

CHAPTER 4

Active Learning

Because many college teachers emphasize critical thinking, they offer you the chance to move from a pattern of being taught *passively* to one of learning *actively*.

What is active learning, how does it take place, and why do many teachers believe it's the best way to learn? Active learning is simply a method that involves students in an active manner. It happens whenever your teacher asks you a question in class, puts you in groups to solve a problem, requires you to make an oral presentation to the class, or does anything else that gives you and other students a voice in the learning process.

IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL LEARN

- The big difference between high school and college
- What active learning means and how it can help you learn more easily
- The value of studying with other students
- How to choose the best teachers and be comfortable with them
- What to do if things go wrong between you and your teacher

The Many Benefits of Active Learning

In addition to placing you “in the center” of learning, active learning teaches you a variety of skills employers want most: thinking, writing, oral communication, goal setting, time management, relationship building, problem solving, ethical reasoning, and more. All these skills are an important part of leadership.

A teacher who urges students to collaborate on an assignment is aware that two or more heads may be far more productive than one. Each student turns in an original piece of work but is free to seek advice and suggestions from another student.

More than likely, this is how you will be working after college, so it makes sense to learn how to collaborate when you can, rather than compete. Students who embrace active learning not only learn better but enjoy their learning experiences more. Even if you have an instructor who lectures for an

entire period and leaves little or no time for questions, you might form a study group with three or four other students so that each of you can benefit from what the others have learned. Or you might ask the teacher for an appointment to discuss unanswered questions from the lecture. By doing so, you can transform a passive learning situation into an active one. In a passive classroom, where you listen and take notes, you are less likely to retain information or put it to use.

Active learners are willing to try new ideas and discover new knowledge by exploring the world around them instead of just memorizing facts. Here are some things you can do to practice learning actively:

- Try to find out which teachers will actively engage you in learning. Ask friends, your advisor, and other teachers.
- Even in a large class, sit as close to the front as you can and never hesitate to raise your hand if you don't understand something. Chances are, the other students didn't understand it either.
- Put notes into your own words instead of just memorizing the book or the lecture.
- Study with other students. Talking about assignments and getting other points of view will help you learn the material faster and more thoroughly.
- Follow the suggestions in Chapters 2 and 3 and Chapters 6–8 about managing your time, optimizing your learning preferences, taking class notes, reading texts, and studying for exams.
- If you disagree with what your instructor says, politely challenge him or her. Good teachers will listen and may still disagree with you, but they may think more of you for showing you can think and that you care enough to challenge them.
- Stay in touch with teachers, other students, and your academic advisor. One great way is through email. Or call and leave a voice mail if the person is out.

Why Active Learners Can Learn More Than Passive Learners

Active learning puts students in charge of their own education. Although you may acquire knowledge listening to a lecture, you may not be motivated to think about what that knowledge means. Through active learning, you will learn not only the material in your notes and textbooks, but also how to:

- Work with others
- Improve your critical thinking, listening, writing, and speaking skills
- Function independently and teach yourself

- Manage your time
- Gain sensitivity to cultural differences

Asking a question in class has as much to do with developing assertiveness as with knowing the answer to a question. And keeping a journal will help you learn *how* you learn so that you can teach yourself.

Becoming an Active Learner

Active learning requires preparation before and after every class, not just before exams. Active learning also can include browsing the Internet for credible Web sites related to the subjects you are studying, searching for more information in the library, making appointments to talk to faculty, making outlines from your class notes, going to cultural events, working on a committee, asking someone to read something you've written to see if it's clear, or having a serious discussion with students whose personal values are different from yours.

Yet with all its benefits, some students resist active learning out of fear of trying something new and challenging. One student described an active learning class as “scary” and a more traditional class as “safe.” The traditional class was safe because the teacher did not invite students to sit in a semicircle, and he used a textbook and lectures to explain ideas. On the other hand, discussions in the active learning class were scary because of the process, the uncertainty, and the openness.¹

Studies have indicated that the larger the class, the less most students want to speak out. As one student explains, “If I give the wrong answer in a large class, students will see me as a dunce.” Yet when the instructor creates an atmosphere where such participation is comfortable and makes it clear that even reasonable “wrong” answers are better than no answers at all, you probably will want to participate more often.

