Lighten the Lecture Load with Active Learning Strategies

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The following suggestions are ways to lighten the lecture load by incorporating active learning strategies. Embedding these types of students-do-something-now strategies throughout a lecture is a good way to enhance the students' experience and opportunity to process and reflect on the content.

• **Think-pair-share.** This strategy involves (1) asking the students a question about the content; (2) giving students an opportunity to consider the question, study their notes and/or text; (3) confer with their neighbor regarding their answer to the question. There are many variations on this strategy, especially in terms of how to handle the "share" aspect. For example, a pair can join up with another pair to discuss the question; using Clickers, pairs can log their response (this is a nice option for providing the whole audience with instant feedback, and for giving you as the lecturing information that can help provide direction for the next part of the lecture); and pairs can log their response and their names on to index cards, pass them to the front, and the lecturer can randomly select a few responses to share with the whole group. [Note: This approach also provides a jumping off place for the rest of the lecture, and the index cards with students' names can be used for student participation grading.]

• **Interview.** Instead of lecturing, I have had students interview me about the topic. I start this strategy by telling students that during the interview they must collect all of the information they need on the topic to fulfill the requirements for writing an essay, completing a project, or preparing for an exam. Then students – in teams with an elected interviewer, in rows with the person in the front deemed the official interviewer – work together to determine what 3-5 questions their group (team or row) needs to ask in order to achieve the objective. This strategy encourages students to reflect on what they already know, what they can find out via their text or other resource, and what they absolutely need to ask their professor. It also helps them construct good questions, and prioritize needs.

• **Point-counterpoint.** One of the best lecture-enhancement strategies I've used is to invite a colleague to participate in a point-counterpoint discussion on a particular topic (often controversial), with the students as our audience. This strategy allows students to listen to two (or more, as with a panel) practitioners/experts discuss and debate issues related to the topic. It helps students recognize that there are differing perspectives on the issues, and to see how colleagues grapple with those differing perspectives.

• **Fishbowl.** Another strategy that has worked well for me is to select different groups of students to participate with me in a small group discussion, with the rest of the students listening. I form these student groups ahead of time so I can keep track of who has participated, and make sure that I invite everyone in the audience to participate at least once.

• **Stump the Professor.** For this strategy, I ask small groups of students to compete to see who can compose a question they think will stump me as well as the rest of the class, write it on an index card (along with their names), and throw it into a hat. Then, I pull out each question one at a time. For each question, students have a certain amount of time to respond in writing (either as individuals or in their original small groups) – depending on how many questions there are – as I work out my response. They submit their response, and then I share mine. Sometimes I am stumped, and I distribute points for that. This strategy helps them enhance their question construction, gives them some ownership over the questions, and is fun.

• **Value-added.** I avoid lecturing on the same content the students have available to them via the textbook, article packet, or other set of resources. If I lecture on the same content they have available to them elsewhere they learn very quickly to either (a) not bother reading the text, or (b) not bother
attending the lecture. As an expert in the domain, I have something unique to offer – my take on the topic at hand, and my stories about how it plays out in practice. I want students to see the value in both the readings and what I have to share, so I avoid replication.

- **Storytelling.** As often as possible, instead of lecturing in the conventional way, I tell stories or describe cases that illustrate the points I want students to consider. This strategy helps students process the content in a more contextually meaningful way, helping students see how the content is relevant to the working world.

- **Relevance reminders.** It helps students engage in a lecture if they understand how the lecture content is related to (a) their professional preparation (i.e., what they will be doing on-the-job), and (b) how they are assessed in the course. I remind students at the beginning, middle, and end of a lecture how the content is related to both their professional work and/or the current assignment they are completing for the course. I then reinforce those relationships by incorporating them into my assessment of the assignment. For example, when I ask students to provide design documentation for an instructional product they have created, I require them to cite not only their readings but the lectures and class discussions as well. [Note: Related, I occasionally use the one-minute paper or quiz strategy, informing students at the start of the lecture that at the end of the class I will ask them to submit a one-minute paper or quiz. Knowing that this is coming encourages students to attend to the lecture and take useful notes.]

- **"Give me a break"...i.e., a pause in the action.** This is a simple strategy to implement during a lecture. I allow students time throughout a lecture to summarize what I’ve shared, clean up their notes, ask for clarification from neighbors, and— in general — process and reflect on the content. After the pause in the action, I ask for questions—often, after time to reflect on the lecture, a few students will find they have a gap in their notes and will ask me a follow-up question. I have found that giving students time to summarize the lecture thus far, in their own words, allows them the time and space to do the same sort of fruitful cognitive processing that I’ve done in preparing the lecture. If I don’t give them time to process and reflect, then the lecture is for naught...and all I have accomplished is hearing myself talk.