



Ten Active Learning Exercises to Complement a Lecture

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Brainstorming

Purpose: To elicit a lot of information in a short amount of time or to generate new ideas. This technique is quite effective and often overlooked in the classroom.

Directions: The professor asks a question and tells the students that the class is going to brainstorm the answer. The professor writes all answers on the blackboard – regardless of whether they are good or correct. Students are not allowed to criticize what anyone else says, though their answer can contradict a previous answer. Once a thorough list of answers is on the board, the professor then works with that information, depending on the learning outcome.

If the goal was to elicit facts, any answers that are incorrect are then crossed off – based on an explanation of why it is wrong. If the goal is to teach conceptualization or theorizing, then students are asked to group the answers in categories of theories (usually no more than five). If the goal is to teach analysis, then the students are asked to prioritize the answers and explain why some are more significant than others.

Pause2Reflect (P2R)

Purpose: To provide students time to think about lecture material or discussion comments. When mastering a new subject or a lot of new information, it can be hard to sort out key ideas, so pausing to reflect allows students to identify key points or make connections to old info.

Directions: Say “Pause to Reflect” or “P2R” and stop conversation. The timing on when to P2R is based on when you see students’ eyes glaze over and you can feel them shutting down from overload or when a heated class discussion is winding down. (Sometimes a student will feel the need and say “P2R” to start the exercise.) Then give students 4-5 minutes to write in their notebooks or computers. You could then ask a student to share what he or she has written, but I use this more as a personal experience for the individual student.

Quick Write or Free Writing

Purpose: To stimulate thinking, generate ideas, and provide time for students to collect their thoughts before speaking in class. It is often used to develop critical thinking, and it always leads to better student comments in class discussion. Like P2R, it allows students who do not think quickly (sometimes misinterpreted as shy or introverted students) to gather their thoughts and contribute to class discussion.

Directions: During class (it can be at the beginning or at any point before delving into a difficult topic) the professor asks a specific question and gives students 3-5 minutes to write on that question in their notebooks or computers. Instruct the students to write without stopping, even if it doesn't make sense. Tell students you will not collect their Quick Writes, but you could say they receive a zero for participation if they write nothing. After writing stops, ask someone to share their thoughts. You might ask students: "Any thoughts to move the discussion in a new direction?" or "Who can summarize key points that have been said?"

Think-Ink-Pair-Share

Purpose: Everyone processes information at different speeds, so this exercise allows students time to think and try out ideas before sharing in a large group. This brief exercise will generate better comments in class and allow students who might not usually share to participate in class.

Directions: At any time during class, though often after some initial lecture on a topic, give students a conceptual question. Then give them 1 minute to think about the question, 1 minute to write about it, 3 minutes to share with a partner. After 5 minutes, ask students to share one major idea or question generated by the exercise.

Super-Sentence

Purpose: To provide a summary of key points raised in a class session. This is particularly important when a class session entailed a lot of discussion or active learning exercises so that students leave class with a common understanding of the main points.

Directions: Allow ten minutes at the end of class for students to collectively compose one sentence that the professor writes on the board. The subject of the sentence can be a specific term, concept or theory (e.g. American Creed, Liberalism, the relationship between democracy and capitalism) or more general (take-away points of today's class). The professor starts the sentence. For example, "The American Creed is defined as ..." And then the professor asks students to continue by adding, subtracting or rephrasing ideas. This super-sentence can have

many clauses and phrases (and doesn't have to be grammatically perfect!). Everyone in the class – all students and the professor – must reach consensus that the final super-sentence expresses the key points to take away from that class session.

One-Minute Lecture

Purpose: The point is for students to synthesize, analyze, and reinforce the most important points of the lecture. This exercise helps students retain more of the lecture.

Directions: At the end of class, tell students, “If you were asked to give a one minute lecture on [topic], what would you say?” Give students 10 minutes to write their One Minute Lectures. The question should be conceptual yet specific enough to be answered in one minute. The professor can tell students at the beginning of class that they might have a writing assignment at the end of class, without telling them the question, although it is not necessary to inform them in advance.

As the students are writing, you can walk around the classroom to find a really good one and ask that student to read aloud. You can collect and grade them as part of the student's participation grade. With a really tough text, you can have students write a One Minute Lecture at the beginning of class and then a One Minute Lecture on the same question at the end of class. Doing it twice is a very clear way to assess which students have understood the reading, as well as what students learned in the class session – and they appreciate the second chance.

