

## **Becoming a Teacher in the Time of COVID-19: Reflections on Active Learning in an Isolated and Online Environment**

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### **Preface**

Earlier in 2020, in the before-times, I was planning to deliver a talk on active learning at a conference in Regina, Saskatchewan. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference was cancelled and work travel was not permitted. Nonetheless, I had already begun to think, read, and talk about what it means to be active in a learning environment. When life as we knew it came to a halt in mid-March, notions of active learning were also turned upside down. For a brief time, I put the work and thought on this topic aside and dove deep into the murky waters of trying to support students in their completion of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) in an online and isolated environment. Certainly, as faculty at post-secondary institutions, we have had previous experience with teaching using various types of synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Moreover, in times of budget cuts for national associations, face-to-face (F2F) meetings were becoming a thing of the past; we are also highly familiar with video-conferencing technology. However, to be in an educational context where meaningful interaction with humans and building relationships were held as the gold standard, I felt as though I was walking into a very altered educational setting. Also, as someone interested in language, I was both intrigued and disturbed by words and expressions like alternate reality, surreal experience, new normal, and Zoom fatigue that were now being used to describe the boat in which everyone in post-secondary, learners and teachers, were now finding themselves.

During this challenging time in the spring and early summer of 2020, as I tried to connect with B.Ed students, communicate crucial information, develop realistic assessments, and provide meaningful feedback, I returned to this idea of active learning. What does this term now mean? Has its definition evolved or mutated due to these odd circumstances? Is this ideal of being actively engaged in learning possible in our isolated and online environments? In an effort to reflect carefully on these questions, I did what I often did in the before-times; I turned to my students for their insights and input. As was the case when I was in the throes of preparing for my talk in Regina, I turned to my students to co-learn and co-construct and invited some of them to participate in this thinking and writing project. As co-authors, we focused on key questions as a way to frame our shared and individual experiences. Our thinking, writing, and talking helped us to better understand how we have been surviving these past four months. From the abrupt stoppage of their practica in schools to the almost instant transformation of their final

spring/summer term to an online format, we have been living and learning in the face of unprecedented challenges. This article represents the conversations, ponderings, frustrations, successes, and reactions we experienced as we navigated the completion of an education program during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also addresses the questions around whether active learning and teaching were possible in this environment and what we may need to consider for education in our forever altered world.

### *Active Learning - Defining the Term*

We begin with defining the term and reviewing some of the research related to active learning. Active learning has been described as work that “engages students in the process of learning through activities and/or discussion in class, as opposed to passively listening to an expert. It emphasizes high-order thinking and often involves group work” (Freeman et al., 2014, pp.4-5 ). Actively constructing knowledge and being actively engaged in doing and thinking seem to be necessary parts of the active learning process. Grobinger and Dunlop (2016), in their article about “REAL - Rich Environments for Active Learning,” also underscore the importance of the constructivist approach in this type of pedagogy and outline its necessary components: authentic inquiry, learner autonomy, community knowledge-building, and thought processes like creativity and problem-solving. Brame (2014) echoes many of these ideas and, in particular, emphasizes constructivism, metacognition, and higher order thinking. In a recent and relevant article discussing active learning in online courses, particular elements of Bloom’s (1969) taxonomy – analysis, evaluation, and synthesis—were emphasized along with clearly defined course goals, community building, timely feedback, and proper utilization of online discussion tools (Khan, Egbue, Palkie, & Madden, 2017).

Of course, no conversation about constructivist approaches to learning would be complete without reference to Lev Vygotsky’s seminal work in this area. Vygotsky (1978) posited the critical relationship between the social and the cognitive and suggested that learning takes place when a learner interacts in a meaningful way with the world around them. More knowledgeable others (adults and peers) act as scaffolds within this active approach to learning. All socio-cognitive theories of education are grounded in Vygotsky’s significant work and the concept of active learning is no exception. The social context in which learning takes place, whether in a F2F or online environment, is crucial to being actively engaged in the learning process. Another seminal scholar, Jerome Bruner (1966) also viewed learning as an active process in which the learner uses prior experience and knowledge to construct new knowledge. Instruction based on this theory views the teacher as a scaffolder who facilitates learning through strategic sequencing and encouragement. In his more recent work, Bruner (1986) advocated for educational processes that encompass social and cultural aspects.

