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Risky Business: Making active learning a reality

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In recent years several national reports and many recognized experts have called for the introduction of active learning techniques into college classrooms. Chickering and Gamson (1987), for instance, suggest the following:

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

A growing body of research does clearly show that if the goals of the instructor are to develop higher order thinking skills or to change students' attitudes, then active learning strategies must be used in conjunction with the traditional lecture. [For a review of the literature, see Bonwell and Eison (1991).]

It is one thing to acknowledge the need for active learning; it is quite another to successfully use it in the classroom. In many workshops faculty have articulated barriers to using active learning: one most commonly presented is the element of risk. Indeed there are several risks associated with using active learning in the classroom. For instance, since the norm is straight lecturing, there is the risk that students will be unfamiliar with different techniques and therefore resistant to them. Also, students often prefer the passive role of

listener in a lecture setting because it is easier to take notes than to become actively engaged in the learning process.

From the perspective of faculty, few have role models for anything other than lecture and many, lacking experience or guidance, have painful memories of disastrous attempts to be innovative. Even those who do not lack self-confidence may find themselves hesitant to use active learning because they risk being viewed by their colleagues as teaching in an unorthodox fashion. This is especially true for junior faculty who must face the rigors of evaluation for tenure and promotion. Finally, most faculty are comfortable with their perceived role as expert in the classroom and they find it difficult to relinquish control in a setting where there is shared responsibility for learning.

Exploring what's possibleFor those who do want to develop active learning as an adjunct to their lectures, there are positive steps that can be taken. Though the classroom use of active learning strategies will always involve some level of risk, by carefully selecting only those active learning strategies that are at a personally comfortable risk level, you can maximize your likelihood of success. For instance, look at the following possibilities (listed in roughly ascending order of risk) and then select those that you have not used in the past, but might be willing to use in the future:

- 1) field trips/library tours;
- 2) periodic pauses during a lecture so that students can work in pairs and compare notes;
- 3) short quizzes for immediate feedback on students' comprehension of material;
- 4) in-class writing;
- 5) demonstrations;
- 6) surveys or questionnaires;
- 7) self-assessment activities;
- 8) lectures with short discussions interspersed;
- 9) brainstorming;
- 10) case studies;
- 11) extended discussions based on audiovisual materials or activities 3 through 7 above;
- 12) small group discussions;
- 13) role playing;
- 14) small-group projects/presentations;
- and 15) guided imagery exercises.

The next step would be to select one strategy that you believe you could use in the classroom. If possible, place the activity in context by imagining one of your courses and the specific content. Then engage in a writing exercise by asking yourself the following questions:

1) What appeals to me about using this approach in this course?; 2) If I used the technique during one class period, what is the worst possible scenario (List the things that could go wrong)?; and finally, 3) What could I do to correct the situation if my worst fears were realized?

Instructors who finish this exercise often remark that they have become aware of two things. First, they find that they were not very willing to take risks in the classroom, a stance that is understandable since most of us perceive that what we do in the classroom already is effective and we are hesitant to make changes. Second, those who have imagined the worst that can happen usually find that their fears were overblown. Upon reflection they find that they could have coped with unforeseen problems.

Lowering the risk If thoughtfully carried out, this exercise is particularly useful because it forces the instructor to identify those elements within the classroom that can be controlled and those that cannot. Bonwell and Eison (1991) have suggested that risk can be substantially minimized if the following factors are considered:

1) the active learning strategy chosen

As suggested above, some active learning techniques have higher levels of risk than others. Instructors wishing to make changes in their classroom presentations should not choose an activity that is radically different from that with which they are currently comfortable. Successful modifications are made slowly as both instructor and students learn to adapt to new techniques. For instance, someone wishing to go slightly beyond traditional straight lecture might first consider using the pause procedure or inserting a short writing activity designed to provide feedback concerning student comprehension of the lecture.

2) the class-time allotted

In terms of class time, shorter activities involve considerably less risk than those involving greater class time. For example, when students meet in small discussion groups to analyze an issue or solve a problem for 10 to 15 minutes, less risk is involved than valuable class

time will be nonproductive than when they meet in discussion groups for 30 minutes. Therefore, faculty wishing to lower risk might consider dividing class time into segments with minilectures followed by short active-learning exercises.

3) the amount of structure incorporated into the activity

Finally, in terms of planning and organization, more highly structured strategies involve lower risk than less structured ones. Highly structured activities include short quizzes, surveys or questionnaires, self-assessment instruments or case studies. Conversely, role playing or small group discussions based on a single abstract question typically involve less structure. Indeed when employing any active learning strategy, faculty should consider the amount of structure they deem necessary to control risk. For example, the skillful use of questioning in class could involve crafting a careful sequence of thought-provoking recitation questions focused on understanding a single concept (lower risk) as opposed to a series of questions that stimulate divergent thinking about moral issues (higher risk). The degree of structure imposed depends upon the faculty member's preference and tolerance for risk.

To be successful when adopting a new active learning strategy, choose an activity with which you are comfortable, allocate a short period of time, and then plan a carefully structured exercise. As your confidence develops, you can loosen constraints and ultimately develop a larger repertoire, one that has significant benefits for the learner.

References

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