

Changing lectures from passive to active events [a sample resource]

It has been shown by amongst others Peterson & Miller 2004, that students show relatively low levels of challenge during large group instruction. This low level equates to apathy and represents moments when comparatively little learning is occurring. The fault of many lecturers is to focus on the teaching of content as opposed to learning. This manifests as:

- a high number of powerpoint (or equivalent) slides
- a fast pace to cover all of the content
- relatively few opportunities for learner engagement beyond answering a few, often simple, questions
- learner passivity
- slides dominated by a lot of written information.

In contrast students experience relatively high engagement and are more likely to be thinking on task during cooperative activities. If the purpose of lectures is learning, then creating moments when they can engage with the materials and think critically becomes essential.



Activities often require minimal if any additional resources and only need to run for a short amount of time. They have a number of effects:

- engage all of the learners
- lift the energy levels in the room
- share out the learning
- encourage students to build their ideas
- shift the learners from passive to active

- allow learners to pre-prepare answers which encourages those who might otherwise be less willing to talk publicly.

You need not be anxious about running these activities as, perhaps surprisingly, you do not risk losing control of the group. They will readily return to plenary as soon as you re-gain their attention. There is something safe about the tutor re-asserting their authority that plays into learners' dependency needs.

When you set up an activity be clear, succinct and unambiguous in your instructions, for example it is usually more effective to avoid saying, "You can either do X or Y." Make sure that the group are still listening to you rather than starting to work without really knowing what they are doing. Be available for the learners to request clarification without imposing on them. The learning will not be as effective if it is all done through you so, while it may feel counter-intuitive, you should avoid engaging with a group beyond simple clarification. Hovering over them while they work will completely change the dynamics. It may be worth having a slide which reinforces the task, or writing it up onto a flipchart to give them a visual reminder.



After setting up the group the next challenge you will face is re-gaining the attention of the learners when they are working. If noise levels are high this is probably (hopefully!) a good sign as they are focussed and attending to the task, but it will be difficult to attract their attention if they are a large group. There are a number of strategies you can try in order to avoid shouting, "Shut up!"

- Before the groups begin the activity set up the way in which you will bring them back together. So for example say to them, "When I step up onto the podium I'd like you to stop working and rejoin the large group".
- Tell the group that they will have X amount of time and give them a reminder when they only have a minute left.

- Stand at the front and begin talking over the group and they will gradually realise that you want their attention and the silence will ripple back through the room. Don't talk about anything that matters, it is simply the act of you demonstrating that you want their attention that works.
- Ask the group to finish the idea that they are currently discussing.
- Pick a moment when there is a lull in the noise level.

Feedback or plenary sessions sometimes take as long as the activity and may be repeating the work unnecessarily and actually be a little boring. The following are useful guidelines for managing the plenary.

- Only take some of the suggestions
- Ensure that different groups/pairs have the opportunity to contribute
- Where sub-groups have been given different tasks, they will need to share their thinking with the large group
- Rather than getting the groups to report back consider showing a micro-summary slide for them to review their thinking against. Then check that the learners understand if they have made any errors and find out whether they have any questions.
- Beware that while writing down the group's thoughts gives visual evidence of the topic, it also slows down the pace of the session.
- Ask groups to prioritise their thinking and just share their most significant points.