**Why Students Resist Active Learning**



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By now, regular readers of [**this column**](https://chroniclevitae.com/people/476-david-gooblar/articles) know that I am an ardent supporter of active learning strategies. Pedagogical practices that are driven by what the students do in class, rather than by what the instructor does, are at the heart of my thinking as a teacher. Whether it's [**team-based learning**](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/621-how-and-why-to-split-your-students-into-teams), [**in-class writing assignments**](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/588-the-obvious-benefits-of-in-class-writing-assignments), or [**frequent testing**](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/315-we-should-give-students-more-tests-seriously) (yes, testing is an active learning strategy!), I'm always on the lookout for approaches that draw students into taking a more involved role in the classroom.

And if last year's [**HERI Faculty Survey**](http://heri.ucla.edu/pr-display.php?prQry=151) is anything to go by, more and more instructors are moving away from strict adherence to the lecture model and toward a pedagogy that is much more student-centered. Over the past 25 years, the number of teachers using such approaches as class discussions, small-group collaborative learning, group projects, and peer review in most or all of their courses has trended consistently upward. Correspondingly, the number of teachers who reported using "extensive lecturing" in most or all of their courses has gone slowly but steadily down.

Still, if you mention to your colleagues that you are thinking of integrating more of these strategies into your classroom, you'll probably hear dire warnings of student resistance, particularly in the form of poor student evaluations. It makes sense: One way of defining active learning is any teaching practice that compels students to participate. Whether it's asking a question and then calling on a student for a response, or dividing students into small groups and asking them to work on problems together, active learning forces students to break from the passive role of merely listening to a lecture and taking notes.

You may indeed encounter many students who are still used to doing schoolwork at home and using class time to sit and listen and absorb whatever the professor wants to communicate. Those students may not easily adjust to a course that asks them to work in class, too. For adjuncts and non-tenure-track instructors in particular, the fear of bad evaluations may be enough to make adopting such practices seem a risk not worth taking.

So how can we integrate these strategies into our classrooms with a minimum of student resistance? Here are a few tips to help ease the way.

**Be explicit up front.** As I've noted, a course in which students are expected to be active participants can be a bit of a shock for some. So make the case for your pedagogical choices. Read up on the benefits of active learning (two good places to start are [**here**](http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Papers/ALpaper%28ASQ%29.pdf) and [**here**](http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Papers/Prince_AL.pdf)) and, particularly at the beginning of the semester, let your students know that there are well-researched reasons behind the way you've designed the course. Treat students like colleagues whose cooperation you need and they will be much more likely to buy in to new approaches.

**Be open.** Throughout the semester, get into the habit of explaining the justification behind each activity as you introduce it. Let your students know why a particular exercise or topic will be useful to them, either for their final grade, or (better yet!) in their lives outside the classroom walls. Use rubrics or [**annotated examples of past student work**](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/742-why-i-don-t-like-rubrics) to show them how you'll be assessing their work. Give updates on their course performance [**early and often**](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/392-student-feedback-matters-and-it-goes-beyond-grading). Students are less likely to resist your pedagogy if you cultivate a relationship of openness throughout.

**Vary your teaching methods.** Some students may resist your attempts to integrate active-learning strategies simply because you rely too heavily on one kind of activity. You want your teaching to benefit both the extrovert who loves collaborative exercises and the bookworm who excels at in-class writing assignments. Mix it up on a regular basis and keep everyone on their toes.

**Lecture sometimes.** Finally, don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. There are (still!) perfectly good reasons to lecture to your students -- some of the time. For one, you know a lot about the course topic and students will benefit from you telling them what you know. But perhaps more important, a lecture component can help increase the benefits of the learner-centered activities that take up the rest of class time. Get in the habit of closing every class period with a brief summary or synthesis of what you think your students learned in the preceding hour. Any students who are unsure about your new methods may appreciate the familiarity of a professor "re-emerging" for the last 10 minutes to captain the rudderless ship. By providing a conclusion to each class period, you'll help students build on what they learn from day to day, and help to reassure them that this brave new world isn't so scary after all.



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