TATP - TA Table - EP 3

[00:00:00] **Elliot:** Welcome to another episode of the TA table, the official podcast of [the TATP](https://tatp.utoronto.ca/).

[00:00:13] **Estefania:** We're your hosts, Estefania Toledo and Elliot Fonarev.

[00:00:18] **Elliot:** Today, we're talking all about active learning strategies: why they're great for student engagement, and how do we implement them in our classrooms?

[00:00:27] **Estefania:** Elliot is talking to two of our TATP Graduate Educational Developers, Ally Tabaczynski and David Aceituno-Caicedo.

Take it away Elliot.

[00:00:37] **Elliot:** Thanks to Stefania.

first up we'll have David introduce himself.

[00:00:42] **David:** my name is David Aceituno-Caicedo. My pronouns are he/him, and I'm a fifth year PhD candidate in the [Department of Earth Sciences](https://www.es.utoronto.ca/) and I'm affiliated with the [Department of Physical and Environmental Sciences at UTSC](https://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/physsci/). I do a lot of work in bio-geo-chemistry, bio-cements, and that's kind of my field of expertise. Over at TATP, I'm a graduate education developer on the science and engineering team.

[00:01:03] **Elliot:** And along with David, I spoke to Ally who is also a graduate educational developer on the science and engineering team, as well as the Micro-teaching coordinator.

[00:01:14] **Ally:** my name is Ally Tabaczynski. I'm a fifth year PhD candidate in the [Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education](https://kpe.utoronto.ca/). I'm in the behavioral stream of that faculty. So all around exercise psychology, my research interests are specifically around behavioral exercise oncology—understanding why cancer survivors are active or why they're not active and how we can develop programs to help them become more active. In TATP, I coordinate all of the microteaching sessions that we put on, doing training for microteaching for the new GEDs, and adjusting the materials that we have to fit our [new certificate programs](https://tatp.utoronto.ca/certificate-programs/certificate-programs-f-a-q/).

[00:01:49] **Estefania:** I'm excited to hear Ally and David talk about their teaching strategies, but before we get there, can we tell listeners what active learning strategies are?

[00:01:58] **Elliot:** For sure. I asked both of them to explain it.

[00:02:00] **David:** Active learning is a process where we engage students with course materials in ways that gets them thinking at a deeper level. So instead of teaching at students in a lecture style, which is more of a passive process, we structure our lessons so that students actively participate in the learning, that means giving space for reflections, discussions, debates, assessments, or plenty of other creative activities. It helps contextualize and process course content, to get it to stick better.

[00:02:23] **Ally:** Instead of regurgitating it back into either an exam or memorization, I think it's really great to mix this new incoming knowledge in with previous existing knowledge, whether it's inside the course and outside of it. It really helps with that critical learning piece and to really think critically about these concepts.

[00:02:40] **Elliot:** Active learning helps students retain course materials, and it also helps with critical engagement. Here's what Ally shared about her experience

[00:02:49] **Ally:** When I was an undergrad student, I was good at being a student because I was good at kind of memorization and recall and those sorts of things, but I was scared to critically engage with these concepts. So once I got to grad school it was a big adjustment for me because I just wasn't used to critiquing these course concepts and having your own opinion. Having these active learning strategies allows students to have more of a confidence in being able to use critical thinking skills when they're learning. Because they shouldn't just be taking it in, yhey should really be seeing how it kind of works for them and ties in with their own knowledge and experiences so far.

[00:03:24] **Elliot:** And some of you listening may relate to Ally's experience of not really encountering active learning as an undergrad student, while others might be very familiar with active learning activities. One of the most popular, is the [think-pair-share](https://tatp.utoronto.ca/resources/active-learning/). And as David says—

[00:03:40] **David:** —it's super quick, super effective. Essentially, you break students into groups and ask them to reflect on a question. And then give them time to discuss in the groups. And already in that short time you're giving space for critical thinking, time management, and even communication. And then not just that, but they're incredibly flexible and can be modified to suit the size of the classroom, time limitations, even goals of the lesson.

[00:04:02] **Estefania:** Besides the think-pair-share, people might be familiar with role playing and other exercises that involve a mix of individual reflection, small group, and large group work. I personally like to use think-pair-share for the many benefits that David mentioned.

[00:04:18] **Elliot:** As an undergrad, I remember doing model UN type simulations. That involved some preparatory work and group work building up to that final role play activity.

[00:04:28] **Estefania:** I also find the ‘four corners’ activity interesting. ‘Four corners’ is essentially dividing up the class into four groups. Each corner represents a viewpoint or argument and the educator poses a question. Then students would discuss the question in those smaller groups.

[00:04:42] **Elliot:** There are so many kinds of active learning activities ranging from short five or 10 minute exercises to full class or multi-class types of activities. It's fun for educators too—for example, David shared his favorite way to incorporate active learning in his classrooms through his love of games.

[00:05:01] **David:** in my personal life, I'm a huge fan of board games and video games. I find that the gamification of content gives a really fun angle and for motivation between students to participate. Sometimes I'll even offer stickers. So just making it fun.

