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Increasing Online Engagement through Active Learning

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Increasing Online Engagement through Active Learning

The sudden shift to remote learning in higher education in 2020 resulted in experimentation and observations that will continue to inform educators. Previous research has shown the efficacy of online communities of inquiry (Garrison), which were defined as the intersection of cognitive, social and teaching presence. Cognitive presence is the interaction between students and the content material, which successfully happens in a variety of delivery methods. However, social presence (the interaction among students as a learning community) and teaching presence (the interaction between students and the educator) have become critical considerations during the transition to remote learning. Though cognitive presence can be delivered through remote technologies such as video lectures and e-textbooks, the new challenge for educators is to leverage social and teaching presence to enhance learning remotely. One successful approach to building social and teaching presence is active learning. This paper seeks to describe how active learning provided an authentic educational experience for synchronous online English courses.

Active learning traces its roots to John Dewey, who studied how to change education from lecture-centered to experience-centered modes. Active learning strategies include case studies, peer instruction, problem-based activities, and role-playing (McConnell et al.), but with the requirements of suddenly-remote learning, active learning has become more of a way of interacting in the online space than a defined set of activities. One helpful concept for applying active learning is orienting students to the new online space to enhance participation. A second concept is employing strategies that keep students engaged during real-time class by harnessing online potential. A third concept is to extend active learning beyond the synchronous class interaction as a bridge to the next online class meeting.

Orienting students to the new online space

The first goal for the suddenly remote classroom was to orient students to the new space. This strategy was especially important in light of the rapid transition to new technology for students and professors. It took time and effort to confirm that everyone could navigate the course technology. It was also important to create a space where students could see and interact with each other. In the courses studied, each class comprised 20 or fewer students, and it was realistic for students to view the entire class. The professor asked students to turn on their video and view the class in a grid format. Students were guided to re-name themselves so that everyone could see their first and last names. For our classes, we kept technology simple by raising hands rather than utilizing a digital tool, and everyone practiced this technique the first day to make sure that it worked. Each class also began with a microphone check during which each student answered an icebreaker question such as "what is your favorite textbook this semester?" Though the activity served a practical technology check, it also served to engage students and build social presence among students. As the semester progressed, students became accustomed to seeing each other and participating in class-wide icebreakers and discussions.

The discomfort engendered by the new technology was gradually overcome through repetition of the same skills such as signing on, turning on the microphone, and raising a hand to add to the conversation. The professor introduced new skills gradually to prevent cognitive overload on the part of students. As an example, the use of the chat function was introduced the second week as

part of an activity. Though many students had experience with the chat function or intuited its use, the professor assumed that the chat function was new to all students and walked students through the activity. Breakout rooms were introduced a week later, and once again the professor walked students through the skill of using them. Through incremental introduction to classroom technologies, students grew in confidence and participation.

Harness online potential

After orienting students to the course space, the next goal was to keep students actively engaged using the new medium of the online course space. The online space differs from a physical classroom since class members are connecting on the internet and lag time may affect the ability of students to negotiate who speaks next. On the other hand, the virtual space allows for quieter students to be encouraged to participate in discussion and for students who might sit in the back of the physical classroom to be in virtual front row seats. Balancing the challenges and potentials of the online space, we found a modified facilitator role for the professor worked well. It combined active learning ideas of making lectures short, incorporating activities to apply new concepts, and giving students preparation time to think about their responses during discussion. As an example, the professor might explain the concept of a thesis sentence using a visual and fewer than three minutes of explanation. Next, the professor gives the students five minutes to compose a sample thesis sentence and post it in the chat. As the sentences began to appear, the professor asks students to read each other's sentences and be ready to comment on what they observed. After five minutes, the professor opens the discussion by calling on one of the students who posted early. As they express their observations, the professor asks other students to comment. Though this could be considered a cold calling technique, the students had been prepared that everyone would ultimately share with the class. This approach still allows for volunteers to raise their hands, and as this method became a norm for the class, it created a modified facilitation style that overcame lag problems and harnessed the front-row seat potential of all students. We found that if students knew that each person would be expected to share a short comment, they became accustomed to engaging and responding to one another. In the process, teaching presence and social presence grew because the professor was facilitating interactions among students. This approach could be used in the midst of any type of learning activity, and we realized that active learning became more of a facilitation attitude than a collection of specific activities. For the modified facilitation style, it helped to give students the opportunity to prepare before they spoke. The professor often created a silent preparation time by communicating the question and explaining that everyone had a minute to jot down ideas or think about what they would say.