When I asked students in the before-times (i.e., February, 2020) to describe the term active learning, many of their video-recorded definitions echoed the literature. Ideas such as experiential learning, engagement, and learner involvement were reflected in their conceptions. For example, one student used a driving metaphor to explain active learning:

I think active learning is when you are a participant in the learning process rather than a passive backseat driver...taking part in the learning and absorbing it through experiential activities. Not just reading and listening, but engaging with each other and with the professor. We [students] are more of the drivers of the learning process (Cara Fitz, Feb. 2020).

Another student also contrasted active learning with this idea of passivity:

Active learning... is not like passive learning where a teacher is feeding information to the student and the student is just passively receiving it. Active learning has a big involvement of the student in the process... it's a kind of discovery or autonomous kind of learning. (Deanna Valin, Feb. 2020)

Finally, my co-authors also contributed to this conversation in the before-times and put their collaborative definition succinctly: "To us, active learning is engaging, interactive, and empowering" (Caitlin Foote, Emily Burton, Kieran McCormick, & Lauren Sieben, Feb. 2020).

### **Reflections on Active Learning in the Early Days of COVID-19**

Building on what we already know and believe about the concept of active learning, my co-authors and I decided to reflect on a series of questions in order to co-construct our knowledge and describe our experiences of learning in this time of social isolation.

- How would you describe the experience of transitioning from doing F2F courses and F2F practica to learning online suddenly in an isolated environment?
- Thinking about the idea of active learning, how has its definition evolved or mutated due to the circumstances in which we now find ourselves?
- Is this ideal of being actively engaged in learning possible in our isolated teaching and learning environments? If so, how?
- What insights have we gained about teaching and learning in an online environment that we will take into the future?

The data collection for this article consisted of first responding to prompts in writing followed by a focus group, which allowed us to explore key ideas more deeply. By way of analysis, we looked for threads that linked our ideas and then came to an agreement on the key themes that emerged. We will organize the subsequent discussion around three themes: Community of Learners; Energy and Warmth; and Motivation and Routine.

#### *Community of Learners*

One theme from our written reflections and subsequent focus group was the notion of community. We have all struggled with maintaining the learning community we so carefully nurtured over the previous eight months. UNB's B.Ed program continually extolls the pedagogical and socio-emotional virtues of "relationship building" and "positive rapport." In fact, one of the texts that guides the B.Ed foundations course in teaching and learning cites "creating an

environment of respect and rapport” as one of the key tenets of professional practice (Danielson, 2013, p. #). A longing for the collegial friendships previously a focal point of our community was apparent in many of our comments. When beginning the thinking process for this collaborative writing project, Kieran pondered:

Most of my thoughts focus on the importance of the classroom as a "community of learners," and how our current situation is challenging or changing the notion of a learning community. This has led me to reflect on the extent to which a teacher serves as a community-builder, and whether a teacher may truly foster a learning community in an online environment.

This reflection found in Kieran’s initial writings was echoed, in some ways, by Emily’s consideration of the challenges associated with an abrupt move from a highly collaborative context to a physically and socially distant virtual environment:

Going from a social format to an isolated format has been tough as the teaching profession is social and people-related. That made the transition difficult and navigating learning harder. Our program does a lot of group work, and quickly becoming isolated added difficulty to motivation, quality, and collaboration.

Returning to our central focus of active learning, we know from the literature that this kind of learning involves group-think and cooperative teamwork. We have all struggled to come to grips with how this can happen when we’re feeling disconnected and alone. Lauren’s reflection aptly put these sentiments in words:

I love to learn, and I always have, but the idea of having to take online classes to complete my degree has been harder than locking myself down for two months. It is hard to create meaningful lessons when you can’t put them in the context of your own classroom and your own experiences. It is hard to make a creative project when you don’t have your peers at the table with you to converse with and draw ideas and inspiration from.

Finding ways to generate group synergy was a definite preoccupation of these authors. As the faculty member, Paula often reflected on this idea in a journal she kept during this challenging time:

I look forward to the days I talk with my students online, whether individual or as a group. However, my positive anticipation is tempered with feelings of disappointment and longing for what we had established. I was excited to watch them become the great teachers I knew they were destined to be and then to come back together F2F to debrief, to continue to learn, and to celebrate accomplishments. Instead, our final two eight-week terms have turned into a time for us to commiserate, encourage, and support one another. We remain a community... but a changed one.

