# Active Learning Techniques and Descriptions

## Exercises for Individual Students

Because these techniques are aimed at individual students, they can very easily be used without interrupting the flow of the class. These exercises are particularly useful in providing the instructor with feedback concerning student understanding and retention of material. Some are especially designed to encourage students' exploration of their own attitudes and values or reflect on their own learning. Many are designed to increase retention of material presented in lectures and texts.

### The "One Minute Paper"

This is a highly effective technique for checking student progress, both in understanding the material and in reacting to course material. Ask students to take out a blank sheet of paper, pose a question (either specific or open-ended), and give them one (or perhaps two - but not many more) minute(s) to respond. Some sample questions include: "How does John Hospers define "free will"?", "What is "scientific realism"?", "What is the activation energy for a chemical reaction?", "What is the difference between replication and transcription?", and so on. Another good use of the minute paper is to ask questions like "What was the main point of today’s class material?" This tells you whether or not the students are viewing the material in the way you envisioned. Alternatives include summarizing the main points in the form of a tweet (280 characters) or haiku (5-syllables, 7-syllables, 5-syllables).

### Muddiest (or Clearest) Point

This is a variation on the one-minute paper, though you may wish to give students a slightly longer time period to answer the question. Here you ask (at the end of a class period, or at a natural break in the presentation), "What was the "muddiest point" in today's lecture?" or, perhaps, you might be more specific, asking, for example: "What (if anything) do you find unclear about the concept of 'personal identity' ('inertia', 'natural selection', etc.)?".

### Affective Response

Again, this is similar to Muddiest Point, but here you are asking students to report their reactions to some facet of the course material - i.e., to provide an emotional or valuative response to the material. Obviously, this approach is limited to those subject areas in which such questions are appropriate (one should not, for instance, inquire into students’ affective responses to vertebrate taxonomy). However, it can be quite a useful starting point for courses such as applied ethics, particularly as a precursor to theoretical analysis. For example, you might ask students what they think of Dr. Jack Kevorkian's activities, before presenting what various moral theorists would make of them. By having several views "on the table" before theory is presented, you can help students to see the material in context and to explore their own beliefs. It is also a good way to begin a discussion of evolutionary theory or any other scientific area where the general public often has views contrary to current scientific thinking, such as paper vs. plastic packaging or nuclear power generation.

### Impact Drawing (Concept Maps; Visual Representations; Metaphors; Flow Charts)

Students are asked to visually represent or organize their thoughts. This can be done in the form of concept maps to show relationships between concepts, flow charts for processes, metaphors for thinking about complex ideas, or drawings. Depending on the size of the class, these can be shared on a document camera or students can describe their drawing to students around them. Creating an infographic is an excellent alternative for an assignment or group project.

### Daily Journal

This allows for more in-depth discussion of or reaction to course material. You may set aside class time for students to complete their journal entries, or assign this as homework. The only disadvantage to this approach is that the feedback will not be as "instant" as with the one-minute paper (and other assignments which you collect the day of the relevant lecture). But with this approach (particularly if entries are assigned for homework), you may ask more complex questions, such as, "Do you think that determinism is correct, or that humans have free will? Explain your answer.", or "Do you think that Dr. Kevorkian's actions are morally right? What would John Stuart Mill say?" and so on. Or you might have students find and discuss reports of scientific studies in popular media on topics relevant to course material, such as global warming, the ozone layer, and so forth.

### Response to a demonstration or other teacher centered activity

The students are asked to write a paragraph that begins with: I was surprised that ... I learned that ... I wonder about ... This allows the students to reflect on what they actually got out of the instructor’s presentation. It also helps students realize that the activity was designed for more than just entertainment.

