

## CLUSTER 6. COMMENTARY

### FOSTERING ACTIVE LEARNING FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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#### **A context primed for active learning**

This cluster presents three cases of active learning strategies from Political Science, Intercultural Leadership and Communication and Accounting; each designed to increase student engagement during lectures and seminars. They share a similar main aim – to increase student activity, student-centredness and student control or autonomy within their classes. As a bonus, one of the chapters also used constructive alignment to improve the links between activities and assessment tasks. Active learning involves student participation, cooperation or collaboration, and often, authentic and inquiry-based tasks. There are a variety of strategies that can be used to facilitate active learning in higher education, see Silberman (1996) for examples. The activities used to generate active learning in these cases include small group discussion, debates, extracts from primary sources, voluntary quizzes, cut-up cards, group presentations and case studies.

#### **Lessons for early career academics and other academics striving to improve their teaching practice**

All authors designed an approach to teaching that was intended to facilitate student engagement, reduce their fear of participation during class, and improve student learning. Unfortunately for the authors, their intervention did not lead to all the outcomes they expected. The complexity of education contexts combined with student variables can make it difficult to predict and measure the impact of a change in approach or the introduction of a novel activity. This is especially true for early career academics experimenting with something for the first time, and often, is also true for more experienced academics endeavouring to improve their teaching practice.

Overall, the authors achieved their aims. They intended to change their approach to teaching to become more student-centred and through this, change their students' approach to learning (Trigwell et al. 1999). They designed and implemented activities that were uncommon in their courses and so were new to them and to their students. Each author noted that while the data they collected provided some support, it did not lend support to all their hypotheses. And yet we have much to admire; increase in student engagement (Karas), enhanced satisfaction and some evidence for greater information retention (Pechersky), and improved performance, and to a lesser extent, engagement (Srnišová).

The authors demonstrated a deep level of reflection on their practice based on a range of data sources; literature, student performance, student satisfaction surveys, peer observation, and their own observation and reflection. These sources represent Brookfield's (1995) four lenses for

critical reflection on teaching and ongoing consideration of these lenses is important for teacher development. Their planned changes include extra time for tasks, more practice, and additional scaffolding to guide students. Perhaps next time, with the additional support, the students' level of engagement will match their teachers' enthusiasm!

### **Reflections on these cases and educational development for early career academics in this context**

I wonder if the authors could create an opportunity to communicate with students prior to intervention – to ask them about in-class participation and their expectations for the course. This may help them to discover why students do not engage with the content in a traditional lecture format and why an active learning intervention may not be effective. Students may be new to the idea of active learning and not see its value for their own learning, so while intended to increase engagement, it may have the opposite effect. As noted by the authors, it may be important to provide students with more practice being active learners, and also low stakes assessment tasks and/or opportunities to reflect on how they learn. All authors used an experimental or quasi-experimental design, and it may also be worth considering other approaches to interventions – for example, could students take a greater role in designing activities to further increase engagement?

I would argue that the ideas from the teacher development course have had a significant impact as evidenced by the quality of the design, implementation, and evaluation of the authors' teaching interventions. The authors' knowledge of and interest in the student learning experience has either come directly from the course or been reignited by the course, which is not an easy task. As educational developers and advocates of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning are aware, academics often struggle to understand and apply the ideas from these courses. Happily, this volume contributes to addressing this challenge by documenting local examples of practice applied across different disciplines to extend the existing literature.

### **Final thought**

Reading these accounts of practice was delightful because of the authors' passion for teaching and student learning. I would encourage them to be patient with themselves because learning to teach takes time. Building a repertoire of strategies that work (and noting those that do not work) takes years of practice, and sometimes, despite our best intentions, students resist certain activities or plans do not work as expected. There is always a next time and another opportunity to encourage active learning.

## References

Brookfield, S. (1995) *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Trigwell, K., Prosser, M. and Waterhouse, F. (1999) 'Relations between teachers' approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning', *Higher Education* 37:1, pp. 57-70.



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