

Activating Large Classes: Sample Activities

Analyze your Lecture Notes for Opportunities

- 1) *Analyze your lecture notes* for information that is already ‘covered’ in the assigned reading(s). Not addressing the readings in class and lecturing about readings encourage students to not do the reading. Consider devoting 10-15 minutes of class time to talk about the readings. Break students into small groups or pairs and assign them a task focused on the reading, e.g. identify key points from the text, provide additional examples, paraphrase key concepts, or outline the content. For difficult or dense text, ask students to identify passages that are poorly written or not effective at reaching the intended audience (students). These strategies offer an alternative to asking students to publicly declare their confusion or misunderstanding.
- 2) *Analyze your lecture notes* for sections where you can prompt students to provide content, list items, define sub-sections, apply concepts, identify constituent parts, make connections, speculate about potential controversies, or predict the next section.
- 3) *Analyze your lecture notes* for sections that could be rephrased as questions. Strategies for avoiding the blank stare or dead silence include verbalizing the questions aloud before class and predicting students answers. These actions can help you avoid awkward and/or unanswerable questions such as “Who doesn’t understand?” (which no one wants to answer) or “What did you think about?” (which prompts students to ask “what does am I supposed to think?”).

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a technique to introduce a new topic or complex idea. Brainstorming can be triggered by almost any word or phrase, including the topic of the class or class session.

This strategy is deceptively simple, but it addresses a fundamental issue in human learning. Students’ existing knowledge can hinder new learning if misconceptions are not directly addressed. Students do not come to our classes as “empty vessels” or “blank states.” Students’ brainstorming results allow an instructor to identify students’ preconceptions by making students’ thinking visible and permitting both instructor and students to monitor progress from informal to formal thinking within a discipline.

Begin by assuring students that you do not expect them to come up with a “right” answer. The only “rule” about brainstorming is that all student responses should be recorded—even those that are incorrect. Incorrect responses provide an excellent opportunity to address misconceptions that could cause trouble later. Practitioners of this technique note that students’ responses often approximate a disciplinary perspective, even without disciplinary language, which helps students retain content.

Variations

- Record student’s responses, and then ask them to analyze the resulting list for patterns, themes and categories, or connections (between different answers, between this and previous material)
- Use additional prompts such as “What is missing?” “What is most important?” For misperceptions or incorrect information: “This is a common answer” or “A lot of people think that too” “Why is that the case?”
- Scaffold student discussions from individuals to pairs, triads, or quads (TAs can help students form groups and get discussions started)
- Write answers on cards and trade with a neighbor 3 consecutive times (use this to engage students in controversial topics about which they might be reluctant to voice their opinions)
- Trigger questions: “What changed in your thinking about ?” “What surprised you?” “What image comes to mind when you think about the reading?”
- As students to interpret charts, graphs, textual passages, or images. Ask questions such as: “What do you see?” “What is going on here?” “What do you think it says/means?”

Debates & Role-Playing

Large classes ideal for these two strategies because they permit you to easily assign sections of the class to different perspectives. Role-play involves assigning students or asking them to choose a role or position. Debates involve exploration of an issue or an interpretation, usually controversial, by opposing sides. In both debates and role-playing, the instructor provides explicit directions about how to participate, which helps focus attention on the content and away from the manner in which students participate.

Assign a reading or present a mini-lecture for context about the issue. Ask students to read or listen from the perspective of their chosen/assigned role.

- Divide the class into two groups or pairs of students with opposing views
- Assign or ask students to choose a particular role in an issue or case
- Select a small group or pair students to represent each view while the rest of the class observes. Ask observers to analyze the arguments and formulate their own perspectives or opinions (after which, you can break them into opposing pairs or groups).

Ten Suggestions to Improve a Lecture*

Lecturing is one of the most time-honored teaching methods, but does it have a place in an active learning environment? It does if an instructor builds interest first, maximizes understanding and retention, involves students during the lecture, and reinforces what's been presented.

Build Interest

1. **Lead-Off Story or Interesting Visual.** Provide a relevant anecdote, fictional story, cartoon, or graphic that focuses students' attention on what you are about to teach.
2. **Initial Case Problem.** Present a problem around which the lecture will be structured.
3. **Test Question.** Ask students a question (even if they have little prior knowledge) so that they will be motivated to listen to your lecture for the answer.

Maximize Understanding and Retention

4. **Headlines.** Reduce the major points in the lecture to keywords that act as verbal subheadings or memory aids.
5. **Examples and Analogies.** Provide real life illustrations of the ideas in the lecture and compare your material to the knowledge/experience the students already have.
6. **Visual Backup.** Use charts, graphs, video, brief handouts, and demonstrations that enable students to see as well as hear what you are saying.

Involve Students during the Lecture

7. **Spot Challenges.** Interrupt the lecture periodically and challenge students to give examples of the concepts presented thus far or answer spot quiz questions.
8. **Illuminating Exercises.** Throughout the presentation, intersperse brief activities that illuminate the points you are making.

Reinforce the Lecture

9. **Application Problem.** Pose a problem or question for students to solve based on the information given in the lecture.
10. **Student Review:** Ask students to review the contents of the lecture with each other or give them a self-scoring review test.

* Silberman, Melvin L. *Active Learning: 101 Strategies to Teach Any Subject*. Allyn and Bacon, Boston. 1996.