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NEW CHALK TALK

 THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

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The 2 + 2 schedule: revisiting active learning in the classroom

Dr Aziza Ellozy, Director, Center for Learning and Teaching

The Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) has long been an advocate for 'active learning' and numerous "New Chalk Talk" issues and CLT workshops have been devoted to the subject. But the urgency to sound out the call again comes at the onset of the new 2+2 schedule which AUC is implementing on a trial basis this year.

When this schedule was announced last spring, it was met with resistance and anger from students. The reaction may have resulted in part from the students' perception of not having been consulted on the matter, but their main concern was what they saw as the inevitable decline of their classroom experience due to longer classes and to more class sessions during the day. A 75 minute lecture, they said, would be too long and too boring because their attention span could not last that long. The daily assembly hour was the compromise that ensued.

What was interesting to me then was the skepticism with which many faculty members reacted to this complaint. They saw it as yet another instance of how our students are spoiled. Yet, studies on attention span have shown that adult learners can keep tuned in to a lecture for no more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time, and this at the beginning of the class. In 1976, A. H. Johnstone and F. Percival observing students in over 90 lectures given by 12 different lecturers reported this 15-20 minute window. The study showed that as the lecture proceeded, the attention span shortened and fell to three or four minutes towards the end of the lecture. Other studies have supported these findings (Hartley and Davies, 1978); (Burns, 1985) (Middendorf & Kalish, 1996)

In addition, current literature emphasizes the limitations of the traditional lecture format when it comes to promoting critical thinking and long-term retention, and calls on to promote more learner-centered practices.

Historically the lecture had originated from the time where there were very few books and the most efficient way to communicate information was to read to people who would take notes of their own. Despite that this need is long gone, lecturing continues to be the most prevalent mode of instruction. Over forty years ago, McKeachie wrote "*College teaching and lecturing have been so long associated that when one pictures a college professor in a classroom, he almost inevitably pictures him as lecturing.*" (Gage, 1963) This has still not changed much.

Nowadays research in the science of learning has indicated that active learning is one of the most important components of the learning process, and a body of literature has challenged colleges and universities to develop instructional approaches that transform students from passive listeners to active learners.

Within this context, strategies that promote active learning are instructional activities that provide students with opportunities to do things, to learn independently and from one another and to reflect about what they are doing and about their learning. These activities involve students in higher order thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and emphasize students' exploration of attitudes and values.

The term 'active learning' is an umbrella term that covers a range of teaching practices (from simple pair-share-think activities to in-class discussions to more elaborate pedagogies such as community-based learning, inquiry- or problem based learning, role-playing, etc to name a few).

As our Provost suggested, if this 2 + 2 experiment is to be successful, we need to make use of the extra time of the new schedule to engage our students and to "*take advantage of the opportunities it affords to experiment with new ways of teaching and learning*" (notes from the Provost's 2+2 Task Force) .

This year most of CLT's workshops will revolve around active learning strategies in the classroom (please refer to this semester's "Active Learning Series" on our website and to our announcements in News@auc). If you would like us to add you to our mailing list of "CLT friends", please send us an email at CLT@aucegypt.edu

We encourage you to attend these workshops, not necessarily because you "need" to, but because your participation in the discourse, the sharing of your experience and your interaction with faculty from other disciplines is in itself an enriching learning experience for all. One of my staff members once asked me, "Dr Ellozy, how can you attend workshops that are repeated again and again? Don't you get bored?" The fact of the matter is that I don't, mostly because each group of participants brings with it a different dynamic to the discussion and every time it is a different learning experience for me.

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