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Teaching at ALBANY

NOVEMBER 2012



Mark your calendar now for ITLAL Winter Events

December 12
Clicker-Mania

12:00 noon – 2:00 pm
ITLAL Underground (L1 B-69)

What can you do with clickers? How does the technology work? What are the best practices? How do I get started? You'll leave this session ready to *clickerize* your teaching.

December 14

Writer Interlude

with Special Guest Linda Nilsson:

Turning Students into Self-Regulated

Learners (Yes, it can be done!)

9:00 am – 12:00 noon

Join us in a pair of workshops to answer questions such as, "How do we get students to take charge of their own learning? How do we get them to do the reading?"

January 14 & 16

Instructional Leadership Academy:

Team-Based Learning

Join the ranks of the 150+ UAlbany instructors who now use some version of TBL. Learn the method and its techniques, and redesign your course for higher level learning goals and greater student engagement.

January 17

Course Design for Active Learning

and Critical Thinking

Re-think your course from the ground up, so that goals, content, activities, assignments and policies all line up coherently for students. Better design allows you to aim higher and expect more from your students.

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Allow for a little student grieving... BEFORE YOU GIVE UP ON ACTIVE LEARNING

Instructors' experience using active learning strategies varies widely. Some who try it for the first time see a noticeably improved classroom dynamic, immediate student buy-in, and an upsurge in SIRF scores. For others, however, the road to greater student enthusiasm can be rocky, with some instructors getting "pushback" from students and even an immediate—though usually temporary—dip in SIRF scores. This can be off-putting and even confusing, especially if we see evidence that our new approach is yielding positive results, both in student learning and in improved attitudes and behaviors.

Students resist changes in method for good reason: these changes come at what appear to be a high price. Many of them see themselves as having been successful students by working within traditional, teacher-centered models of instruction. They've been getting passing grades, which is the system's most trusted currency. Active learning practices change this economic reality by requiring students to adopt an unfamiliar role, and to suddenly take on greater responsibility for their learning. The active learning classroom is going to function only if students prepare and participate, and students are now directly implicated in what used to be 100% the instructor's responsibility. In any given population of students there will be some who feel betrayed by the changed expectations and newly imposed standards.

Donald Woods compares the transition between these two realities to the stages of grief.

1. **Shock:** "I don't believe it—we have to do homework in groups and she isn't going to lecture on the chapter before the problems are due?"
2. **Denial:** "She can't be serious about this—if I ignore it, it will go away."
3. **Strong emotion:** "I can't do it—I'd better drop the course and take it next semester" or "She can't do this to me—I'm going to complain to the department head—she's not doing her job!"
4. **Resistance and withdrawal:** "I'm not going to play her dumb games—I don't care if she fails me."
5. **Surrender and acceptance:** "OK, I think it's stupid but I'm stuck with it and I might as well give it a shot."
6. **Struggle and exploration:** "Everybody else seems to be getting this—maybe I need to try harder or do things differently to get it to work for me."
7. **Return of confidence:** "Hey, I may be able to pull this off after all—I think it's starting to work."
8. **Integration and success:** "YES! This stuff is all right—I don't understand why I had so much trouble with it before."

If we don't pay attention to this sometimes slow, painful, adjustment process, student expressions of dissatisfaction can convince us that what we're doing isn't working, or isn't worthy of pursuing—before the process of adjustment and "grieving" has had time to run its course.

The question for instructors is how to negotiate this grief phase while waiting for the effects of the new model to kick in. It's also important to make sure you've considered all possible reasons for students' emotional response to the course. Richard Felder suggests that teachers experiencing student pushback for the first implementation should reflect on two possibilities: (1) Maybe students are responding to issues that are unrelated to the new teaching method, or (2) Teachers may be missing some steps in their implementation.

Here is a brief heuristic to guide your reflection on what might be happening, BEFORE you give up on any active learning implementation.

(1) What's your evidence for thinking that students are pushing back specifically on your chosen active learning method?

Are student complaints aimed at the method, or might they relate to other things such as unclear criteria, length of assignments, due dates, clarity of directions, or something else altogether? Small things that, on the surface, have little to do with your active learning plan, can inadvertently sow frustration and even unintentionally convey disrespect. When instructors focus their attention on trying a new teaching method, especially the first time around, some of the management and communication basics get lost in the shuffle.

The remedy begins by collecting some information. For example, every 2-3 weeks make it a point to ask students to respond in writing on any piece of paper to the following prompts:

- What's working well for you in this course?
- What's not working? What's not helping you learn?
- What suggestions do you have for the instructor?

This information is going to help you figure out quickly whether it's the method that's the problem or some other issue that has escaped your attention in the turmoil of trying something new.

