

Fostering an Active Learning Environment in the Philosophy Classroom

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Active Learning: any activity that substantially engages the students in course content through active listening, talking, writing reading, and reflecting. It involves students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing (Bonwell and Eison 1991).

- class discussions
- games
- debates
- small-group activities
- individual writing exercises
- polls

Why use active learning strategies?

Do you incorporate any opportunities for active learning in your classes? Why or why not?

Advantages:

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Disadvantages:

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Lesson Planning:

Think about what a typical class period looks like for you. Fill in a sample lesson plan and class outline below:

Topic:

Class Session Objective:

Class Session Outline:

How make sure that your class objectives are accomplished?

Active Learning and Class Objectives:

Active learning strategies can be used throughout the class session help you and your students accomplish your class session objectives.

Varieties of Activities:

Activities can be used in a variety of contexts, depending on the level of knowledge you're interested in testing, the level of preparation required, and the level of risk. You might find it useful to incorporate a variety of activities across these dimensions at different points in the class.

Levels of Knowledge:

Low: basic understanding, comprehension, retention

Mid: application

High: evaluation, critique

Levels of Preparation:

Low: requires little to no prep or evaluation outside of class

Mid: requires some prep or evaluation outside of class

High: requires a lot of prep or evaluation outside of class

Levels of Risk:

Low: you maintain control over the content and direction

Mid: you share control with the students over the content and direction

High: the students have most of the control over the content and direction

When to Use What:

It's very easy to incorporate low-prep and low-risk activities in the classroom. Limit high-prep and high-risk activities to those activities that will be especially helpful to students or will have high pay-off in accomplishing your class session objectives or course objectives. Some low-prep and low-risk activities could include having students:

- identify the main point of the reading
- reconstruct an argument that was presented in class
- list important terms and define them
- do practice logic problems from the book

Higher-prep and higher-risk activities may include having students:

- prepare opposing sides of a debate and then debate each other
- construct a new argument or explain a new concept based on a reading or topic
- play as teams in a game you've prepared ahead of time

Active Learning Strategies (not an exhaustive list!):

- Polls: pose a question to students and have them vote by raising hands; thumbs up/down
- Survey: pose a series of questions and have students voice agreement/disagreement
 - o You can use interactive tools like kahoot.com survey students anonymously.
- Minute paper: students spend a minute or two writing an answer to a prepared question
 - o “Which premise of this argument is weakest, and why?”
 - o “What part of lecture was most confusing to you?”
 - o “What is Thomson’s people-seeds example supposed to demonstrate?”
- Think-pair-share: students first reflect on a question individually, then discuss their answers with a partner, and then the pairs share with the class as a whole
 - o “Is this argument valid? Why or why not?”
 - o “How might a theist object to the Problem of Evil?”
 - o “Identify an action that a utilitarian would consider to be morally correct. Why?”
- Pair and Compare: give students time to compare lecture notes, fill in blanks, fix errors
- Brainstorming: students work in groups to generate as many ideas as possible. Hear back from the groups and record their answers on the board.
 - o Generating discussion to frame a new topic
 - o Reviewing a previous topic
- Small-group Homework Check: Have students do their homework individually outside of class. During class on the day the assignment is due, have students form groups and then compare their answers to the assignment. The students in each group must agree on answers and turn in a group solution along with their individual work.
- Evaluating arguments:
 - o Have each group go through each premise of an argument and motivate it.
 - o Assign a premise to each group and have them evaluate why it’s plausible, then present their motivation to the class.
 - o Have each group consider how someone would object to each premise.
 - o Assign a premise to each group and have them consider how someone would object, then present their objection to the class.
- Jigsaw Discussion: a topic is divided into smaller topics. First split students into groups and have each group discuss a different topic. Then rearrange the groups so each new group has a member from the original groups. Each member presents their findings to their group so everyone becomes familiar with all the “pieces.”
 1. Assign each group a different premise. Have them motivate the premise and then consider an objection to the premise.