This year in my environmental microbiology tutorial, I was emphasizing the importance of systems perspectives and interdisciplinary education and research. To really help them start thinking about future directions of where they can pursue a career that balances their technical education and any personal passions that they might have. So I developed a small activity I called interdisciplinology, where I broke students into groups and encouraged each group to provide a prompt for anything that could potentially be a career interest in any field. When I say anything I really mean like any noun: water, journalism animals, things like that. And then after listing all of the prompts for students to see, I gave groups a limited amount of time to combine the prompts to create different fields of research or a unique career path. Some of my own favorites came from mixing music with different research themes, like using data from stars or solar flares in a musical program to create a song, or creating patterns and waveforms in water using music and physics. So just really cool and creative thoughts and ideas.

[00:06:12] **Estefania:** That sounds like a great activity.

[00:06:14] **Elliot:** Definitely. Now, even though we're often excited about our planned activities. Sometimes students resist unfamiliar activities and participation. at the start students might hesitate to interact, especially as they're just getting used to the learning environment and maybe feeling unconfident or lost.

[00:06:34] **David:** A lot of times students have these perspectives because they don't really understand the importance. Of what these things are building towards.

[00:06:42] **Ally:** They'll share together in their independent groups, but once they're sharing towards the rest of the class not getting as much engagement I think is a common report from TAs.

[00:06:52] **Elliot:** I asked David how he dealt with that. He said he makes sure to move from group to group, break the ice with groups by asking them to come up with a team name, and asking questions as they're working together to make sure they're on the right track. Ally also suggested providing an alternative means of engagement.

[00:07:11] **Ally:** Implementing some sort of written aspect that they can have submitted to me, or at least on their own time, so we don't need that group sharing as much, or it might look a little bit differently.

[00:07:21] **Estefania:** I really like how Ally is applying [UDL principles](https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl) and providing students choice in their participation.

[00:07:28] **Elliot:** Definitely. David also talked about how a people-centered approach helped him address resistance in the classroom.

[00:07:36] **David:** Oftentimes when there's this power dynamic in play where you're an educator they're students, they don't usually see past these roles. When you humanize yourself as an individual, maybe inserting small details about your personal life, you're able to start building a bridge to your students for them to kind of see, this isn't just a course, this isn't just a lesson, these are people that I'm dealing with. These are my colleagues. These are people who have their own individual lives.

[00:08:01] **Elliot:** And on that note, David also shared how important it is to create an inclusive atmosphere where active learning can take place.

[00:08:11] **David:** Most, if not all of us, we can recall moments in our lives where we've dealt with institutions at large and really just felt like another faceless number. And at that point, it's really easy to feel and unseen and uncared for, where we just start asking why bother putting in the effort. So really creating a positive and welcoming classroom space creates a foundation for students to feel comfortable participating. Things as simple as making a real effort to learn and pronounce somebody's name correct, or using examples in your lesson plan from different cultures, even encouraging students to relate the materials to their own lived experiences that helps establish a sense of classroom community, of welcomeness, of belonging.

[00:08:51] **Elliot:** From our conversations, I could tell the both of them have thought a lot about their teaching and ways that they can always be improving their classroom strategies. And I'm just going to share the main takeaways that Ally shared for listeners.

[00:09:04] **Ally:** Always reflect on how they went, even if they went well, because it just helps with future times that you're doing it. Whether it's in the same course, same group of students, or across courses, I think there's always a lot to learn from how things went and areas to improve.

Also planning for what might not work well in this active learning strategy and planning ahead for them. So if you're doing something written, even just having like extra pens available for students who might not have one. Having like printed versions and also soft copy versions of papers that might be used. Just really thinking ahead of like, okay, what might be some barriers to some of my students to actually engaging with this fully, or for myself, or time constraints, anything like that. And trying to plan for those as best as possible so you're prepared.

[00:09:51] **Elliot:** Ally said to make sure to have the instructions very clear and present throughout the whole group activity before people go off into independent or group work. And Ally talked about timing.

[00:10:01] **Ally:** There's lots of active learning strategies that can be quite brief and other ones that are much longer, but regardless of what it is, budget more time than you think you need. Especially when you're doing it in a group or having people share. I think sometimes it just takes a little bit to get going.

In my dissertation work, training cancer survivors to deliver these behavioral discussions on physical activity with other cancer survivors, in that was developing the skills to actually lead these discussions. Role play was a big way of doing that. It was like a two hour session. We budgeted maybe 15 minutes for them to do these. And there was just a lot of, like, questions. It was a new skill for them, too. Just like, alright, we're doing this weird role play kind of situation together, I have to put my acting face on. So allowing for that extra time in there to help out was great. So you can get the full extent of the role play.

[00:10:51] **Estefania:** So the key takeaways I got from Ally and David's conversation are to pre-plan, think about multiple ways learners can participate and engage one another as people in the classroom. It's also important for us as educators and instructors in the room or TAs to share clear instructions on the activities and then debrief on how things go.

[00:11:11] **Elliot:** Exactly. And I wish we had more time with Ally and David to cover even more. but we hope that their experiences can help listeners feel like they can get started with some active learning strategies in your tutorials and classrooms.

[00:11:25] **Estefania:** And if you're interested to learn more, please check out our workshops and resources at TATP. We often host sessions on active learning and micro teaching strategies. You can find us at [www.tatp.utoronto.ca](http://www.tatp.utoronto.ca).

[00:11:38] **Elliot:** We want to thank Ally and David so much for sharing your experiences and sitting down with us.

[00:11:45] **Estefania:** We hope you will join us next time at the TA Table.

[00:11:48] **Elliot:** Thanks for listening!