Ticket Out the Door

Purpose: To give students the opportunity to summarize or highlight key points or questions. To give the professor feedback on what students learned or on what they still have questions about at the end of class.

Directions: With five minutes remaining in class, give each student a blank index card or a form with a few questions. This “ticket out the door” can be anonymous or not, depending on your learning goals. Collect the forms and before the next class read and analyze them. You can answer the questions or clarify any confusion in an email to the class or at the beginning of the next class. Reporting back to the students what you learned from these surveys is very important so that students know you take their comments seriously.

Some of the questions that you could ask: “What one insight did you have today?” “What still puzzles you about the material we covered in class today?” I use it with first year students to

encourage reflection on their student participation and ask, “Based on the participation rubric for this course, what participation grade would you give yourself for today’s class?”

Stephen D. Brookfield uses a Critical Incident Questionnaire and asks his students:

“At what moment were you most engaged as a learner?

At what moment were you most distanced as a learner?

What action that anyone took in class did you find most helpful?

What action that anyone took in class did you find most confusing?

What surprised you most about the class?”

Stephen D. Brookfield, *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Question Their Assumptions*. Jossey-Bass, 2012, p. 54.

First-Day-of-Class Quotes (Thanks to Ela Rossmiller (SIS) for the original idea.)

Purpose: To take advantage of the first day of class for a learning experience. This exercise has several goals: 1) it encourages students to think of questions about the course content; 2) it enables students to hold small group discussions in a meaningful way; 3) it allows the professor to respond to students’ comments about course content without dominating; 4) it helps the professor assess the knowledge of students without testing them, so that course content can be pitched at the right level.

Directions: Have each student pick a slip of paper with a quote from the assigned readings for the semester. (This requires you to have picked out key or interesting sentences or passages from the readings. You can include the author or not, depending on your goals. I include the author. You could also google the topic and pick out quotes but then you miss the joy of students commenting on “their” quote when they read it later in the semester.)

Have students meet in groups of four, read their quotes aloud, and then have everyone in the group ask questions about the meaning of the quote. I don’t give a lot of guidance on what I want them to discuss, because I want them to do that thinking. I am looking for things such as: Why would that person have said that? What was the historical context of that quote? What was the reaction of the public to such a statement?

After 15-20 minutes, ask students to report back to the class the quotes and questions that were of most interest to them. That can take as much time as you want, encouraging others in

the class to provide some of the answers. While you could have one person from each group report back to the class, as is often done with small groups, this is usually when you are trying to reach a consensus on a topic, and that isn't the point of the assignment, so I don't suggest you do that.

While I could have easily answered their questions, I play the role of facilitator more than expert – as the main intention of the exercise is to get the students to become engaged learners. The exercise sets the tone that the course is about inquiry and asking questions, that students have a role in that process, and that we are a learning community. I will often note that their questions will be answered during the semester, guiding them into buying into the course material.

Draw-It!

Purpose: This exercise requires students to think visually about a concept, requiring them to identify actors, relationships, and processes without using words. It enables students who are more visual learners to understand and analyze complicated ideas.

Directions: In their notebooks or on paper you provide, ask students to draw a picture of a concept, theory, or author's thesis. Then ask 3-4 students to draw their pictures on the board and have each of them explain their drawing to the class. Discuss, probing for where you think certain actors or processes are identified well and where points are missing. Allow students to modify their drawings. Then have students decide which drawing best represents the concept – or draw a new picture based on discussion. I have done this with Sidney Mintz's thesis in *Sweetness and Power*; American democracy; and why the U.S. sponsored the 1954 coup in Guatemala.

Fishbowl

Purpose: To encourage deep listening and reflection, and to help students reflect on the process of class discussion. This exercise can require participation from students who do not usually share in class.

Directions: Tell students that in the next class you will choose 6-8 students to be in a 'fishbowl' to discuss a question from the reading. Next class, form two concentric circles with a smaller group (fishbowl students) in the center surrounded by the majority (observing students); all chairs face the middle of the room. Ask a question that requires deep thinking or that could be answered from multiple perspectives. The fishbowl students discuss the question for 10 minutes without interruption while the students in the outside circle listen, record, observe.

You can then repeat with a different group of students as the fishbowl, or not, depending on learning goals. Then discuss the content and process with the whole class, beginning with the observing students. It is important for observing students to state what was said and ask questions of the fishbowl students before jumping into what they would have said. At the end ask for a summary of key points; this can be done by having students hand in individual summaries or collectively with a Super-Sentence (see above).