Finally, Caitlin also considered how she described an active learning community and this situation has caused her to rethink this concept.

I think that these odd circumstances may have caused a shift in responsibility of active learning. My interpretation of active learning before was that there was a lot of give and take between teachers and learners; a balance of bouncing energies to engage teachers and learners actively in the learning process...You can feel it when you enter a classroom. You can tell when students and teachers are enthusiastic and engaged. I think rather than building energy off of each other, the idea of active learning has made a shift to meeting each other where you are at on a daily basis and relying more on yourself and self-motivation.

This final reflection reveals a dance in which we all engaged during this time. As learners and teachers we were constantly asking ourselves: What is important right now? How much can I accomplish today? How do I inject energy into this business of teaching and learning when hope comes and goes? How do I maintain my enthusiasm for teaching and learning when I do not always feel that way? These questions bring us to another theme that emerged from our writing and subsequent discussion—energy and warmth.

#### *Energy and Warmth*

The idea of “energy” is connected to teaching and learning in a variety of ways. To return to Danielson’s (2013) framework, one of the key components of the instruction domain is the active engagement of learners. With this comes good communication, enthusiasm, and instructional techniques that facilitate collaboration. Creating this sense of energy and connection during the spring of 2020 was difficult on multiple levels. Caitlin’s thoughts on this matter reveal some of these realities.

Feeding off someone else’s energy through a computer screen is just not the same as being F2F, nor should it be the same. I think our expectations of learners and teachers to be active and engaged at all times need to be adjusted as there are many more environmental factors built into the learning process now. Maybe a bad internet connection is causing frustration; maybe a family member is a front-line worker so the students cannot get help with an assignment; or maybe the teacher does not have access to resources in their home that can make their Zoom background engaging and warm.

Caitlin’s ponderings reflected some of Paula’s worries during this time:

I’m concerned about being overly enthusiastic or optimistic. I don’t want to minimize people’s genuine worries. How do we provide useful information, continue with learning and, at the same time, convey an element of fun and warmth without sounding flippant about the circumstance? I’m not sure how to navigate all of this.

Lauren’s writings on this topic connect both to her own experiences as a learner in the B.Ed and to her experiences assisting her mentor teacher with remote learning after the F2F practicum

was cut short. Thinking about what is engaging and meaningful forced her to deconstruct the notion of active learning and to challenge assumptions about the very essence of learning.

In my short experience with this change, teachers spend more time in a week with scheduling video calls, and making sure lessons are posted, than they do engaging with students in an online learning environment. Not through any fault of their own, but they simply have to....One hour to get them to engage with a week's worth of learning, and to maybe play a game so the students can have some fun, and a bit of time to check in on their mental health. I think that is one of the biggest problems in trying to 'switch' active learning to an online environment. You're assuming that people can successfully individually engage with the environment around them (some of which are dreadfully dull)...

It is evident from Lauren's thoughts and experiences as a student and a pre-service teacher that active learning in an online environment and at a stressful time resulted in mistakes and misconceptions. For example, live sessions that were too lecture-oriented were difficult to attend to and would have been more effective as pre-recorded videos. Additionally, there was an assumption that students would be able to participate in large online classes in the same way they did in large F2F classes, but this did not seem to be the case. Emily also underscored the importance of being attentive to student needs as a means of establishing a warm and inviting environment.

When teachers show energy about the topics they are teaching, it adds to the lesson and the learning experience entirely. Meeting students where they are is even more important now. Being in an online format, in isolated and diverse environments, the student experience needs to be supported. This means lessons must be not only interactive, engaging, but modifiable.

Finally, Kieran pondered and troubled this particular theme and decided it was not enough to convey enthusiasm for curriculum content. He felt strongly that a teacher's role is also as a relationship-builder and wondered how this can work in a digital and distanced environment: "In the same way that teaching itself must be reimagined in an online context, so too must the role of the teacher as a mentor and advisor. I believe this version of energy and warmth – the one that builds relationships – is much less easily fostered in an online context."