According to student development theory, an active approach to learning and living has the potential to produce individuals who are well-rounded in all aspects of life. The hexagon in Figure 4.1 depicts seven aspects of development, with intellectual development at its center. Optimal personal development depends on each area's supporting every other area. For example, with good active learning skills, you likely will feel more comfortable socially, gain a greater appreciation for diversity and education, and be better able to make decisions about your college major and future career. Staying physically active

¹Adapted from Russell A. Warren, “Engaging Students in Active Learning,” *About Campus*, March–April 1997.

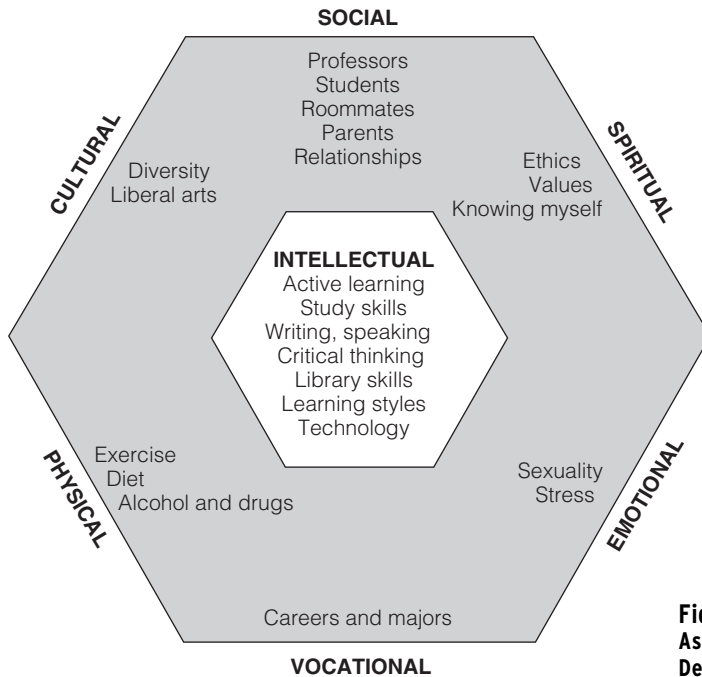


Figure 4.1
Aspects of Student
Development

can reduce stress and keep your mind alert while you study. Developing a sense of values can help you choose your friends more carefully and decide how you choose to manage your time.

One way to practice active learning daily is through a process called the “one-minute paper.” In a major study of teaching at Harvard University, one of many suggestions for improving learning was a simple feedback exercise. At the end of each class, students were asked to write what they thought was the main issue of that class and what their unanswered questions were for the next class.

Even if your instructors don’t require it, try writing your one-minute paper each day at the end of class. Use it to think about the main issues discussed that day, and save it so that you can ask good questions at the next class meeting.

Teachers Who Embrace Active Learning Love to Teach

For a teacher, it’s probably much easier to write and deliver a lecture than to engage students in discussion. But those who favor the latter probably do so because they believe it’s a better way to learn and because sometimes it’s more exciting to hear students demonstrate how much they’ve learned.

And just as some teachers go the extra mile to make classes interesting, so should you. Instead of blending in with your peers—as many new students seem to do—ask the questions in class others probably want to ask but don't. Try to do something genuinely innovative with every paper and project. Be certain it is “on track” with the assignment. Sure, you'll make some mistakes, but your instructor probably will appreciate your inquisitive nature, reward you for it, and be more willing to help you improve your work.

As friendly and understanding as they are, teachers will set deadlines for work and stick to them. This should instill in you an appreciation of time management: If one thing isn't done on time, the whole plan can fall apart. So if you're not sure of a deadline, ask.

Just as good teachers invite you to speak out in class, they also keep lines of communication open. They not only grade your work but may ask you how you're learning, what you're learning, and how clearly their teaching is coming across to you. In fact, some of the best learning may take place one-on-one in the instructor's office. Research shows that students who interact with their teachers outside of class have a greater chance of returning to college for their second year. Remember, this isn't high school, where it wasn't cool to speak to a teacher.

