Active Learning in an Online Course
A Guide for Instructors

Passive Learning
Teacher-centered
Instructor has the knowledge, but passes information to students

Active Learning
Student-centered
Instructors provide the environment for knowledge creation

Active learning has been shown to be better for thinking, collaboration and engagement. Being in an online platform does not limit you from using active learning in your digital classroom. Dee Fink (2005), a leading author in active learning, suggests thinking about active learning as the intersection of three components
- doing or observing (what Fink calls a “rich learning experience”),
- information and ideas, and
- reflective dialogue.

You can think of a “rich learning experience” as an activity that aligns with both learning outcomes and assessments and provides opportunities for students to learn new concepts and skills or to practice with concepts and skills they have recently learned. Providing “hands-on” activities for students, either individually or in small groups, is an important way to both increase motivation and support learning. Situations where students actively participate and work with the content are more effective in encouraging students to think reflectively and push their understanding of the concepts than situations where students receive information passively. Well-designed learning activities promote that kind of active learning.

Activities that Contribute to Active Learning

- Note-taking
- Discussion
- Writing
- Role-Play
- Scenarios
- Debates
- Case studies
- Peer review
- Annotation
- Games
- Graphing
- Polling
- Quizzing
- Puzzles
- Drawing
- Peer teaching
- Freewriting
- Group work
- Problem solving
- Talking

Using Interaction to Support Active Learning
To foster an active learning environment you should keep students actively engaged with you, the course content and each other. Students should be observing, doing, communicating and reflecting...these are examples of actively working with concepts and people. Your interaction with students includes providing feedback on assignments (beyond the grade assigned, use the comments), participating in the discussion boards, post announcements summarizing the previous week or upcoming week, be available for office hours online or over the phone, still serve as a mentor, and working with students for peer teaching assignments. Student to student interaction can be promoted through group projects, group case studies, peer instruction, role playing, discussions/debates, collaborative brainstorming and peer review.
Ideas for Unique Active Learning Experiences

Discussion Boards
This is a simple and easy to do activity in an online platform. Within Canvas you can assign discussion boards. You can require a post before seeing others postings and you could even incorporate responses into the gradebook. When creating your discussion board it is important to post questions that are not easily answered by a “yes” or “no” response.

Group Work
You may think that group work is impossible in the online platform, but it is actually easy to do with the right tools. When assigning group work Canvas allows you to create groups, which can be correlated with grades for group assignments. Once a group is created in Canvas, students have a place they can collaborate. You can also help students navigate tools like WebEx or Teams to provide a way for video conferencing. It is important that you are proficient in the tool you assign so that you can provide student support for troubleshooting if needed.

Peer Teaching
Here you can allow students to do presentations through your regularly scheduled course meeting or allow students to create their own video where they are “lecturing” over a topic. This is a great tool to allow you to cover other areas of content you may miss due to lack of time as well as promote active learning. Students can submit these presentations online to you as an assignment that you can then share or embed into a discussion board thread, whichever works for you. The Canvas Studio tool makes this a simple and easy process.

Let’s Get Visual
Another great thing about Canvas is that students can upload images to assignments and discussions. You can require students to create a diagram or concept map and then share that again as an assignment or discussion board.

Learning by Doing
Is there someplace your students can go and “practice” what you are teaching or “experience” the topic? Maybe they are learning about toxic plants commonly found in pastures, you can ask them to look in their own yard or pasture and identify plants. Perhaps you want students to visit a local coffee shop on a poetry night. It is important to have a backup plan for students who do not have access to resources required for the experience.

Still need help?
Please call Mississippi State Center for Distance Education 662.325.3473 or email help@online.msstate.edu.
Evaluate Your Course

Use the rubric below to analyze your assignments and activities. Also consider the tools you are using to support the activity and why as well as ways you could revise to better support learning and student motivation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities Rubric</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Ratings</th>
<th>Pts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the task authentic?</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0 pts Yes</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0 pts Partially</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0 pts No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it include opportunities for active learning?</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0 pts Yes</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0 pts No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it allow for different types of interaction?</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.0 pts All three types</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0 pts Two types</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0 pts One type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0 pts No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it build on prior work in the course?</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0 pts Yes</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0 pts No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it give the students an opportunity to get useful feedback on their work?</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0 pts Instructor AND peer feedback</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0 pts Instructor OR peer feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0 pts No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it encourage students to think and reflect on what and how they are learning and its significance?</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0 pts Yes</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0 pts No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Points: 10.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brindley, J. E., Walti, C., & Blaschke, L. M. (2009). Creating Effective Collaborative Learning Groups in an Online Environment (Links to an external site.). The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 10(3).