### Reading Quiz

Clearly, this is one way to motivate students to read assigned material. Active learning depends upon students coming to class prepared. The reading quiz can also be used as an effective measure of student comprehension of the readings (so that you may gauge their level of sophistication as readers). Further, by asking the same sorts of questions on several reading quizzes, you will give students guidance as to what to look for when reading assigned text. If you ask questions like "What color were Esmerelda's eyes?", you are telling the student that it is the details that count, whereas questions like "What reason did Esmerelda give, for murdering Sebastian?" highlight issues of justification. If your goal is to instruct (and not merely to coerce), carefully choose questions which will both identify who has read the material (for your sake) and identify what is important in the reading (for their sake).

### Interactive Video Quizzes

Multiple choice questions can be incorporated into existing videos or videos you create. This allows for an alternative quiz format and can be used as a knowledge check or as an alternative to Personal Response Systems in an online format. There are several technology options available to embed questions into videos.

## Questions and Answers

While most instructors use questions as a way of prodding students and instantly testing comprehension, there are simple ways of tweaking our questioning techniques which increase student involvement and comprehension. Though some of the techniques listed here are "obvious", we will proceed on the principle that the obvious sometimes bears repeating (a useful pedagogical principle, to be sure!).

### The "Socratic Method"

Taking its namesake from the most famous gadfly in history, this technique in its original format involved instructors "testing" student knowledge (of reading assignments, lectures, or perhaps applications of course material to a wider context) by asking questions during the course of a lecture. Typically, the instructor chooses a particular student, presents her with a question, and expects an answer forthwith; if the "chosen" student cannot answer the question presented, the instructor chooses another (and another) until the desired answer is received. This method has come under criticism, based on claims that it singles out students (potentially embarrassing them), and/or that it favors only a small segment of the class (i.e., that small percentage of the class who can answer any question thrown at them). In addition, once a student has answered a question they may not pay much attention as it will be a long time before the teacher returns to them for a second question. In spite of these criticisms, we feel that the Socratic Method is an important and useful one; the following techniques suggest variations which enhance this method, avoiding some of these pitfalls.

### Wait Time

Rather than choosing the student who will answer the question presented, this variation on the Socratic Method has the instructor WAITING before calling on someone to answer it. The wait time will generally be short (15 seconds or so) - but it may seem interminable in the classroom. It is important to insist that no one raise his hand (or shout out the answer) before you give the OK, in order to discourage the typical scenario in which the five students in the front row all immediately volunteer to answer the question, and everyone else sighs in relief. Waiting forces every student to think about the question, rather than passively relying on those students who are fastest out of the gate to answer every question. When the wait time is up, the instructor asks for volunteers or randomly picks a student to answer the question. Once students are in the habit of waiting after questions are asked, more will get involved in the process.

### Student Summary of Another Student's Answer

In order to promote active listening, after one student has volunteered an answer to your question, ask another student to summarize the first student's response. Many students hear little of what their classmates have to say, waiting instead for the instructor to either correct or repeat the answer. Having students summarize or repeat each other’s contributions to the course both fosters active participation by all students and promotes the idea that learning is a shared enterprise. Given the possibility of being asked to repeat a classmates' comments, most students will listen more attentively to each other.

### The Fish Bowl

Students are given index cards, and asked to write down one question concerning the course material. They should be directed to ask a question of clarification regarding some aspect of the material which they do not fully understand; or, perhaps you may allow questions concerning the application of course material to practical contexts. At the end of the class period (or, at the beginning of the next class meeting if the question is assigned for homework), students deposit their questions in a fish bowl. The instructor then draws several questions out of the bowl and answers them for the class or asks the class to answer them. This technique can be combined with others such as the Muddiest Point.

### Quiz/Test Questions

Here students are asked to become actively involved in creating quizzes and tests by constructing some (or all) of the questions for the exams. This exercise may be assigned for homework and itself evaluated (perhaps for extra credit points). In asking students to think up exam questions, we encourage them to think more deeply about the course material and to explore major themes, comparison of views presented, applications, and other higher-order thinking skills. Once suggested questions are collected, the instructor may use them as the basis of review sessions, and/or to model the most effective questions. Further, you may ask students to discuss the merits of a sample of questions submitted; in discussing questions, they will significantly increase their engagement of the material to supply answers. Students might be asked to discuss several aspects of two different questions on the same material including degree of difficulty, effectiveness in assessing their learning, proper scope of questions, and so forth.

