5 ideas for taking active learning online

When students are actively learning, they are making connections to their own lives, questioning, and collaborating, which we know leads to more significant, durable learning outcomes. In the classroom, we deliberately plan learning activities and discussion to engage learners and keep them active. We stay alert during class to pick up on cues that learners are tuning out or struggling so we can pivot and improvise as needed.

One of the toughest adjustments to teaching online is that we lose this immediate feedback-action loop. We can't adjust in real time to keep learners engaged in specific activities or assignments. So, it's important to set up learning opportunities that extend past the activity or assignment itself.

Here are some ideas for encouraging active engagement online.

1. Incorporate their lived experience

We usually encourage students to bring their experiences into our classroom. But now, we have to figure out how to bring our discipline-specific content into their experiences. Now we're all at home, students are not focused on our content at a specific time or in a specific place.

To keep them engaged and actively learning, we have to help them experience their lives through the lens of our content. We don't want them to only think about our content when they're sitting in front of their device. Give them things to look for, think about, and capture as they clean the house, care for family members, walk the dog, and watch Netflix. Encourage them to find the ways your content manifests in everyday life. For example:

- **Laws of physics scavenger hunt.** Ask learners to take pictures/videos of laws of physics in action around their home. Share online and ask the class to vote for the best examples.
- **Neighborhood visual ethnography project.** Learners walk around their neighborhood (using safe social distancing practices) and take pictures. They use grounded research techniques to analyze images and categorize characteristics to make hypotheses about their neighborhood's culture. They could incorporate public records searches to consider property values and census information.

2. Make them research assistants

In a discussion-based class, we would generally provide learners with some context and content in lecture and readings and then engage them in discussion and analysis to promote deeper understanding and durable learning. Online forums can be lively and contribute to significant learning, but they are not a straight substitute for classroom discussion. So, instead of providing them with all the relevant readings and context, ask them to find it. Imagine you now have a class full of research assistants.

Here are two examples showing how you might transfer what you do in the classroom to an online environment:

Example 1:

- **Classroom:** Lecture on elements of Victorian society that influenced Jane Eyre and discussion to apply to reading and incorporate learner experiences
- **Online:** Learners research specific aspects of Victorian society, looking especially for contemporary sources that would help learners empathize with Victorian readers. Find examples in the reading of things that would have resonated with or be significant to Victorian readers that today's readers might not find as significant or understand.

Example 2:

- **Classroom:** Assign journal readings about applying theory to curriculum design and then a practical assignment to create a lesson plan.
- **Online:** Provide summaries of major learning theories and then ask learners to find journal articles that apply one of the theories to curriculum design in their discipline. Post the article, a summary, and then explain two specific ways they would incorporate that theory into their own curriculum design.

3. Ask them to write the test

You're right to be concerned about cheating when learners are taking assessments online from home. There are proctoring apps that can help mitigate this risk, but not everyone has access to that technology. Turn testing into an active learning experience (and reduce the risk of cheating) by asking them to write the test.

- In quantitative disciplines or introductory skills-based courses, give learners the learning objectives and ask them to write items that assess the learning objectives and provide the correct answers with justification. Ask them to create multiple choice distractors that represent common mistakes, miscalculations, or misconceptions and explain what error each distracter represents.
- In more qualitative disciplines or higher level theory-based courses, learners can create their own rubrics to evaluate existing works or their own projects. They can use the rubrics they created to evaluate their peers' work, or they can use someone else's rubric to evaluate their own or others' work.

4. Read together

Asking questions while you read and talking to someone else about what you're learning are two proven active learning strategies. Use online tools to allow learners to annotate readings together.

- The app Hypothes.is allows people to annotate PDFs or even websites.
- You can upload a reading to Google Docs, Microsoft OneDrive, or Adobe Cloud and share it so learners can make and reply to comments.

- In any of these apps, learners can tag you or each other for specific questions or responses. Just remember to turn on your notifications.

5. Solve problems together

Often, online group projects are less collaboration and more divide-and-conquer. You can both lean into and disrupt this tendency by using a jigsaw strategy. In a jigsaw strategy, groups of learners become "experts" in one concept or topic, and then they shuffle into new groups where they become the representative of their concept in a new mixed-expertise group. The new group has to work together, sharing and leveraging their specific expertise, to solve a problem. For example:

- **Classroom:** A lecture and readings introduce the concept of sustainability and provide an overview of the types of sustainability initiatives in which corporations engage. In groups, students research the sustainability initiatives of three companies and decide which has the best strategy.
- **Online, option A:** Each group is given one company to research. They find out everything they can about that company's sustainability initiatives and the impacts of those initiatives on the company, consumers, and planet. They create a scorecard to represent the criteria they think is important and how that company scores. Then, in a sync session, breakout jigsaw groups are created where learners have to make the case for their company. Together, the new jigsaw group comes up with a consolidated scorecard and scores all the represented companies.
- **Online, option B:** Each group researches one aspect of corporate sustainability and creates a rubric to score companies on that aspect. In a sync session, breakout jigsaw groups combine their score cards and collectively evaluate a company.

About the author

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