Module: Active Learning Activities

Lesson 1: Choosing the Right Activities

There is such variety in the activities that you can choose for your class. In order to help you make the best choices, this lesson will discuss a conceptual framework of active learning activities (active learning continuum) and other factors that affect the choice of activities to adopt.

Active Learning Continuum

The active learning continuum provides a visual model of tasks that range from simple to complex. Simple tasks are short and relatively unstructured, using less materials and planning. More complex tasks may take a whole class period or more, and require careful planning by you to give the students more structure. Often these activities also need more materials, but not always. An important note: neither end of the continuum is “better” or “more desirable.” In fact, planning a variety of activities for different points in a class may be a great strategy.

Pause (Simple)

A great example of a simple activity is the pause procedure: During a lecture, students are given a 2-minute pause after every 15 minutes of lecture to compare and rework their notes. This activity takes only 4-8 minutes of your class, depending on length, does not require much student interaction, involves no real planning or additional materials, but is still shown to lead to a significant performance improvement in later quizzes and exams.

Jigsaw (Complex)

On the other side of the continuum is a group activity like the Jigsaw. Students start in homogenous “expert” groups, each working on a different concept: Examples might include:
examining Romantic poetry by assigning each expert group a different poet (Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, etc.); Parsing the effects of an historical event, such as the great depressions (creation of new deal, banking regulation, effect on the average citizen); learning the skills needed to complete a complex multi-stage experiment; or analyzing a data set in different ways. They work on the topic until they are confident in the subject matter and then design the most effective ways to explain (teach) the topics to the other groups, who don’t know anything about the topic yet.

They then switch into heterogeneous groups and teach their concept to the group. As “teachers” of their second group, students take a large amount of ownership in their concept – and carry a lot of responsibility for making sure their group understands. Moreover, this activity reinforces students as creators of knowledge (their work in the expert groups) and their ability to work collaboratively (their work in the heterogeneous groups). You can image that this activity requires a fair amount of pre-planning, choosing 4 concepts for each initial group and organizing the logistics of the group-switches. The activity also takes time, easily filling an entire class: in the second group, each student will need enough time to explain their concept to the group.

Other Factors to Consider

Knowledge-Skill/attitudes

We tend to think of student activity as skill-based, because they are doing something – but many activities focus on knowledge acquisition. Where your activity falls on this continuum will likely be related to the goals and logistics of the course. A general education course might have more objectives related to attitudes than an intro in the major class, for which your activities might focus more on knowledge building.
Inexperienced-Experienced

The question of inexperienced to experienced students may be less of which activities fit where, but rather how you will prepare students. Quite simply, inexperienced students might need more guidelines in order to do more complex activities. Breaking down assignments into smaller pieces or increasingly complex tasks is known as *scaffolding*. There are three ways to do this: Process scaffolding focuses on helping students through many steps. You might break up a paper by asking students to submit a proposal, bibliography, draft, edits, and so on. Critical thinking scaffolding divides activities by Bloom’s, starting with the lower levels and then advancing when students are more comfortable. Disciplinary scaffolding might begin with terminology, and then move on to disciplinary debates and practices (this can be helpful for both students new to the area and students beginning to consider your field as a career) - and of course, these approaches can be combined as needed.

Evaluate Your Plan

When choosing an activity, you will want to rely on your learning objectives, while acknowledging your personal teaching style:

- What should students know, be able to do, or feel?
- Is the activity helping student gain that knowledge, practice that skill, or reflect on their feelings?
- Do you feel comfortable with the control and interaction required of the activity – and are your students adequately prepared?
- Is this activity appropriate for the level of the student and the time available?

When planning the scope of the entire semester, you might strive for variety of activities that represent a span of the simple-complex and Knowledge-Skill continuum. The diversity of
possible activities suggested in the next two lessons will hopefully inspire you to include some active learning activities in your classroom.