This experience has forced us to reconsider not only the notion of active learning, but also the essence of good teaching. It has also been a time when we all had to dig deep into our emotional toolkit as motivation has waxed and waned, which highlights a third theme emerging from the data.

### *Motivation and Routine*

Those in educational circles know the significant impact of motivation on learning. In the language learning realm, applied linguists have dedicated their entire careers to examining this affective factor. For example, In Dornyei, Henry, and Muir's (2016) recent book, *Motivational*

Currents in Language Learning, they examined individual and group-related factors that impact a learner's ability to engage and persevere in learning. Knowing how important engagement is to engaging fully in active learning, it is not a surprise that we all hit on this particular emotional factor when we talked about our recent experiences. For example, Emily felt that her sense of safety was put to the test because the learning environment was not predictable or consistent.

For me, it has been difficult to motivate and organize myself, but I have found school structures my day when nothing else can... For some, the safety net of being in the classroom is gone; for others, the routine of the school day is gone. Students are facing more diversity than ever to their routines, norms, and environments. We can argue that this is a good learning experience for students, but, as teachers, we need to support them along the way.

Caitlin also spoke to the constantly shifting ground on which we stood as learners and teachers during this time and how this impacted motivation.

I think the abruptness played the largest role as well as the confusion around whether this would be a long-term scenario. The most difficult part of the transition for me has actually been only having one class at a time. I am used to dedicating a full day to doing classwork or to being in my classroom at the practicum...I am finding it much more difficult to stay engaged and motivated. I feel that I cannot quite establish a sense of routine with the sparseness of classes compared to the daily F2F contact I was having both in teaching and learning prior to COVID-19 measures.

In Paula's journal, she also wrote about moments where motivation was not optimal: I am not sure if I know how to keep things going on a positive path today. This uncertainty is impacting my own engagement even through my best efforts to keep these thoughts at bay." As we know from constructivist theories underpinning active learning, this kind of pedagogy begins with a predisposition toward learning (Bruner, 1966). This tendency is, of course, supported by motivation. When a learner (or teacher) is not feeling motivated due to stress, worry, confusion, or even boredom, learning will likely be affected in a negative way.

As we continue to deal with the after-effects, side-effects, and the lasting effects of living in a time of a global pandemic, we look to our present experiences for insight, inspiration, and possibly hope. If we hold up the ideal of active learning as something we, as educators, are striving towards, how can we plan for future online learning in a way that promotes engagement, critical thought, and collaboration?

### **Conclusion: Moving Forward – Advice and Musings about the Future of Active Learning**

Living and learning in this time of isolation has given us all time to sit with our thoughts. We have all come to the conclusion that we are forever transformed, and that learning and teaching may be as well. Determining ways to move forward as teachers in schools and universities is an important step in our journey. We now know that online learning and working will not go away

completely. One of the insights that came from our discussion and reflections is that, to engage in active learning in this digital environment, we must dare to do something radically different while also preserving what we value about F2F learning—collaborative dialogue, taking risks in a community of learners, deep discussion, and exploration of ideas. How can we find approaches to teaching and learning that are flexible, adaptable, responsive, and active as we navigate our new reality? How can we engage learners when we cannot be F2F or when we may be in a blended or shifting learning environment? What skills do we all need to develop (learners and teachers) to be able to be resilient emotionally and professionally in the after-times?

We, of course, do not have the answers but we are keeping these questions front and centre as we step gently into the future. To conclude, we want to offer some thoughts about what we need to consider as we gain competencies and confidence to attempt active learning no matter the situation. We conclude this article by offering our responses to the final question raised at the beginning for guiding our written reflections and informing our data: What insights have we gained about teaching and learning in an online environment that we will take into the future?

Emily: On the positive side of this, teachers and students have been challenged which has boosted creativity, skill sets, and knowledge that would never be recognized without the circumstances that we face today...we will continue to change as we navigate our circumstances. Versatility and creativity will become more prominent and I personally believe that education will begin transitioning away from the traditional mold. What that means, I am not sure, but this experience will change the way education is viewed.