Another successful tool for simple engagement was short polls. These can be conducted through polling applications built into the remote classroom or simply through a chat box or Google doc. Short polls served to keep students paying attention by requesting their feedback, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or even documentation of whether they changed their mind. After a poll, the professor would ask students to comment verbally on the results. This reflection segment is an important element of active learning, which one professor described as “instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Bonwell and Eison 7). Also, the active learning approach encourages activities to have a purpose to the student. For our classes, the professor regularly reminded students that part of

their goal for the course was to learn to express themselves verbally. They may feel reluctant to speak, but this reminder validated their effort. Transparency in explaining the purpose of the various learning activities encouraged students to participate and thus learn more fully.

As students get to know one another, community was built more deeply through active learning approaches that required deeper involvement. One successful activity involved the use of a Google slideshow that the professor prepared in advance with instructions and group numbers on the slides. Each breakout group was assigned one slide to complete. The professor could observe progress of all the groups in the single slide deck and visit breakout rooms that needed to progress. Usually, these breakout rooms were given a simple task enacted in 5-8 minutes. The goal was for groups to return to class and present their slides and then discuss what they learned from the other groups. As an example, each group might be assigned a different advertisement to analyze for the use of rhetorical devices of pathos, logos and ethos. Each slide featured the advertisement and a blank space for each of the rhetorical devices. Students were told in advance that each student should speak during presentations. The first time this type of activity was utilized, there was a learning curve for students to understand how to work quickly, complete the slide and assign presenters. Usually, the idea of everyone presenting was not fully understood by all groups. Yet after the first experience, subsequent activities with Google slides were easier, and communication skills increased. Building an expectation of all students speaking or writing during class required a couple weeks, but as this idea became accepted, engagement increased.

Extending engagement based on active learning values

A consideration of the core values of active learning helps to extend engagement beyond the synchronous class time. Early proponents of active learning advocated that learning should be *purposive, reflective, negotiated, critical, situation-driven, engaged, and complex* (Barnes).

Purposive: Learning is *purposive* when professors are transparent about how students will use skills such as writing, speaking or revising throughout college and in their careers. Explaining the purpose of independent homework is especially important.

Reflective: Learning is *reflective* when students are asked to comment verbally or in writing on what they learned after an activity or reading assignment. A written reflection assignment is an excellent bridge to connect independent homework with a discussion planned for the synchronous class time later. A written reflection can also be assigned as independent composition after a collaborative project (like a peer review) in class.

Negotiated: Learning is *negotiated* when students are part of the learning process, as when they share what they learned outside class or present their group's findings.

Critical: Higher education courses have a strong history of critical analysis, and the active learning process of facilitating discussion during synchronous online learning is an excellent element of the *critical* aspect of active learning. Synchronous discussion also models critical analysis to create a bridge to independent written assignments.

Situation-driven: Remote learning is inherently *situation-driven* because students must learn to communicate better through the written and spoken word. Rhetoric skills are not a dry abstraction in the online classroom, and active learning assignments outside class include discussion boards, compositions, and multi-modal assignments.

Engaged: This article has focused on the value of real-time *engagement* in active learning, but there is also an important factor of engagement in asynchronous activities for remote learning. As an example, students are expected to write as homework an essay that they began in class. They may also be asked to read independently and be ready to share their observations about the reading in class. Active learning assignments that extend to experiences outside the classroom are especially strong.

Complex: Learning is *complex* when it points to the complexity of the real world. Students who learn to discuss complex topics online through written and spoken words are strengthening their skills in analysis. Yet, bridging to the real world is an important element. Professors can use out-of-class assignments to address issues or serve the community so that students transition from being consumers of education to being creators in the real world. They will use these skills in college and beyond.

The ideas briefly shared in this description of one set of English courses can be applied in many disciplines and a variety of learning experiences. The goal is to harness active learning in the remote course space to build cognitive, social and teaching presence. These courses comprised about 20 students each and contributed to the general education curriculum by providing smaller learning communities to help students feel part of the larger university. Though many classes necessarily comprise more students, some of these ideas could be incorporated by breaking online synchronous classes into smaller groups. The goal is to consider active learning as a mode for interacting in the online course space rather than a list of specific activities. Authentic learning takes place by orienting students to the online space, harnessing online active learning with a modified facilitation style and tools such as polls and breakout rooms, and bridging to independent active learning.

Joyce McPherson holds a PhD in Learning and Leadership and teaches English at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Her research focus is active learning and technology. Her research has been published in *The English Journal* and *The Clearing House*, and she has presented on *Transforming Students from Consumers to Creators* and similar topics at conferences.

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