Two Key Strategies to Promote Active Learning in the College Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In order to more capably serve our increasingly diverse population of students at the postsecondary level, it is important to validate them as learners and move from a traditional college classroom environment to one that embraces active learning experiences. Research has shown that active involvement in the classroom leads to a rise in student participation, learning, and success. This article shares two simple, yet productive, strategies to foster these concepts and effectively promote active learning in the college classroom. Social constructivism is the underlying foundation with a focus on teachers implementing the strategies to create and facilitate an environment that encourages student engagement. As the student population continues to change, it is imperative to reflect on the research and incorporate more active learning strategies that effectually engage all students in the learning process.

More students than ever are entering postsecondary education in the United States, but they are increasingly diverse and often disconnected from the traditional college classroom. Colleges face a profound demographic change, rapidly changing economic and workforce demands, and the need to provide access and promote achievement among previously under-served populations (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Tinto (2012) reiterates that efforts to increase student success for this changing population must require academic and social engagement with academic staff and peers, especially in the classroom. New approaches are needed at the undergraduate level to proactively address the needs of these students and increase their academic success.

Powell & Rightmyer (2011) argue that teachers and schools need to increase the use of instructional practices culturally appropriate for the students we serve. The essence of culturally responsive instruction validates students as learners and is based on a sociocultural perspective which moves education from a standard traditional experience where the teacher is the keeper of knowledge to one that is transformational and allows for collaborative learning experiences and rigorous inquiry-based approaches (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Powell & Rightmyer, 2011). The classroom is viewed as an engaged community of learners where everyone's experiences and prior knowledge has value, and the basic concept of active learning where the students are directly involved in creating their own learning rather

than being passive recipients of instruction is paramount (Boylan, 2002). Freire (2009) reminds us that the only way to engage meaningfully in our learning and with one another is to pursue inquiry in the world, with the world, and with each other, and Vygotsky (1978) reiterates that learning is innately social.

In practical terms, promoting active learning in the college classroom can be made much simpler with two easy, but very productive classroom instructional strategies. This includes collaborative grouping and exit cards. By utilizing these routines, professors can efficiently implement the use of active learning in their classrooms.

The first strategy is the use of collaborative small groups which is an essential component of culturally responsive instruction and active learning. Research has shown that collaborative groups lead to improved student participation, learning, and growth (Armstrong, 2011; Draskovic, Holdrinet, Bulte, Bolhuis & van Leeuwe, 2004; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993; Smith & MacGregor, 1992). Although there is some ambiguity associated with the definition of collaborative learning, Kenneth Bruffee, considered one of the primary scholars and proponent of collaborative learning, reminds us that knowledge is socially constructed, and collaborative learning reveals classroom authority as shared by students and teacher (Armstrong, 2011).

Perhaps this explains why there is a dearth of such endeavors at the postsecondary level. Osterholt & Barratt (2012) remind us that collaborative learning has long been debated among university faculty who cling to traditional methods of teaching despite changing student demographics. No longer is the teacher considered the expert in the classroom, and this is sometimes disconcerting for some professors. While some college instructors do embrace this approach in theory, they are often uncomfortable utilizing group work within their courses. A common complaint is that groups are hard to manage and often unorganized. However, if well-planned and implemented, collaborative groups can enhance the effectiveness and enjoyment of learning (Kosnik & Beck, 2011).

Fostering collaborative groups and the basics of the process should be introduced at the beginning of the term. The underlying message that must be discussed with students is that everyone is a participant and respected as learner. In addition, a well-organized learning environment with easily understood procedures is a must. Perhaps the most critical factor is the modeling, tone, and classroom management provided by the teacher.

The use of Solo cups can assist with the management of collaborative small groups. The instructor will need three Solo cups for each group: one red, one green, and one yellow.

Before instituting the use of the cups, it is essential to explain the system to the students. The cups are stacked and displayed according to the following rules: green – we're working, know what we're doing, and on task, yellow – we do not understand something, we have a question, we need your assistance, and red – we have completed the task.

When the green cup is used by small groups, it does not give a free pass to the instructor. Instead, the instructor should be circulating around the room and monitoring the groups. It is important not to interfere with the group conversation, but monitor and let them know that help is available if needed. One can also quickly see if someone is not participating, who's doing the most talking, and so on. If there are issues with how a group is performing, address discreetly or address on the returned exit cards discussed below.

The yellow cup allows the instructor to quickly see who has questions or needs assistance. Confer with the group to check on their questions, repeat any needed directions, or clarify procedures. Make sure that all of the group members are on track before leaving.

The red cup signals that the group has completed the assigned task. At this point, the instructor needs to collect any task assignments such as a completed graphic organizer or group notes. It is important to note that there should be an expected outcome for all group work, and students need to understand the purpose of what they are doing. Once the group has completed the task, they are free to interact, talk, and have social time. This is an excellent way for them to develop relationships and build trust, key elements of a true learning community.

A second strategy that promotes active learning is the use of exit cards, sometimes called exit tickets. Exit cards provide ongoing formative assessment data and should take no more than three to five minutes for the students to complete (Strickland, 2009). They provide students the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned, how they learned it, where they learned it, why it is important (or not), and how they will use what they have learned for the future (Morrissey, Coolican, & Wolfgang, 2011; Owen & Sarles, 2012). In addition, exit cards provide the instructor with another opportunity to facilitate student learning, to offer support to students in becoming effective group members, and to encourage students to take charge of their own learning.

Each individual group member should complete an exit card (small index card) to note any new learning, concerns, questions, and so forth, which is turned in at the end of the class. Again, the cards should take only a few minutes to complete. Instructors can choose to include questions or prompts to facilitate the process, particularly when starting to use exit cards, but it is not necessary. The goal is to encourage students to take charge of their learning and to model the importance of reflection in the learning process (Owen & Sarles, 2012).

The instructor reviews all of the exit cards and responds to each individual student with a comment or two. The cards are then handed back to the students at the beginning of the next class period. This strategy also provides a simple way to check attendance. More importantly, the cards provide an opportunity for the instructor to encourage the student to reflect, answer any questions, address any concerns with the student, and create an opportunity for individual dialogue and engagement with each student. They also alert the instructor to adjust any follow-up instruction or to address any issues with the whole class when consistent questions, misconceptions, or themes appear throughout the cards.

In order to encourage more authentic communication and comments, instructors might choose to award participation points rather than an actual grade for the cards. This allows the students to take more risks and share their true thoughts. Often students will ask questions on the cards that they do not feel comfortable asking in class, and the instructor can also encourage the students to add more insights if comments are sparse by engaging in an ongoing dialogue with them.

For the classroom to be a place of positive learning experiences for an increasingly diverse student population, students (yes, even college students!) need to learn how to work effectively with each other in collaborative groups and also with their instructors where everyone will often have very different perspectives and experiences. Active learning can be challenging in the college classroom, but it can also be a very valuable experience where learning is not only achieved, but enjoyed (Kosnik & Beck, 2011). Utilizing these two simple strategies to promote active learning for all students in the college classroom provides an opportunity to step in that direction.

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