Your college instructors will encourage you to develop new ways of thinking, to realize there may be many acceptable answers as opposed to only one, to question existing knowledge, to take issue with something they might say, to ask questions in class, and to offer possible solutions to problems. You may be surprised to find that most college teachers do not fit the stereotype of the ivory tower scholar. Though many college instructors still must spend some of their time doing scholarly research and performing service for the institution, a majority of them say they love teaching most of all, and for good reason: Motivating students like you can be deeply rewarding.

Instructors may also do things your high school teachers never did, such as:

- Supplementing textbook assignments with other information
- Giving exams covering both assigned readings and lectures
- Questioning conclusions of other scholars
- Accepting several different student opinions on a question
- Leaving it up to you whether to take notes or read the text
- Demanding more reading of you in a shorter period of time
- Giving fewer quizzes or many more quizzes
- Expecting you to be familiar with topics related to their field
- Being sympathetic to difficulties you may have while at the same time holding firm to high standards of grading.

You may be on friendly terms with your instructor and find you have received a low grade because you missed too many classes, did not complete all

required work, or simply failed to produce acceptable work. A college teacher may tell you that although your grades may be unacceptable, this is not necessarily a reflection on your character or potential abilities.

Making the Most of the Student-Instructor Relationship

- 1. Make it a point to attend class regularly and on time.** And participate in the discussion; you'll learn more if you do. If you miss a class, you might get another student's notes, but that isn't the same thing as being present during class. Learning is simply easier when you're there every day.
- 2. Save your cuts for emergencies.** When you know you will be absent, let your instructor know in advance, even if the class is a large one. It could make a big difference in your teacher's attitude toward you. And if the class is really large, it's one way of introducing yourself.
- 3. Sit near the front.** Studies indicate that students who do so tend to earn better grades.
- 4. Speak up.** Ask questions when you don't understand or need clarification, and voice your opinion when you disagree.
- 5. See your instructor outside class when you need help.** Instructors are required to keep office hours for student appointments. Make an appointment by phone, email, or at the end of class. You will likely be pleasantly surprised at how much your instructor is willing to work with you. Get your instructor's email address and use it.
- 6. Share one or more "one-minute papers" with your instructor.** You can do this either in writing or through email. It could be the start of an interesting dialogue.

Teachers, Students, and Academic Freedom

College instructors possess and believe in the freedom to speak out, whether in a classroom discussion about economic policy or at a public rally on abortion or gay rights. What matters more than what instructors believe is their right to proclaim that belief to others without fear. Colleges and universities have promoted the advancement of knowledge by granting scholars virtually unlimited freedom of inquiry (academic freedom), as long as human lives, rights, and privacy are not violated.

Some teachers may speak sarcastically about a politician you admire. Although you need not accept such ideas, you must learn to evaluate them for yourself, instead of basing your judgments on what others have always told you is right.

Academic freedom also extends to college students. This means you will have more freedom than in high school to select certain research topics or to

pursue controversial issues. You will also have the right to disagree with the instructor if you feel differently about an issue, but be certain you can support your argument with reliable published or personal evidence.

Above all, discuss—never attack. Cite something you’ve read or heard, and ask what the instructor thinks about your approach to the issue. Done respectfully, such queries can enrich learning for the entire class.

“Great teachers know their subjects well. But they also know their students well,” says Dr. Eliot Engel of North Carolina State University. “In fact,” he continues, “great teaching fundamentally consists of constructing a bridge from the subject taught to the student learning it. Both sides of that bridge must be surveyed with equal care if the subject matter of the teacher is to connect with the gray matter of the student. But great teachers transcend simply knowing their subjects and students well. They also admire both deeply.”²

As an active learner, you should find it easier to admire both your teacher and your subject deeply, just as your teacher will learn to admire you.

If Things Go Wrong between You and a Teacher

What if you can’t tolerate a particular instructor? Arrange a meeting to try to work things out. Getting to know the teacher as a person may help you cope with the way he or she teaches the course. If that fails, check the “drop/add” date, which usually falls at the end of the first week of classes. You may have to drop the course altogether and pick up a different one. If it’s too late to add classes, you may still want to drop by the drop date later in the term and avoid a penalty. See your academic advisor or counselor for help with this decision.

