

Engaging Students in Active Learning

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What does it mean to engage students in active learning? And why is it important? Before we consider these questions, we should define what active learning is.

The term “active learning” as discussed in educational literature refers to student learning that goes beyond simply listening and memorization. Listening to content delivered by a teacher in the traditional stand-and-deliver approach is no indication that the student is actively and cognitively engaged in learning. The student might appear to be paying attention, but his/her mind might be focused on other things. To be actively engaged in learning requires some action on the part of the student: reading, writing, discussing, problem solving, and presenting. At a deeper level, it requires the student to be engaged in higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation. ⁱ Thus, the evidence of active learning is seen when students are doing things and thinking about what they are doing instead of passively listening.



Active learning places the responsibility for learning on the student rather than on the teacher. The teacher creates the conditions for active learning to take place. Thus, in preparing his/her lessons, the teacher must deliberately devise ways and means to make his/her lesson engaging and meaningful to solicit student participation in the learning process. The key word for active learning is *involvement*. When a teacher delivers a carefully planned lesson using PowerPoint or lecture, the focus of attention is on the teacher and not on the student. And while this may be commendable and necessary, the object of good teaching is to get students to act upon lesson content as if it is their own.

How do we usually engage students in active learning? Essentially, we do so by asking questions or giving commands. Question: What are the primary colours? Command: Read the story and state three things about the main character. These examples are close-ended; that is, they solicit precise, factual information. Though engaging students in active learning, the above question and command invite very limited discussion or thinking out of the box. But our aim as teachers should not be to simply engagement of students in active learning, but rather, to engage them cognitively as well. For it is at this deeper level of engagement that students are able to apply factual knowledge to real life situations and be involved in dynamic thinking and learning, where they must synthesize information, analyse ideas and draw their own conclusions.ⁱⁱ

This brings us to another type of question or command that can be used for engaging students in the learning process. Question: How does your knowledge of the primary colours impact your life? Command: Explain why you think the decision taken by the chief character in the story is unfair. The above are examples of an open-ended questions and commands. They are meant to elicit discussion, brainstorming solutions to a problem, and to create opportunities for thinking

outside the box. This type of question and command are engage students cognitively, getting them involved in dynamic thinking and learning.

For the purpose of student engagement, an open-ended question or command is a powerful tool that any teacher can employ in any classroom setting, but they are more powerfully employed in group work. Cooperative and collaborative groups facilitate active learning by allowing students to brainstorm answers to open-ended questions, discuss problems, work on projects, and share ideas. Thus, organizing your classroom to facilitate group work is something every teacher should consider as it provides the atmosphere and creates the condition for active learning to take place.

Please note that the key to cognitive engagement does not lie in organizing students in groups per se, but in the activities and assigned tasks of engagement: the type of questions posed, the commands given, the projects assigned. More important than the group formation is the structure of our teaching. We must ensure that every lesson includes several opportunities for all students to demonstrate active participation and cognitive engagement.

Why is it important for students to be engaged in active learning? The answer is obvious: it shifts the responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student. The more a student is engaged in the learning process, the more empowered he/she becomes, and the more likely he/she would become a life-long learner. And when you up the ante by infusing your lesson content with higher-order thinking, you engage students cognitively, helping them to become critical thinkers, problem solvers, innovators, and change makers.

As Adventist educators, we must be mindful not only of *what* we teach, but of *how* we teach. We need to deliver lesson content in ways that will elicit positive response from students, engaging them fully in active learning and higher-order thinking, thereby empowering them. Ellen G. White places her stamp of approval on active learning when she states: “It is the work of true education...to train young people to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of people’s thoughts.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison, “Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom.” Retrieved July 25, 2011, from <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/91-9dig.htm>

ⁱⁱ Persida Himmele and William Himmele (2011). *Total Participation Techniques: Making Every Student An Active Learner*, Virginia: ASCD, p. 13

ⁱⁱⁱ Ellen G. White (2000), *True Education*, Idaho: Pacific Press Publication Association, p. 12.