### Personal Response Systems (PRS)

Often referred to as “clickers” or polling, students can answer multiple choice or short answer questions (depending on the technology) and the student response data is immediately collected by the instructor. Answers can be collected anonymously or can be linked to a student’s name or code. In addition, instructors can choose to share the responses with the class. There are a variety of options including hand-held remote-type clickers and web-based systems that can be used on a phone, tablet, or computer. Low-tech alternatives include using fingers, raising hands, or colored index cards with A,B,C, and D. This method allows instructors to assess student knowledge at a glance. The instructor can stop at appropriate points to give quick tests of the material and adjust the lecture mid-course. Based on the results, the instructor may slow down to spend more time on the concepts students are having difficulty with or moving more quickly to applications of concepts of which students have a good understanding.

### Peer instruction

During class, the instructor poses a question to students and they respond using a Personal Response System, but the answer is not revealed to students. Instead, the students spend a few minutes talking about their answers in small groups, attempting to arrive at the right answer. Students are then asked to respond to the same question. The answer and student results are then shared with the class and the instructor has an opportunity to lead a discussion and clarify confusion. This technique often leads to more students choosing the correct answer as a result of the peer instruction. For more information: Mazur, E. (1997). Peer instruction: A user’s manual. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

## Critical Thinking Motivators

Sometimes it is helpful to get students involved in discussion of or thinking about course material either before any theory is presented in lecture or after several conflicting theories have been presented. The idea in the first case is to generate data or questions prior to mapping out the theoretical landscape; in the second case, the students learn to assess the relative merits of several approaches. Students may use interpretation, analyzation, and evaluation. These are difficult skills to develop and usually require time and effort both on the part of the instructor and the students.

### Case Study

Case studies are based on real-world situations or applications, but may be slightly altered or include some boundaries to fit within the context of a course. This may include a limited amount of information or a pre-defined data set. Cases consists of a scenario, the task, and any resources needed for the task. Supporting materials may also be provided. Cases can be text based or include a variety of media. A set of questions typically accompanies a case study to prompt students to reflect and generate a response. This is a very flexible active learning strategy that can be applied to a variety of contexts and is usually used with small groups. Well-crafted case studies do not have an immediate and obvious answer and may require students to gather additional information. Case studies facilitate connecting prior knowledge to a situation and may involve decision making, analysis, and synthesis to reach a conclusion. Case studies also allow students to reflect the complexities of the real-world.

### Houston, We Have a Problem

In this activity, students in small groups are presented with a problem, but are only given a finite set of tools (physical objects or a list) or information to solve the problem. It is also useful to include items that will probably not be useful but require the students to consider how they might be used. This promotes evaluation of the situation as well as creative problem solving. Multiple solutions may be proposed and tested to determine a solution that solves the problem. Although not necessary, the problem can have multiple solutions or paths to a solution. As students are working, answer clarifying questions without providing suggestions or examples of how to use the items to determine a solution. Students may find this activity challenging and frustrating at first, but it’s important to let the groups struggle a little bit rather than give in and give them hints. Each group can share their solution and the process they used to the entire class or another group if time permits.

### Quotations

This is a particularly useful method of testing student understanding when they are learning to read texts and identify an author's viewpoint and arguments. After students have read a representative advocate of each of several opposing theories or schools of thought, and the relevant concepts have been defined and discussed in class, put on the projector a quotation by an author whom they have not read in the assigned materials, and ask them to figure out what position that person advocates. In addition to testing comprehension of the material presented in lecture, this exercise develops critical thinking and analysis skills. This would be very useful, for example, in discussing the various aspects of evolutionary theory.