If you can’t resolve the situation with the instructor and need to stay in the class, see the head of the department. If you are still dissatisfied, move up the administrative ladder until you get a definite answer. Never allow a bad instructor to sour you on college. Even the worst course will be over in a matter of weeks.

What if you’re not satisfied with your grade? First, make an appointment to see the instructor and discuss the assignment. Your teacher may give you a second chance because you took the time to ask for help. If you get a low grade on an exam, you might ask the instructor to review certain answers with you. Never directly insist on a grade change, as this will most likely backfire.

What if you’re dealing with sexual harassment or sexism? Sexual harassment is a serious offense and a cause for grievance. If an instructor makes inappropriate or threatening remarks of a sexual nature, report this to the

²From a column in the *Dickens Dispatch*, the newsletter of the North Carolina Dickens Club, January 1989.

instructor's department chair. No instructor should ask for a date or otherwise pressure students to become involved in personal relationships, because the implied threat is that if you refuse, you may fail the course.

Sexism refers to statements or behaviors that demonstrate a belief in the greater general worth of one gender over the other. Comments such as "I don't know why girls take chemistry" are not only insulting but may cause women to lose confidence in their abilities. The same rules apply to defamatory remarks about one's ethnic group. Your campus has specific procedures to follow if you believe you are being harassed sexually; make use of them.

Collaborative Learning Teams

Besides "teaming" with your teachers to enhance your learning, you can also team with your fellow students as a collaborative learning team.

How does such collaboration improve learning? Joseph Cuseo of Marymount College, an expert on collaborative learning, points to these factors:

- Learners learn from one another as well as from the instructor.
- Collaborative learning is by its very nature active learning, and so tends to increase learning by involving you more actively.
- "Two heads are better than one." Collaboration can lead to more ideas, alternative approaches, new perspectives, and better solutions.
- If you're not comfortable speaking out in larger classes, you will tend to be more comfortable speaking in smaller groups, resulting in better communication and better ideas.
- You will develop stronger bonds with other students in the class, which may increase everyone's interest in attending.
- An environment of "positive competition" among groups develops when several groups are asked to solve the same problem—as long as the instructor clarifies that the purpose is for the good of all.
- Through the group experience, you may develop leadership skills.
- You will learn to work with others, a fact of life in the world of work.

When students work effectively in a supportive group, the experience can be a highly powerful way to enhance academic achievement and meaningful learning. Interviews with college students at Harvard University revealed that nearly every senior who had been part of a study group considered this experience to be crucial to his or her academic progress and success.

Making Learning Teams Productive

Not all learning groups are equally effective. Sometimes teamwork is unsuccessful or fails to reach its potential because no thought was given to how the

group should be formed or how it should function. Use the following strategies to develop high-quality learning teams that maximize the power of peer collaboration:

- 1. Remember that learning teams are more than study groups.** Don't think that collaborative learning simply involves study groups that meet the night before major exams. Effective student learning teams collaborate regularly on other academic tasks besides test review sessions.
- 2. In forming teams, seek students who will contribute quality and different points of view to the group.** Resist the urge to include people just like you. Look for fellow students who are motivated, attend class regularly, participate actively while in class, and complete assignments. Include both men and women, and select teammates from different ethnic, racial, or cultural backgrounds, different age groups, and different personality types and learning styles. Choosing only your friends can often result in a learning group that is more likely to get off track.
- 3. Keep the group small (four to six teammates).** Smaller groups allow for more face-to-face interaction and eye contact and less opportunity for any one individual to shirk responsibility to the team. Also, it's much easier for small groups to meet outside class. Consider choosing an even number of teammates (four or six), so you can work in pairs in case the team decides to divide its work into separate parts.
- 4. Hold individual team members personally accountable for their own learning and for contributing to the learning of their teammates.** Research on study groups indicates that they are effective only if each member has done the required work in advance of the group meeting (for example, completing required readings and other assignments). One way to ensure accountability is to have each member come to group meetings with specific information or answers to share with teammates as well as questions to ask the group. Or have individual members take on different roles or responsibilities, such as mastering a particular topic, section, or skill to be taught to others.

