns/FAQs-3.html>

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