### The Pre-Theoretic Intuitions Quiz

Students often dutifully record everything the instructor says during a lecture and then ask at the end of the day or the course "what use is any of this?", or "what good will philosophy [organic chemistry, etc.] do for us?". To avoid such questions, and to get students interested in a topic before lectures begin, an instructor can give a quiz aimed at getting students to both identify and to assess their own views. An example of this is a long "True or False" questionnaire designed to start students thinking about moral theory (to be administered on the first or second day of an introductory ethics course), which includes statements such as "There are really no correct answers to moral questions" and "Whatever a society holds to be morally right is in fact morally right". After students have responded to the questions individually, have them compare answers in pairs or small groups and discuss the ones on which they disagree. This technique may also be used to assess student knowledge of the subject matter in a pre-/post-lecture comparison. The well-known "Force Concept Inventory" developed by Hestenes to measure understanding of force and motion is another good example of this.

### Puzzles/Paradoxes

One of the most useful means of ferreting out students' intuitions on a given topic is to present them with a paradox or a puzzle involving the concept(s) at issue, and to have them struggle towards a solution. By forcing the students to "work it out" without some authority's solution, you increase the likelihood that they will be able to critically assess theories when they are presented later. For example, students in a course on theories of truth might be asked to assess the infamous "Liar Paradox" (with instances such as 'This sentence is false'), and to suggest ways in which such paradoxes can be avoided. Introductory logic students might be presented with complex logic puzzles as a way of motivating truth tables, and so forth. In scientific fields you can present experimental data which seems to contradict parts of the theory just presented or use examples which seem to have features which support two opposing theories.

### Evaluation of Another Student's Work

Students are asked to complete an individual homework assignment or short paper. On the day the assignment is due, students submit one copy to the instructor to be graded and one copy to their partner. These may be assigned that day, or students may be assigned partners to work with throughout the term. Each student then takes their partner's work and depending on the nature of the assignment gives critical feedback, standardizes or assesses the arguments, corrects mistakes in problem-solving or grammar, and so forth. This form of peer review is a particularly effective way to improve student writing. An added component to peer review is a feedback memo in which the student asks for specific feedback on certain parts of the assignment or paper. This can lead to more directed and informative feedback.

### Gallery Walk

This is a technique where you post various prompts around the room on flip chart paper and individuals, armed with a magic marker, can circulate around the room and respond at each station. This method has the advantage of giving participants the chance to read what others have written and respond to it, therefore gathering large amounts of information while stimulating conversation among participants. After the walk, each station can be summarized and the instructor can facilitate a discussion about the most intriguing points with the class.

## Cooperative Learning Exercises

For more complex projects, where many heads are better than one or two, you may want to have students work in groups of three or more. As the term "cooperative learning" suggests, students working in groups will help each other to learn. Generally, it is better to form heterogeneous groups (with regard to gender, ethnicity, and academic performance), particularly when the groups will be working together over time or on complex projects; however, some of these techniques work well with spontaneously formed groups. Cooperative groups encourage discussion of problem solving techniques ("Should we try this?", etc.), and avoid the embarrassment of students who have not yet mastered all of the skills required.

### Small Group Discussion

Students are asked to pair off and to respond to a question either in turn or as a pair. The instructor can circulate around the room answering questions, asking further questions, keeping the groups on task, and so forth. This can easily be combined with other techniques such as those under "Questions and Answers" or "Critical Thinking Motivators" above. For example, after students have responded to statements, such as "Whatever a society holds to be morally right is in fact morally right" with 'true' or 'false', they can be asked to compare answers to a limited number of questions and to discuss the statements on which they differed. In science classes students can be asked to explain some experimental data that supports a theory just discussed by the lecturer. Generally, this works best when students are given explicit directions, such as "Tell each other why you chose the answer you did". An online alternative is a discussion board, wiki, or forum.

### Think/Pair/Share

Grouping students in pairs allows many of the advantages of group work (students have the opportunity to state their own views, to hear from others, to hone their argumentative skills, and so forth) without the administrative "costs" of group work (time spent assigning people to groups, class time used just for "getting in groups", and so on). Further, pairs make it virtually impossible for students to avoid participating thus making each person accountable. After students think of a response, they share their response with their partner. The instructor can ask a few pairs to share with the whole class as a way to get some feedback without having everyone share. Students may be asked to summarize their discussion or share their partner’s response rather than their own. An alternative is write/pair/share which allows students to compose their thoughts in a written format before they share with a partner. This is particularly useful for students who benefit from taking time to compose their thoughts as well as students whose first language is not English.