The Many Uses of Learning Teams

- 1. Note-taking teams.** Team up with other students immediately after class to share and compare notes. One of your teammates may have picked up something you missed, or vice versa. By meeting immediately after class, your group may still have a chance to consult with the instructor about any missing or confusing information.
- 2. Reading teams.** After completing reading assignments, team with other students to compare your highlighting and margin notes. See if all agree on what the author's major points were and what information you should study for exams.

3. **Library research teams.** Forming library research teams is an effective way to develop a support group for reducing “library anxiety” and for locating and sharing sources of information. (*Note:* Locating and sharing sources of information isn’t cheating or plagiarizing as long as the final product you turn in represents your own work.)
4. **Team/instructor conferences.** Have your learning team visit the instructor during office hours to seek additional assistance in study or completing work. You may find it easier to see an instructor in the company of other students. And the feedback from your instructor is also received by your teammates, so that useful information is less likely to be forgotten. Your team visit also tells your instructor that you are serious about learning.
5. **Team test results review.** After receiving test results, the members of a learning team can review their individual tests together to help one another identify the sources of their mistakes and to identify any answers that received high scores. This provides each team member with a clearer idea of what the instructor expects. You can use this information for subsequent tests and assignments.

YOUR PERSONAL JOURNAL

Here are several things to write about. Choose one or more. Or choose another topic related to this chapter.

1. We’ve stated that college teachers are different from high school teachers. Can you give an example or two of those differences, based on one of your high school teachers and one of your current college teachers? Whose style are/were you more comfortable with? Why? In which class do you believe you’ll learn more? Why?
2. If you’ve tried collaborative learning, write about how that went. If you haven’t tried it yet, write about why you haven’t and whether you plan to do so in the near future.
3. An important part of active learning is student participation. What if some students are reticent about speaking in class? (Their learning styles may indicate they are introverted.) Should the teacher be flexible about this? If so, how? If not, what should he or she do?
4. What behaviors are you thinking about changing after reading this chapter? How will you go about changing them?
5. What else is on your mind this week? If you wish to share it with your instructor, add it to this journal entry.

READINGS

Ten Strategies for Getting Students to Take Responsibility for Their Learning*

By Sara Jane Coffman

Abstract. *This article presents ten strategies instructors can use to get their students to take more responsibility for their learning. Suggestions are given about the importance of getting students to verbalize why they are taking the course, helping students get into the proper mind-set for each class, and structuring assignments so students will be more likely to come to class prepared. Other suggestions include teaching students to look out for each other; behave responsibly when working in groups, and analyze their learning experiences. By teaching responsibility, as well as content in our classrooms, we can enhance learning, raise the level of our classrooms, and produce more responsible members of society.*

Wouldn't it be great if our students came to class prepared—not just having read the assignment, but mentally prepared as well—alert and ready to debate, challenge, interact, and contribute?

Unfortunately, it often seems that when students walk into our classrooms their brains are set on the lowest possible setting. One reason students may not feel compelled to prepare (or be in the proper mind-set for learning) is that they don't mind being shortchanged. In our consumer-driven society, where more is supposedly better, education is the one area where people are content to settle for less: Want to make a class happy? Let them out early.

Are there some things we can do to get our students to read the assignment, come to class ready to participate, and be responsible learners? Absolutely! Not only are there things we could be doing, we should be doing them, according to Marcia Magolda in her article "Helping Students Make Their Way to Adulthood: Good Company for the Journey." Magolda believes that instructors are in a unique position to help students learn two important lessons: (a) to be less dependent on external authorities, and (b) to take ownership and responsibility for their own lives.

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By teaching our students to be responsible learners, we can change our classrooms in dramatic ways. The following is a list of ten strategies you can use to bring your students to become more responsible.

1. Ask your students why they are taking the course. Many students enter the classroom without having thought out why they are there—they signed up for the class because their advisors told them to. Make your students put their reasons for taking your course in writing. This will get them to think about their commitment to the course and give you some valuable information about their needs, expectations, and goals.

