



CETL TIPS: Actively Engaging Students in the Classroom

Engaging students in a classroom experience is a way to encompass learning from teacher to student, student to teacher, and student to student. Students are actively engaged when there is an emphasis on the exploration of each student's attitudes and values rather than the transmission of information. Engagement includes the development of student skills, engagement through activities, and an emphasis on higher-order thinking, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Research conducted by numerous educational researchers (Astin, 1985; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Cross, 1987; Ericksen, 1984) and compiled in national reports (the Association of American College's Task Group on General Education, 1985; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1987; Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984) have concluded that students learn more, and care more about the material, when they are actively engaged in their learning.

Strategies to engage students take many forms, including talking, writing, reading, discussing, debating, acting, role-playing, journaling, conferring, interviewing, building, creating, and more. Here are some specific tips to get you started:

Mix it up. Students typically have attention spans of about 10-15 minutes. Try to design your lectures in segments. For example, in a 50 minute class period, you could lecture for the first 15 minutes, then incorporate a group activity for the second 15 minutes, lecture for another 15 minutes, and then summarize what has been covered in the class in the remaining 5 minutes.

- Design interactive lectures. For example, have students begin by brainstorming what they know or think they know about a topic. Use this list as a framework for introducing material.
- Ask meaningful, open-ended questions. You could direct these at the whole class (be sure to allow sufficient time for students to contemplate the question and formulate a response). Or, direct a few related but different questions at smaller groups who can contemplate and respond with a group answer.
- In larger classes, solicit written questions for discussion, or assign a group of student volunteers to take a leadership role about a specific topic for the class to discuss.
- Include group activities in your planning. Be sure to fully explain the task and stick to a structured timeframe for discussion. Some possible group activities include:
 - *Focused Listing*: Your task is to come up with a concept you think is important for students to know. After informing the students of the task, in groups students will have to list one thing they know about the concept and then pass to the next person as each reads his/her item out loud. The list should make it through the group at least 3 times, and students may pass if they cannot come up with an item. This is a good way to gauge what students know about a topic, and share their knowledge with others.
 - *Three-Step Interview*: Your task is to outline 3 questions important to a specific topic in class. In pairs, students take turns asking the three questions of their partners. At this point, in groups of 4, each partner recaps the other's answers to the other pair. This too is a check of the students' comprehension.
 - *TV Commercial*: Your task is to determine a concept that you have already covered that is worth more attention from the students. Then in groups, the students will have to make a 30 second TV commercial that illustrates this concept. This is a good way for students to apply their knowledge.
 - *Quick Thinks*: These are activities that are easily inserted into a lecture and allow the student to stay focused and check their understanding of the material. Your task is to choose a topic that needs more emphasis than is achieved in lecture format only. The following is a list of possible quick think formats:
 - select the best response
 - correct the error
 - complete a sentence starter
 - compare or contrast
 - support a statement
 - reorder the steps
 - reach a conclusion
 - paraphrase the idea

Some of these tips are from Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison, *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*. To borrow this book or other resources about active engagement, contact cetl@clarku.edu (<mailto:cetl@clarku.edu>).

For more tips online:

[Active Learning Online \(http://150.252.8.96/cte/activelearning/focus.htm\)](http://150.252.8.96/cte/activelearning/focus.htm).

Brief Reference List

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