Active Learning in the Online Environment

Using this Resource

The goal of this resource is to generate ideas for using active learning in the online environment. According to Prince, active learning is defined as "any instructional method that engages students in the learning process. In short, active learning requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing" (Prince, 2004). Research shows that active learning supports both student engagement and long-term learning (Hudson, 2009). Knowing that active learning can have such a positive impact on learning, how can we bring active learning to the online environment? In response to these questions, this guide will:

- Identify key considerations of online teaching and learning for teaching assistants (TAs) and course instructors (CIs).
- Outline strategies for activating student engagement in online learning.
- Connect active learning techniques to specific Educational Technologies (EdTech).
- Recommend further resources to enhance online facilitation, course design, and EdTech proficiencies.

Key Terms: Getting Familiar with Online/Remote Learning

Online/remote learning describes teaching and learning that takes place over the Internet. Other common names for this type of learning include virtual learning, e-learning, and distance learning. Online learning can involve a**synchronous learning** (activities, readings, or assignments that can be completed whenever the learner choses) **and synchronous learning** (classes or lectures delivered live, in real-time). When online learning is combined with in-person instruction, it is described using terms like: **blended/hybrid learning** (a combination of online and face-to-face interaction) **or the flipped classroom** (course content delivered online through video, audio, or lecture capture modules, supported by synchronous engagement).

Considerations for Active Learning Online

When creating an active learning activity, remember to keep these key factors in mind:

Start with your learning outcomes:
- What are the learning outcomes for the specific assignment or activity?
- Does the assignment or activity need to address different kinds of learning? (writing; reading; listening; verbal communication; interpreting data; analysis; memorization)
- Does the activity aim to reinforce knowledge, give students an opportunity to practice skill-building, and/or ask them to reflect on knowledge, skills, practices, or attitudes?
- Should the activity generate a sense of community or motivate independent learning?

Consider the tech tools and features available to you:

- Determine if the application/feature is already integrated into Quercus, is institutionally supported (or approved by your department), or has been vetted for confidentiality and privacy.
- Establish whether your tool or feature in Quercus can handle the design of the activity you have in mind (if unsure, consult with IT support about implementation)
- Anticipate the time necessary to manage the activity online
- Consider if there are extra costs associated with downloading particular software/applications

Respond to community needs and set expectations:

- Consider how the CI, TA, and students will communicate in the course (email, discussion board, or text chat; formal or informal).
- Create a group/community agreement shared between the learners and grader/facilitator in the course about how they will work together over the term.
  - Use writing/discussion prompts for the agreement, such as communication preferences, accessibility and equity concerns, active attention, "netiquette," etc.
- Encourage students to check-in and address ongoing community needs and expectations by creating a Course Page as a Wiki.
- Also use an Access Check to ask students if there are any barriers created by the active learning activity or environment that require adjustment (to the best of the CI/TA's abilities).

Examples of Active Learning Activities for the Online Environment

Synchronous Activities – Reflection

These activities can be done during synchronous sessions in video conferencing platforms, such as Blackboard Collaborate Ultra.

- **Q&A:** ask students to post questions on the chat during a live video conference or lecture; schedule specific times in which to address these questions to the class.
- **Pause and write:** stop students during an interesting discussion and have everyone, including you, write down what they would say next to focus on a specific argument.
- **Free writing:** ask the class to "free write" for a set period of time. Give them a specific question/prompt, ask them to make connections between a reading and an upcoming assignment, or instruct them to begin drafting a thesis.
- **One-minute paper:** similar to free writing, ask the class to write for one minute in response to a focused and specific prompt.

Synchronous & Asynchronous – Discussion-based Activities

These activities can be run in synchronous sessions (using the chat panel or a shared document) or assigned asynchronously.

- **Clearest Point/Muddiest Point:** assign this prompt directly before or after the lecture/webinar and have the students share their ideas on the discussion board to encourage dialogue with other students.
- **Write a headline/Tweet:** ask the class to summarize their thoughts by writing a newspaper headline or Tweet (280 character post for Twitter).
- **Believing and Doubting:** ask students to identify the main thesis of a course reading and outline 3 reasons they believe it and 3 reasons they doubt it.
- **Chalk Talk:** facilitate a silent conversation using a collaborative word processor (like Google Doc or a screen share feature) in which students can move back and forth responding to a written prompt and commenting on each other's responses.

Synchronous & Asynchronous – Peer Learning

These activities can be run in synchronous sessions or assigned asynchronously. peerScholar is a helpful tool that can be integrated into Quercus and used for peer feedback assignments.

- **Written and/or verbal feedback:** ask students to prove feedback on each other's work, whether it is in response to a preliminary idea for an upcoming assignment, a rough draft, or reflecting on a final draft after submission and assessment.
- **Debate:** instruct students to take one of two positions and respond to a prompt (either through written or verbal format) and practice giving evidence and critiquing the other side's supporting argument.

Synchronous – Gamify Online Learning

These activities can be run using breakout rooms in Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. Alternatively, you can create your pop quizzes in Quercus.

- **Online scavenger hunt:** design a simple or more elaborate scavenger hunt. For example, students can explore research methods of a particular discipline by working in small groups to locate specific research materials and scholarly sources. Students can work together in small groups through video conferencing software and screen share to investigate sources together.

- **Pop quizzes:** low stakes quizzes or Jeopardy-style exercises can enable active learning by motivating students to learn from their mistakes and try again.
- **Lego Serious Play:** although Lego Serious Play is a pedagogical practice typically used by the TATP staff in-person, it can be adapted to the online environment without any actual Lego; ask students to choose a creative practice available to them at home (drawing, sculpting, painting, crafts, etc.) or design a "toolkit" of shapes for them to use in their building process. In small groups, introduce the students to one or more building prompts ("build a representation of X course concept") and after they finish their creations, ask them to discuss the final products in their small groups and reflect on their creations.

References

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Further Resources

TATP Resources:	Quercus Resources:	U of T Resources:
Teaching Toolkit	Quercus Support Centre	CTSI Online Learning
Active Learning and Adapting Teaching Techniques	Participating in Webinar Sessions	Online Learning Strategies (OLS)
Using Accessible Visual Aids	Quercus in A&S	Online learning
		OISE Instructor Resources

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