One instructor makes the following assignment on the first day of class: “Please read the syllabus carefully and skim through the textbook. Then, write a short essay describing your expectations for the course, given what you know about yourself as a student and relating your experiences to what you see in the syllabus and in the textbook.” In this way, he gets his students to read the syllabus, buy the textbook, and begin making a connection to the course.

If you have your students put their reasons for taking the course in writing, you can ask them to revisit their answers on the last day of class. This lets your students see if they achieved their goals, and it gives the class a nice sense of closure.

2. Get your students to come to class prepared. There are several ways to get your students to come to class prepared. First, when choosing a textbook for the course, select one with study questions (or an accompanying study guide) and require students to complete assignments (that you collect and respond to). Second, put study questions in the course syllabus under the heading “Be prepared to answer the following questions.” Third, design interesting and unusual homework assignments so your students will want to come to class to discuss their answers. And, fourth, start class with a quick quiz (graded or ungraded).

Decide if you need every student to be prepared at every class session. It may be unrealistic to expect everyone to be prepared every time. Also, redefine your idea of “being prepared.” Being prepared may be as simple as having them bring in a question that they’d like to have answered.

3. Help your students attain the proper mind-set for class. Can you imagine what would happen if students brought the same level of concentration to our classes that they use when playing a computer game or watching “Friends” on TV? Instructors can help their students get into the proper mind-set by making clever use of the time before class begins. Some have music playing when their students enter the classroom. Others show intriguing clips from relevant videos.

Studies have shown that students are most alert and attentive during the first ten minutes of a class (Hartley and Davies, 1978); so pay particular attention to how you use this time. Students enjoy classes that start in unusual and interesting ways. Put an engaging question on the board. Start with a surprise, a mystery, or a table full of props (for your visual learners). Set up a problem that you'll solve during the lecture (for your logical learners). The idea is to not begin the meat of the lesson until you have your students hooked.

4. Make participation and interaction integral parts of the course.

According to Magolda, classrooms can be a place for young people to learn to defend their views, hear alternative perspectives, and redefine their belief systems. Use discussions and questions as often as possible. Explain to your students that it's important for you to hear what they're thinking so that you know whether or not they're processing the information.

A positive classroom climate can greatly facilitate learning. Have your students learn each other's names and get to know each other as quickly as possible. One professor asks her students to sit in a different seat each time so that they'll meet everyone in the class by the end of the semester. If it's a large class, have them use name tents. And, from the very first day, don't just take volunteers when you ask a question. Go ahead and call on your students! It adds a much-welcomed element of suspense to the classroom.

5. Make your students responsible for each other. Students learn at different speeds, so use your students who master the material more quickly to help the others. Have students pair up with a study buddy who can fill them in if they have to miss a class. Assign students to study groups and give them class time to prepare for the first exam together.

Make an announcement at the beginning of the semester that everyone in the class is in the same boat and that no one is going to be left behind. (But make sure your students know it's their responsibility for getting on the boat.)

6. Teach your students to behave responsibly in groups. Group work can be extremely frustrating because some students don't know how to behave in groups. Before using group work, ask your class to brainstorm a list of rules they think they should follow (e.g., respect other's opinions, don't interrupt each other, stay on track, etc.). Once the groups begin, spend time with each group and monitor their progress and behavior.

Let your students know that for a group to work well, everyone must contribute equally. Group members (no matter how shy) who have special information have an obligation to share it. And every member of the group is responsible for seeing that the group achieves its goals.

7. Model higher cognitive skills. Students can expand their curiosity and learn to ask questions by watching you be curious and ask questions. Teach your students not to skim over the top of a topic like a jet skier, but to

put scuba diving equipment on and go down to examine underlying causes and relationships. When you ask a question, don't let students who give one-word answers off the hook. Ask them to elaborate.

8. Have your students analyze their learning experiences. Give your students a learning styles inventory to help them understand how they process information. Your teaching style may differ from their learning styles, and this will give you a chance to discuss what you both might do to bridge the gap.

