Reasons for Resistance to Active Learning Strategies

Though active learning has been used in higher education for many years, we still find initial student resistance to many strategies. Some claim that lack of student buy-in is the biggest obstacle to successfully employing active learning strategies. The following are 4 of the top reasons for student resistance.[1]

- ❖ **High schools remain teacher-centered institutions** – though much change in pedagogy has occurred in elementary and some in middle schools, high schools have seen very little movement
- ❖ **Learning is not a top reason students give for attending college** – students don't view college as a place to learn as much as they see it as a ticket to a good paying job afterwards
- ❖ **Students do not like taking learning risks** – active learning forces students to display how much they've learned while in the formative stage; they fear punitive measures if they have to show how they're learning rather than what they've learned
- ❖ **Learner-centered teaching does not resemble what students think of as school** – students associate teaching with teacher talk and student note-taking followed often by homework; students think that teachers don't teach when they don't lecture

To improve student buy-in and time-on-task, try these tips:
- ➢ Discuss the importance of learning to work in groups explaining that very few careers allow workers to work in isolation.
- ➢ Discuss how developing the ability to engage in critical inquiry during the course can pay dividends in future courses. When possible use concrete examples.
- ➢ Consider grading participation in the activity rather than the product, at least initially (when the active learning has a product).
- ➢ Ensure the work product (when there is one) is an authentic assessment – something that has meaning and value. Students will consider anything else busy work.
- ➢ Make the initial stage of the active learning experience attainable, but be certain that the later stages will challenge all students (though not overwhelm them).
- ➢ Design the experience to move students from what they already know through what you want them to learn to something that they can do independently. Jerome Bruner terms this moving **from** the **known**, **through** the **unknown, to** the **new-known**. Many learning exercises end when the student is still in the unknown stage; it makes sense in class, but when I try to do this at home, I get lost. We want to move them to when I try this at home, I can do it.
- ➢ Provide a context for the activity. The connection between what students previous learning and the application of the current topic to an activity will be obvious, but it won't be for students; making this explicit helps students connect the dots.
- ➢ Consider how quizzes, discussion boards, homework, etc. might help students understand the importance of the material.
- ➢ Assign roles to individual students (manager, spokesperson, scribe, reflector) might deflect social loafing during class activities. Knowing that the group is responsible for a response can help the entire group focus on the task.

---

[1] Adapted from Doyle, T. (2008). *Helping students learn in a learner-centered environment.* Sterling, VA: Stylus. Pages 18-29.

Three Factors that Affect Social Loafing[2]

Large Projects – the chance of social loafing increases when a group project lasts for an entire semester and has multiple parts. In this situation, students are more likely to avoid their personal responsibilities. One solution to this is dividing the project into only two larger parts.

Large Groups – the larger the group, the more likely one or two of the group members are to get lost. Smaller groups (or more specific roles within a larger group) tend to ensure each person understands the importance of individual input.

Peer Evaluation – when peers are required to evaluate each other – and when they are strongly encouraged to be frank and open in their group communication and evaluation, the less likely any member is to fail to complete his/her portion of the group tasks. In fact, as the number of peer evaluations increases, fewer members engage in social loafing.

Means to Redirect or Avoid Off-task Behavior

Off-task behavior has several underlying reasons. Understanding the reasons can provide faculty with a means to avoid the behavior from ever occurring.

- ❖ **Students are in groups with their friends** – students who self-select groups tend to exhibit more off-task behavior than diverse groups composed of classmates who do not socialize out of class; find a means of assigning groups that increases diversity
- ❖ **Student has a learning disability** – students with selected disabilities (e.g., ADHD) often display off-task behavior; frequently students who took medication in K-12 will try to function in college without it – with varying degrees of success; check with the DRC for specific suggestions for this student
- ❖ **Activity is not engaging** (may be too easy or too challenging) – if you're finding off-task behavior in many groups, then the activity may not be at the appropriate level; redesign the activity OR increase/decrease the level of difficulty for the activity
- ❖ **Students are pre-occupied** – many devices call for our attention; if a student or group of students have a difficult time putting mobile device away, or using them for class work, brainstorm with the class ways that might make this easier; perhaps this would be a good strategy before this becomes a problem
- ❖ **Began on-task but moved to off-task** – off-task behavior often begins as on-task behavior (often discussion) that veers off course; students in this scenario generally respond well to a private reminder to return to the task at hand

---

[2] Adapted from Aggarwal, P., & O'Brien, C. L. (2008). Social loafing on group projects: Structural antecedents and effects on student satisfaction. *Journal of Marketing Education, 30* (3) 255-264.