Collecting—and acknowledging—students' responses to your teaching also communicates your respect for them, and gives you the opportunity to articulate your rationale for the method you've chosen. Often it's only a small number of students who are really objecting to the method. If this is the case, indicate this fact in your in-class response to the feedback ("It looks like most of you are finding X useful, but I did notice that three of you expressed reservations.") This will help dislodge complaining students of the notion that they are speaking for the majority of their classmates, which can quell some of the less productive criticisms and reduce their potentially toxic effect on the classroom environment.

(2) Do YOU really believe that the method you're using is a better way for students to learn?

Nothing will make students more skeptical of a teaching innovation than a tentative instructor. You have to believe that the method you've chosen will work—or you'll at least need to act like you do until you see enough evidence to be thoroughly convinced. If you start to pull back and question yourself, and give hesitant instructions that convey lack of conviction on your part, students will push even harder. This requires a true leap of faith on an instructor's part, and having a like-minded colleague with whom you can consult can be helpful. Hearing from others who have had successes with the method you're using can be an important source of support.

(3) Did you explain to your students why you are using the method?

Students are much more savvy than we often realize about the nature of what's happening in our classrooms: if they don't understand the reason for adopting a new approach, they will remain skeptical and push back. One edition of *The National Teaching & Learning Forum* tells the story of Dr. Gary Smith, a Geology professor at the University of New Mexico, who transformed a course from the traditional "chalk and talk" approach to a more collaborative, problem solving method, only to find that students, who admitted that they were learning a lot, still rated his course poorly in its first redesigned iteration. Dr. Smith decided that he had not offered students sufficient explanation for his rationale for changing methods. The following semester he spent class time on day one assessing students' expectations:

"Thinking of what you want to get out of your college education and this course, which of the following is most important to you? 1. Acquiring information (facts, principles, concepts) 2. Learning how to use information and knowledge in new situations 3. Developing lifelong learning skills."

Students' responses to these questions, which clustered around #2 and #3, became the driver of a discussion about how students could best achieve their goals for the course and their college education. The students made their own case for active learning, by indicating that they could acquire information on their own out of class, but to learn to use the information and to develop other skills they would need to practice in class with the help of Dr. Smith. Dr. Smith was then able to confirm that he thought the same thing, and designed the course for that purpose. The payoff: Dr. Smith's course evaluations were actually the highest he had ever received.

It's worth taking the time necessary to remind students that you are not just "making it up." A wealth of formal educational research over several decades shows that effectively administered active learning leads to better acquisition of knowledge, greater skills that potential employers consider valuable, and higher academic performance when measured against a standard. Even if students are skeptical at first they will recognize that your efforts are made in good faith and in

their best interests. That perception will carry weight when the students are evaluating their experience in the course.

(4) Have you asked a colleague to give you some feedback?

Find someone you trust and ask him/her to take a look at your materials and plans, and even visit one of your classes to collect data on how students are responding. A third-party perspective is essential when troubleshooting, as you may be too close to the situation to see it objectively. We know of many "Eureka" moments where the outside observer was able to put a finger on something crucial that the instructor was overlooking. The feedback in such cases may be all that is needed to refine the process, put students at greater ease, increase student buy-in, and brighten the mood of the class.

(5) Have you used the new method long enough to overcome the learning curve associated with it?

It can take a semester—and often more—to become comfortable and adept with active learning. As you hone your use of the chosen method, trust that your students will eventually respond more favorably. In the meantime it is worth reflecting upon and modifying your implementation on a daily basis as you proceed. Keep close at hand your references on the method—possibly in the form of a shorthand checklist or set of criteria to use in planning each class meeting. After each class meeting ask yourself,

Which elements of the method worked well today? (Do I know why?)

Did my handling of a given incident/situation support the objective and process of the method?

Did this assignment or that activity conform to the method?

Did I improvise modifications that may have worked against the effectiveness of the method? (For example, did I vary from my game plan when several students failed to do the reading? Did I remember to let students respond to students, to let them try to find a solution for themselves?)

TRUST THE METHOD

If you've made the decision to implement an active learning strategy, you no doubt saw the need for it and you certainly value the goal—otherwise, why would you try? If you've boldly and courageously come this far, you owe it to yourself to see it through. Make your job more fun by accepting imperfection as part of the experience. In many cases we observe that a deeply flawed implementation of active learning is still more engaging and rewarding for students than a traditional lecture. Because you've introduced more variables than in a straight lecture, you're going to make errors, and you're going to see constant room for improvement. The good news is that your students are likely to be on your side, if they see that you're trying something that shows your commitment to them, many students will take the role of partner, try to help, and maintain a productive attitude even during moments of frustration or confusion.

References:

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Smith, Gary A. "First-Day Questions for the Learner-Centered Classroom." *The National Teaching & Learning Forum* 17:5 (Sep 2008): 1-4.

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