In addition, give your students several opportunities throughout the course to give you feedback on how the course is going and to suggest changes that would help them learn better. According to Magolda, giving students a chance to evaluate the course is another way for them to challenge their reliance on external authority.

Finally, make your students give each other feedback (either formative or summative) on speeches and papers. Most students are hesitant to give their classmates feedback—they don't want to get involved, or they don't know how to give feedback. But giving feedback is a skill they'll use on the job and in every aspect of their lives. The classroom is a good place for them to learn to do it.

9. End class in a meaningful way. The last ten minutes of a class can be as important as the first ten. Make your students responsible for the lecture by having them write a short summary or take a short quiz before they leave. Another good way to end class is to ask, "Why did we do this?" "Why did we study this?" or "Why is this important?"

10. Don't try to save your students. Having compassion and extending a deadline when a student has a crisis is one thing; trying to save a student by extending a deadline because of his or her lack of planning is quite another. Even something as insignificant as bringing pencils for your students to borrow on exam days teaches students that they don't need to be responsible for bringing them.

SUMMARY

Whose responsibility is it for learning to occur in the classroom? The responsibility belongs to both the instructor and the students. Responsibility can (and should) shift, depending on the time in the semester and the level of the students. Faculty working with freshmen may take more of the responsibility for learning to occur than faculty working with seniors or graduate students. Likewise, instructors may take more of the responsibility at the beginning of the semester. As the class progresses, they can slowly relinquish control and prepare their students to take over, so that by the end of the semester, the students are shouldering most of the responsibility.

By teaching responsibility, we not only enhance learning and raise the level of our classrooms, but we help produce responsible citizens and productive members of society.

Class Participation: Report from Beijing*

By Peter Phillips Simpson

Thanks to a Fulbright scholarship, I am teaching political philosophy at Beijing's Renmin (People's) University of China this year [2002]. My students are all rather silent in class. I attribute this mostly to difficulty in understanding English or diffidence with respect to speaking English. Among those students whose English is quite good, I think this diffidence has something to do with speaking one's mind in a country where people are understandably fearful of government surveillance and retribution. But it probably also has something to do with speaking with a foreigner, especially an American. Chinese students expect me to be biased against China. Whatever the reason, they only talk when one-on-one in my office or after class over coffee. When they get a chance to speak reasonably freely, they show themselves to be very bright and amusing kids.

Occasionally I try to get them to speak about life in China, but they are reluctant to do so. One-party rule inhibits discussion, but so does the traditional closeness of Chinese families. The parents of some of my students have sacrificed to enable their children to go to a good university and the kids are expected to repay the kindness by raising the family's status and economic standing. China does not have much of a welfare system and the old communist system, where one's factory provided housing, medical care, and retirement, has long since gone. So if your kids don't help you out, who will? Of course, the kids are grateful to their parents and feel duty bound to them. Family pressures can force students to forgo further study, either in China or abroad.

Surprisingly, a form of Marxism is still a powerful influence here. It is taught in the high schools and universities, and attendance at a certain number of classes in Marxist theory is compulsory. But it is taught mainly through textbooks, not from Marx's work itself. Consequently, what students know about Marxism is quite limited. When the subject has come up in class, I'm the one who introduces all the relevant concepts: labor theory of value, class struggle, proletariat, etc. Maybe the kids don't care about Marxism anymore or they've forgotten it or they don't trust me and just let me blabber on. I make no attempt to be cautious in what I say about communism, Marxism, or Chairman Mao. I imagine my students put up with this as the price to be paid

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to have free teaching (the U.S. government pays for Fulbright lecturers; the host university just provides accommodation).

Recently, I was giving an invited lecture on war and terrorism at another university in Beijing. In answer to a question about the Vietnam War, I remarked that it was in general a good thing to oppose communism and stop its spread. Since this occasioned some surprise, I explained that while communism professed noble enough aims (the improvement of the people, especially the poor), it actually produced greater poverty by means of brutal tyranny. My translator thought this too controversial and declined to translate (though some in the audience knew enough English to have caught on). I did not press him. After all, he has to live here; I can go when I please.