Caitlin: Maybe a good way to become active teachers and learners during these times is to address the things we are going through and those new skills we are developing rather than just pressing forward through classes like normal. I think part of active learning is engaging in what is going on around us, and this may be an opportunity to do just that...I don't think there is a "return to normal" after this passes. I think this also raises questions about what "normal" even is in teaching and learning and whether that can be adjusted, moved forward, or abolished.

Lauren: If this [online learning] is something we continue going forward, I believe there are a lot of things that we need to consider. The number one being the idea of rethinking what active learning looks like online. If our goal is to create an environment that is active and engaging for the students, how can we make sure that every single student has an online experience like that. In a school environment, the school itself gives a little bit of equal playing ground. Students show up, and the teacher is able to differentiate lessons based on students' experiences and provide resources to the students who may need them. How do we do that in an online environment?...I think we genuinely must consider the time, planning, and relationships that go into creating a classroom environment that is considered active and engaging. If the students are the driving force behind an active learning environment, then they need to be involved...our default in this situation cannot be to sit them down behind a computer for an hour a day and ask them to read through



worksheets or attend yet another meeting where they simply become one of thirty muted microphones. That sounds like the opposite of active learning to me.

Kieran: If nothing else, the shock that the onset of these after times brought to teachers and learners may demonstrate that, twenty years into the twenty-first century, there is still no consensus on how our technology is best-suited to meet the needs of learners. If the meaningful interactions and relationships that are synonymous with active learning remain unrealized in an online environment, we must consider how online learning may evolve. This is especially true if we are to perpetually navigate in and out of the after times. As in the before times, a model of instruction in which learners passively listen to an expert will not effectively foster a community of learners. Therefore, creativity – a concept that technology has such enormous potential to foster – will become especially important as we continue to reconcile our roles as teachers and learners with the technological tools that are now central to our work.

Paula: As I ponder the fall term that is approaching, I reflect on what I have learned from this experience and how much more I have to learn before I can feel competent and confident about this new way of teaching. I have to consider the tenets of active learning and then try to envision how this can take place in a hybrid or completely online environment. When we are learning in a more independent asynchronous manner, I need to think of ways to engage students actively in course content. Considering the collaborative aspects of active learning, I need to construct tasks that will lead to meaningful “interaction” among learners when they may not be in the same room. Finally, I need to think of the emotional components of active learning and build in time to address the issue that students may be struggling or confused or even angry about the situation in which they find themselves.

As we concluded this article, we turned again to what we think needs to happen moving further into the after-times. What have we learned from this experience where we were “forced” online? What have we gained from these experiences that we can integrate into our teaching whether online, partially online, or even F2F? We tossed around the idea of the “flipped classroom.” In the before-times, a flipped classroom was defined as a blended approach to learning where students are provided with at-home learning opportunities before the F2F class in order to use classtime for experiential and deeper learning (e.g., Hertz, 2014). So, how might this educational concept work in our current upside-down world? We came to a consensus that educators cannot fall into the traditional trap of teacher-lecturing and students-listening and watching. As Hertz (2014) argued, a flipped classroom is not a synonym for online videos.

Thinking optimistically, we felt that this situation may force some people to move away from what they have been doing for years. We considered the various modes of online instruction we have experienced in the last few months and wondered how we use synchronous and asynchronous online platforms to try to achieve the goals of active learning. When we do use pre-recorded videos and readings, we need to think of specific ways to engage learners, viewers and readers. When we bring people together for video chats, they must have a purpose and we

must ensure students feel prepared for and ready to engage in the discussion or activity. Experience thus far has taught us that if you come in cold to this interactive platform, you may feel lost and separated from the community. Moreover, many of us felt that the number of participants in video-conferencing is a factor. You can only feel like you are actively learning if you are actually able to contribute in this digital environment. If there are large numbers of participants, we need to find ways to ensure that small group tasks are possible. Making interactive platforms into one-way lectures simply reinforces a hierarchy of knowledge of those who know and those who don't. This environment does not foster active learning; it just makes people feel disconnected or even alienated. Finally, we were convinced through our reflections and discussions that educators will be forced to reflect on and re-evaluate instructional practices in general. For active learning to be achieved, even partially, we must really pay attention by actively noticing and actively reflecting. Perhaps these challenging experiences will not cause us to pine for the before-times, but instead push us to become better educators and to put what we have gleaned to good use in the after-times, whatever those may be.

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