

Bringing More Critical Thinking into Lectures and Discussions

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Brown, G., Atkins, M., (1988). *Effective Teaching in Higher Education*. London: Methuen.

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Steffens, H., (1989). *Collaborative Learning in a History Seminar*. *History Teacher*, 22(2), p125-138.

Brookfield, S.D., Preskill, S., (2005). *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Active learning strategies can help make more engaged, inquisitive and better thinking students who can argue better. Exploratory and formal writing outside the class can promote this, as can in the class small group work, improving lectures and whole class discussions. This document looks at strategies to promote active learning, both formally and informally in the lecture / discussions.

Increasing Active Learning in Lecture Classes

By nature, lectures “imply a transmission of theory of knowledge in which-students receive the ideas and information sent by the instructor” and are thus passive (p202). Bligh (2000) points out that lectures “are not as effective as discussion for promoting thought [or changing attitudes]” (p3). However, he argues that a well planned and delivered lecture can actually be as effective as other methods for transmitting information" (p3). This can be done through what he describes as “deep processing” of the lecture content, and the combination of active, critical thinking activities to the lecture. 6 Strategies to promote this are outlined below:

1) Develop Exploratory Writing Tasks Keyed to Your Lectures

- Here tasks are designed which can only be completed if the students pay attention to the lectures-exploratory tasks that recycles the concepts or information (freewrites in class or thinking or forum activities). For example, linking lecture material to their own experiences, applying to new concepts, arguing for or against propositions of lectures, or asking new questions.
- Exploratory writing can also be used to engage students with a problem that the lecture will address, or activate personal experience from prior learning, which facilitates new material to be learnt.

2) Break the Pace of a Lecture Using "Minute Papers"

- The “minute paper,” a term coined by Angelo and Cross (1993, pp. 148—153), allows the instructor to stop at an appropriate point in a lecture and ask students to freewrite for several minutes in response to a question. Questions could range from “What is currently puzzling you?” to any kind of disciplinary problem connected to a current point in the lecture.
- Alternatively students could write a question down.
 - The instructor collects several and reads them out (could be during or after class)

- This serves to refocus students' attention and increase listening for the next part of the lecture, and also provides feedback and insight into the students' thought processes.

3) **Ask Students to Write Summaries of One or More of Your Lectures**

- Another strategy for promoting better listening is to have students write a 1 page or paragraph summary of your lecture. This allows you to check their understanding, and means students remember (therefore learn) more and give feedback to the instructor to adjust future lectures. (p204)

4) **Ask Students to Question Your Lectures**

- At the beginning of the lecture introduce a question or contention that your lecture will tackle. Students have to summarise your argument and respond through analysis and further questioning.
- Helps students to understand that lectures are arguments not merely information!

5) **Design a Formal Writing Assignment Requiring Students to Integrate Lecture Material**

- Also makes sure students have understood lecture material. You could create an assignment that compares an argument from your lectures, or series of lectures, with an alternative they found in readings or research. (p204-205)

6) **Deliver Narrative Lectures That Model the Thinking Process**

- Be the model for critical thinking. Sometimes give a lecture that shows students your own thinking process in tackling a problem or summarises the literature on a problem. First, pose the problem that puzzled you or other scholars, then recreate your (or the scholars') thinking process, not forgetting false hunches and false starts, frustrations and excitement. This is effectively a lecture version of an exploratory essay.

Increasing Active Learning in Lecture Classes. P205-206.

Rather than more passive lectures, discussion classes should be more active. However:

- often the teacher can try to dominate the discussion, even though they often think they are simply leading the discussion. (Brown and Atkins, 1988),
- or that only a few students talk,
- or that one student doesn't have enough time to fully develop an argument, cut off by another student.
- students spend their time preparing their next argument and not listening to the speaker.

Increase Wait Time by Using Freewriting. P206.

- After asking a question give students as little as 15-30 seconds to think, or a few mins to plan on paper. Then a student can begin by reading out their freewrite. Draws in shy students.

Use Out-of-Class Exploratory Writing to Prime the Pump. P206

- Prepare students for discussion through out-of-class writing, increasing readiness and engagement.

During Heated Discussions, Consider Time-Outs to Let Students Freewrite Their ideas. P207

- When heated or too many people want to speak, stop for 5 mins to allow freewriting. This gives space to articulate and clarify their ideas without being interrupted. Then students can summarise their writing to continue. If this is near the end of a class then this can continue in a forum.

Have Students Generate the Questions to Be Discussed

- After giving a reading homework, get students in groups to generate questions raised in the readings-choosing a consensus of one or two main questions.. This increases engagement and active learning (Steffens, 1989), and can be used on online forums too. (p207)

Stagger Due Dates for Short Formal Papers to Allow Daily Paper Presentations. P207-8

- Here different students are given different problem-based assignments so that writings can be photocopied (one or two) for each student and can be used to begin the day's discussion. Then students are given extra days to revise their paper in response to the discussion.
- This public nature forces good work, which encourages better discussion.

Have Students Complete a Weekly Critical Incident Questionnaire. P208

- Allows students to reflect on previous discussion and gives teachers feedback (Brookfield and Preskill (2005, pp. 48—50).
- Read these anonymously in class or use forums.
- They always ask the same five questions:
 1. At what moment in class this week were you most engaged as a learner?
 2. At what moment in class this week were you most distanced as a learner?
 3. What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most affirming or helpful?
 4. What action that anyone in the room took this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
 5. What surprised you most this week?

Extend the Classroom by Initiating Online Discussion Forums. P209

- Brookfield and Preskill (2005) note that online forums are "participatory, thoughtful, and disciplined" (p.234), and use a "circular response" which asks students to begin their posts with reference to the views of a previous classmates post. Students should respond with both a mix of the course content and their opinions, thus a more complex conversation can build.

Also- see <https://www.cte.cornell.edu/documents/presentations/Active%20Learning%20-%20Creating%20Excitement%20in%20the%20Classroom.pdf>

<https://www.cte.cornell.edu/documents/presentations/Active%20Learning%20-%20Creating%20Excitement%20in%20the%20Classroom%20-%20Handout.pdf>