My translator was again surprised (though he did translate this time) when in answer to a question about Taiwan, I said that if China tried to invade, any American president who refused to defend Taiwan would face the wrath of the American people. The surprise for my translator was the word “invade.” How could China invade what is, after all, its own territory? he reasoned. I hastily added that I was speaking from the American perspective and went on to explain the special relationship that has long existed between the United States and the one part of China that did not succumb to communism.

Whenever I challenge students to explain why Tibet or Taiwan should belong to China, or what is so important about such supposed issues of “territorial integrity,” they respond with distorted history (Tibet has always been part of China and ruled by China) or *tu quoque* arguments (What would you do if Georgia broke away from the United States?). When I ask if they would be willing to accept the results of a referendum in either place, they are not at all keen to say yes. My guess is that students just repeat the party line, which no one has ever seriously challenged before in their hearing. I suspect that patriotism is also a factor.

I think the same patriotism is behind the generally favorable opinion that most people have of Chairman Mao. After all, Mao did preside over China’s restoration to national independence and international prominence. That Mao was at least by one measure three times worse than Stalin (Stalin killed 20 million of his own people while Mao killed 60 million) and six times worse than Hitler (who killed 10 million) does not seem to matter. When I make this comparison, as I did on a number of occasions at the English Corner (which meets weekly for anyone who wants to practice English), the listeners gasp with astonishment, not unmixed with amusement (Did he really say that?). But the worst gasps, unmixed by any amusement, are reserved for any Chinese who agrees with me or voices the same opinion—which has, surprisingly, happened on more than one occasion.

The Chinese, whether students, faculty, or others, tend to have a pretty jaundiced attitude toward American foreign policy. A typical feeling about the

attacks of September 11, for instance—apart from shock and sympathy, of course—was that America somehow brought them on itself by its bullying approach to international questions. “America is always using force to settle problems; America runs the UN according to its own interest; America wants to keep China weak and dependent” (code for American military support for Taiwan); and so on.

Beyond the rather crude nationalism, I think there is a certain defensiveness behind the respect people show for Mao. After all, the tyrant tormented China for some thirty years, and to think there was nothing good in what he did, that nothing at all about his rule redeems it from being murderous insanity, that those thirty years were a complete waste, is just too much to bear. One has to think otherwise just to preserve a bit of sanity. Those who lived through that period are the most defensive, but I’m puzzled about why younger Chinese often share this view. (All of my students were born after Mao died.) Was there really something good about Mao’s rule? Sometimes my students suggest as much. Here is what one of them wrote (English uncorrected):

It's more difficult to understand China by American than to understand America by Chinese. Because China is just like an old grandmother who have experienced much, and America is just like a young gal who is very beautiful but can't understand the full wrinkles and scars on the face of an old woman. As for the concrete affairs, I can't explain them clearly. But I'm sure that you have not known China well, for example, Taiwan affairs and Tibet problems. The difficulty is we (not only you) can't separate the Chinese government with China and Chinese people!

Perhaps I do not know China well. But I make no apology for being controversial. It’s part of a teacher’s task to provoke students into thought. So far, no one in authority has complained or suggested I cool it or told me to leave the country. I suppose that says something too—about both China and my students.

DISCUSSION

1. Discuss your understanding of the core idea of this chapter: active learning. How does this notion of active learning compare with how you think you learn best? Can you identify teachers who encourage active learning—and with what results?
2. Discuss successful—or unsuccessful—ways you have addressed problems or differences with any of your college teachers. If you have not had any—and we hope you haven’t—speculate on how you think you would handle such a challenge. Share what you know about your campus’s official

procedures for filing a formal grievance against or appeal of an instructor's action.

3. Discuss how you work with other students on group assignments. What have you done to make this successful?
4. Experts have long known that students who take more responsibility for their own learning are more successful in college (and life). Discuss the recommendations in the first reading, "Ten Strategies for Getting Students to Take Responsibility for Their Learning," and consider how these would apply to you successfully and why.
5. The second reading is a firsthand account of an American professor's attempts to nudge his Chinese students in Beijing to participate in class. What can you infer about the Chinese students' learning process? Does lack of participation imply that the students aren't active learners? Or does it merely reflect a different style of interaction? Or are there other reasons?