

# Active Learning

## what do we mean?

not:

- pupils running around the classroom;
- chaos, confusion etc.

Active learning indicates some sort of contrast with learners being passive, but it's not a simple polarisation. All learning is active in a certain sense, but some kinds of learning are more active than others,

Active engagement with materials, with ideas, with relationships and with other resources is a key purpose.

## what's activity to do with learning?

"Active learning refers to the idea that people learn by engaging in a process of sense-making. .... The goal is not to provoke behavioral activity per se, but rather to provoke productive kinds of cognitive activity"

Mayer RE (1998), "Cognitive theory for education: what teachers need to know" in Lambert NM and McCombs BL (Ed.), *How Students Learn: reforming schools through learner-centred education*. Washington DC, American Psychological Association

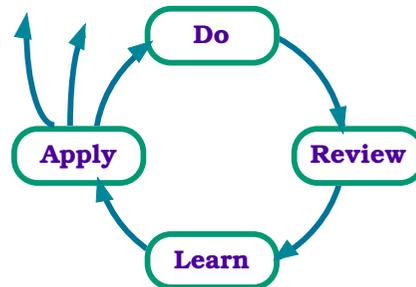
"Active learning on the one hand has to do with learners making decisions about learning and on the other hand making active use of thinking."

Simons PR-J (1997), "Definitions and theories of active learning" in Stern D and Huber GL (Ed.), *Active Learning for Students and Teachers: reports from eight countries*. Frankfurt, OECD/Peter Lang

## how do we go about it in a classroom?

If learning is "... the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984) then "It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten or its learning potential lost" (Gibbs, 1988).

The model below brings together some key steps in the process.



This cycle highlights activity in learning (Do), the need for reflection and evaluation (Review), the extraction of meaning from the review (Learn), and the planned use of learning in future action (Apply).

The cycle may be active over a long period of time (e.g. a design-and-make project) or a short time (a few minutes).

## examples

### Active Reading

Learners go much further than the dominant (but passive) idea that reading is "getting this text in my head" through strategies such as:

*Scanning* before reading (what's the theme, how is the text structured?)

*Questioning* (what do I already know, what do I want to know more about?)

*Read* (small step at a time, stopping at regular intervals to make sense)

*Review* (What is being said? What do I think of it?)

*Recollect* (What are the main messages? What are the key ideas?)

### Active Writing

Writing is not a "knowledge-telling process" - a sort of dumping onto paper which novice writers are encouraged into. Skilled writers approach the act of writing as something which in itself enhances their knowledge and understanding. Active writing is about writers becoming more playful and reflective. Active writers develop an idea of what they want to say in text, compose a draft, try it out with a reader and see whether it communicates what they themselves were intending.

Examples arise in all subjects, for example:

	Do	Review	Learn	Apply
Maths	Tackle a problem	Review strategies	Compare effectiveness	Prepare for next challenge
English	Create a draft	Try out with a reader	Consider feedback	Redraft and publish
Technology	Construct a product	Test its function	Examine evaluations	Redesign
Drama	Rehearse	Critique	Adapt	Perform
History	Collect sources	Identify points of view	Synthesise	Make sense of another situation

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## what holds us back?

- teachers planning for THEIR activity, not the activity of the learners
- running classrooms as "Do, do, and do some more"
- the voice of fear "it will all fall apart"
- underestimating pupils "they won't be able to handle it"
- our response to pressures to "cover the curriculum"
- the dominant view of learning: "learning = being taught" "Why is it that, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so entrenched in practice?" (John Dewey, 1916)
- forgetting (or not knowing) that research surveys show that active learning gets better results: Abbott ML and Fouts JT (2003), *Constructivist Teaching and Student Achievement: The Results of a School-level Classroom Observation Study*, Washington: Seattle Pacific University