### Active Review Sessions

In the traditional class review session, the students ask questions and the instructor answers them. Students spend their time copying down answers rather than thinking about the material. In an active review session, the instructor poses questions and the students work on them in groups. Then students are asked to show their solutions to the whole group and discuss any differences among solutions proposed.

### Group Work at the Board

In many problem solving courses (e.g., logic or critical thinking), instructors tend to review homework or teach problem solving techniques by solving the problems themselves. Because students learn more by doing, rather than watching, this is probably not the optimal scenario. Rather than illustrating problem solving, have students work out the problems themselves, by asking them to go to the board in small groups to solve problems. If there is insufficient blackboard space, students can still work out problems as a group, using paper and pencil, small whiteboards, or computers if appropriate software is available.

### Visual Lists

Here students are asked to make a list--on paper or on the board; by working in groups, students typically can generate more comprehensive lists than they might if working alone. This method is particularly effective when students are asked to compare views or to list pros and cons of a position. One technique which works well with such comparisons is to have students draw a "T" and to label the left- and right-hand sides of the cross bar with the opposing positions (or 'Pro' and 'Con'). They then list everything they can think of which supports these positions on the relevant side of the vertical line. Once they have generated as thorough a list as they can, ask them to analyze the lists with questions appropriate to the exercise. For example, when discussing Utilitarianism (a theory which claims that an action is morally right whenever it results in more benefits than harms) students can use the "T" method to list all of the (potential) benefits and harms of an action, and then discuss which side is more heavily "weighted". Often having the list before them helps to determine the ultimate utility of the action, and the requirement to fill in the "T" generally results in a more thorough accounting of the consequences of the action in question. In science classes this would work well with such topics as massive vaccination programs, nuclear power, eliminating chlorofluorocarbons, reducing carbon dioxide emissions, and so forth. Visual lists can also be created on small whiteboards or large sheets of paper.

### Jigsaw Group Projects

In jigsaw projects, each member of a group is asked to complete some discrete part of an assignment; when every member has completed his assigned task, the pieces can be joined together to form a finished project. For example, students in a course in African geography might be grouped and each assigned a country; individual students in the group could then be assigned to research the economy, political structure, ethnic makeup, terrain and climate, or folklore of the assigned country. When each student has completed his research, the group then reforms to complete a comprehensive report. In a chemistry course each student group could research a different form of power generation (nuclear, fossil fuel, hydroelectric, etc.). Then the groups are reformed so that each group has an expert in one form of power generation. They then tackle the difficult problem of how much emphasis should be placed on each method.

### Role Playing

Here students are asked to "act out" a part. In doing so, they get a better idea of the concepts and theories being discussed. Role-playing exercises can range from the simple (e.g., "What would you do if a Nazi came to your door, and you were hiding a Jewish family in the attic?") to the complex. Complex role playing might take the form of a play (depending on time and resources); for example, students studying ancient philosophy might be asked to recreate the trial of Socrates. Using various sources (e.g., Plato's dialogues, Stone's The Trial of Socrates, and Aristophanes' The Clouds), student teams can prepare the prosecution and defense of Socrates on the charges of corruption of youth and treason; each team may present witnesses (limited to characters which appear in the Dialogues, for instance) to construct their case, and prepare questions for cross-examination.

### Panel Discussions

Panel discussions are especially useful when students are asked to give class presentations or reports as a way of including the entire class in the presentation. Student groups are assigned a topic to research and asked to prepare presentations (note that this may readily be combined with the jigsaw method outlined above). Each panelist is then expected to make a very short presentation, before the floor is opened to questions from "the audience". The key to success is to choose topics carefully and to give students sufficient direction to ensure that they are well-prepared for their presentations. You might also want to prepare the "audience", by assigning them various roles. For example, if students are presenting the results of their research into several forms of energy, you might have some of the other students role play as concerned environmentalists, transportation officials, commuters, and so forth.