2. Then rearrange the groups so every new group has a member for each premise. Have each group member motivate and then object to the premise.
 3. In the new groups, have the students collectively identify the best objection to the argument and consider a response. Have each group present to the class
- Debate: divide the students into two groups. Give them time to prepare arguments and responses for their side then let them debate.
 - o Compatibilism vs. Libertarianism
 - o Marquis vs. Thomson
 - o Utilitarianism vs. Deontology
 - Open-ended discussion: Prompt groups with an open-ended question and let them discuss what interests them
 - o “What is your opinion about free will?”
 - o “What was the most interesting part of the reading?”
 - Games
 - o Logical Fallacy Bingo: Have students fill in a 5x5 board with logical fallacies from a word bank you provide. Go through slides with examples of different fallacies, have students identify them, and cross off the fallacy on their board. First to get 5 fallacies in a row/column/diagonal wins.
 - o Taboo: Prepare a series of cards with one term/topic/argument/objection written on each card. Give each student a card and have them describe what’s written on the card to students (individually or as teams). The student/team that guesses the most cards wins. (To make it more challenging, write additional terms on the card that the students cannot use to describe their topic.)
 - o Proofreading games: When preparing to write papers, give students a sloppy paper (ideally that you’ve written) and give them 5 minutes to find as many errors as possible. As a class, go through each error and explain how to fix it.
 - o Review games: Prepare a practice quiz and have groups compete to find the most correct answers in a limited time. Then go through the correct responses.
 - Variation: have students generate review questions outside of class. Compile them and have the students answer all the questions.
 - Variation: Jeopardy
 - You can use interactive tools like kahoot.com to play games.

What other active learning strategies could you use (or have you used) in your classes?

Discussion:

1. Find an activity that is low-prep, low-risk, and/or checks for a low level of knowledge. When would this activity best be used (within each class session, in the semester)?
2. Find an activity that requires moderate preparation, has moderate risk, and/or checks for mid-level knowledge. When would this activity best be used (within each class session, in the semester)?
3. Find an activity that is high-prep, high-risk, and/or checks for a high level of knowledge. When would this activity best be used (within each class session, in the semester)?

Troubleshooting Active Learning:

What could you do as an instructor to solve these potential problems in class? Be specific.

- 1a. One group is completely off-task and doesn't complete their assignment.
- 1b. Students complain about having to work in groups.
- 2a. The groups seem confused about their task.
- 2b. A group comes up with something completely unexpected and possibly incorrect.
- 3a. The activity doesn't go as planned, and it ends up being a disorganized mess.
- 3b. No one from a particular group wants to share their findings with the class.

What other problems do you anticipate?

Using Active Learning Strategies to Troubleshoot your Class:

Which low-prep and low-risk small group activities could you incorporate on the fly to fix some of these problems?

1. No one is participating.
2. Your students seem confused, but you don't know why.
3. You are running out of time and can't cover all the material.
4. You have too much time and don't know what else to do.

Recommendations for Incorporating Active Learning Strategies in the Classroom:

1. Set your expectations for participation early. Use active learning from day one.
2. Affirm student contributions; don't make anyone nervous about participating.
3. Respond to student input (implicit or explicit) to improve the activities.
4. State the purpose of the activity and explain how you're using it.
 - If you'll be using their responses to guide the rest of the discussion, say so.
 - Put responsibility on each group to respond if each has a crucial point to discuss.
 - Try to incorporate activities that are explicitly aimed at accomplishing objectives.
5. Give written instructions whenever possible, especially when each group is doing something different.
6. Decide whether you should assign students to groups or let them choose their groups.
7. Decide whether you should check-in on the groups or let them work without interference.
8. Follow-up with the groups as a class.
 - Write down responses on the board
 - Summarize the important points covered
 - Validate each group and re-direct tactfully if necessary
9. By yourself, evaluate how successful the activity was. Were the students engaged? Did they have fun? Were they confused about their task? Were the responses unhelpful? Consider what changes would need to be made if you use it again. Consider what went well and should be used again.

Reflection:

Identify two active learning strategies you're interested in trying. What prep do you need to do before class? How would you frame and wrap up those activities in class?

Revisit the lesson plan you outlined on page 1. How could you use active learning to *accomplish* the class session objective and also *check* whether the objective has been met?

Thank you for attending this session! Feel free to contact me if you have questions about what we discussed today or with other cool ideas about active learning.

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