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Active Learning in a Web-Based Introductory Course

Laura E. Dewald[1]

The idea that people learn through knowledge reception is the most prevalent "common sense" assumption about learning and is the basis behind the lecture mode of instruction. In contrast, advocates of learner-centered education argue that learning occurs when meaningful knowledge is constructed by the learner being actively engaged with the learning material. Although many science-based classroom courses are using active-learning techniques, most web-based courses epitomize the passive method of instruction. Learner-centered education advocates maintain that merely to read or observe what is on a screen is not learning. They suggest that it is only when ideas are attached to existing frameworks in the students' minds that we can assert that learning has occurred. This requires reflection by the student; until the learner removes their gaze from the screen and is engaged in thinking, there is little learning likely to happen. Online teachers need to focus on ways they can interrupt the student's gaze and engage the student in mental exercises that help add new ideas to prior knowledge. In this presentation, I will describe methods of how I think I have encouraged student reflection, and stimulated critical thinking and writing using my web-based "Introduction to Forestry" course as an example. I will describe the course objectives, the student population taking the course, examples of active-learning exercises used in the course, and how I assess student learning and achievement of my course objectives.

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