### Debates

Actually a variation of panel discussions, formal debates provide an efficient structure for class presentations when the subject matter easily divides into opposing views or ‘Pro’/‘Con’ considerations. Students are assigned to debate teams, given a position to defend, and then asked to present arguments in support of their position on the presentation day. The opposing team should be given an opportunity to rebut the argument(s) and, time permitting, the original presenters asked to respond to the rebuttal. This format is particularly useful in developing argumentation skills (in addition to teaching content).

### Games

Many will scoff at the idea that one would literally play games in a university setting, but occasionally there is no better instructional tool. In particular, there are some concepts or theories which are more easily illustrated than discussed and in these cases, a well-conceived game may convey the idea more readily. For example, when students are introduced to the concepts of "laws of nature" and "the scientific method", it is hard to convey through lectures the nature of scientific work and the fallibility of inductive hypotheses. Instead, students play a couple rounds of the Induction Game, in which playing cards are turned up and either added to a running series or discarded according to the dealer’s pre-conceived "law of nature". Students are asked to "discover" the natural law, by formulating and testing hypotheses as the game proceeds.

## Metacognition

Metacognition is *thinking about your own thinking* (Flavell, 1976). Metacognition involves planning, monitoring, and assessing your learning. Metacognitive strategies allow students to become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners and facilitate students taking responsibility for their learning. As students engage in metacognition, they develop transferrable skills for learning that go beyond a single course.

### Exam Wrappers

Exam wrappers are a series of questions used to guide reflection on the preparation for an exam as the exam results, and future study plans. Questions about preparation might include how long a student studied and what strategies they used. Questions about the exam might include why they missed points (careless mistakes, didn’t know where to start, didn’t understand the concept fully, etc). Questions about future study plans might include what study strategies the student will continue to use, new strategies the student plans to use, and a possible timeline for studying. A simplified exam wrapper might ask students to describe how they studied for the exam, the kind of mistakes they made on the exam, and how they will study for the next exam. While exam wrappers are most beneficial to the student, the instructor may find wrappers to be useful, especially if there are common trends in wrong answers or misconceptions. It is also useful if the instructor makes the exam wrappers available to students a week or two before the next exam and reminds students to review their study plans. Wrappers can also be given after large homework assignments such as essays or problem sets.

### Inventory of study strategies

Asking students to reflect on what study strategies they use is an easy way to begin to incorporate metacognition into a course. You may provide students with a list or ask them to generate their own. Often first and second year students who excelled in high school then begin to struggle in college have trouble figuring out why they are struggling. You might ask students to identify study strategies they used in high school, strategies they use now, and reflect on how the lists compare to what is necessary for them to succeed in a particular course. Students may identify strategies that worked in the past but are ill-suited for what they are required to do in a college course. In this case, students may benefit from providing additional study strategies and asking students to create a study plan (see below). An inventory of study strategies alone may not be sufficient.

### Self-Assessment of Learning

A self-assessment of learning requires students to reflect beyond studying to the learning process as a whole. Students fill out a form, rubric, or answer open ended questions about how they plan, monitor, and assess their own learning. Using a self-assessment of learning should be paired with helping your students throughout the course further develop self-regulated learning skills. The same self-assessment of learning could be given to students later in the semester so that they can compare how they have changed over time. A few tools exists for self-assessment of self-regulated learning skills including the Metacognitive Activities Inventory (MCAI) designed by Cooper and Sandi-Urena (2009) which is well-suited for courses with problem solving, the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory developed by Schraw and Dennison (1994) which can be applied to a variety of disciplines, and the Learning to Learn Metacognition exercises developed Landsberger (1996-2012) which includes questions geared towards reading assignments <http://www.studygs.net/metacognition.htm>.

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