

What Is 'Active Learning' and Why Is It Important?

Written by Jess Gifkins

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

What Is 'Active Learning' and Why Is It Important?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/10/08/what-is-active-learning-and-why-is-it-important/>

JESS GIFKINS, OCT 8 2015

This is the first of a two part blog post. The second is here.

We have all sat through (and perhaps given) lectures where the lecturer read a pre-prepared script with little or no scope for interaction. These 'delivery mode' lectures are draining for the lecturer and demotivating for students. The education literature commonly quotes studies showing that when material is delivered using a single method (i.e. students are passively listening) their concentration limit is between 10 and 20 minutes, a small fraction of a lecture. Passively listening to a lecture can be useful at promoting learning at the lower end of a taxonomy of learning such as – to 'remember' and 'understand' – but is not as good at promoting higher-level skills like 'apply', 'analyse' and 'evaluate'. While all of these types of learning are important, and build on each other, higher-level critical thinking skills are integral to the study of International Relations. 'Delivery mode' lectures, where students listen rather than interact, are not good at promoting higher-level learning and skills.

How can we make lectures more interactive and more geared towards higher-level learning? 'Active learning' approaches form a key alternative. Simply put, active learning is the process of learning via engaging with the content. It means students are interacting with the material in any way that can promote active thought, via 'activities' for learning or via re-framing the note-taking process to encouraging thinking about the material rather than transcribing the content. While definitions of active learning vary, they share common priorities: students are doing more than simply listening; the aim is skills-development rather than just conveying information; students engage in activities (e.g. discussion, debate, application of principles) aimed to promote higher-order thinking (such as critical thinking, analysis etc). Simulations are becoming increasingly used in International Relations as tools for active learning, and are well suited to particular topics, however here I wanted to think more broadly about the ways in which active learning could be integrated into any and all lecture topics. Next week I will post a list of strategies for active learning that could be easily integrated into large lectures, including a wide variety of ideas for varying what students are doing, seeing and hearing.

Promoting active learning in lectures has many benefits for student learning. The drop-off in concentration can be limited by using a different approach to learning each 15 minutes (which means changing the way students are engaged, rather than changing topics). Active learning promotes recall and deeper understanding of material, as students are engaging with the content rather than simply listening to it. There are also equity benefits that flow from active learning, as lower-performing students have greater benefits from active learning than students who are already achieving high grades. Another equity outcome from active learning is that using different modes of delivery supports students who have different learning styles. There are clear ethical as well as pedagogical benefits to the use of active learning techniques.

Interacting with content through active learning has some compelling advantages over 'delivery mode' lectures. It helps to maintain student concentration and deepens learning towards the higher-level skills like critical thinking. It also helps to engage students who might otherwise struggle. This does not mean doing away with spoken lectures, rather it means integrating different ways of engaging with the material at regular intervals throughout the lecture. Next week I will offer a range of possible strategies for making lectures more interactive. Students report that active learning can enhance learning, be more fun, and can help maintain concentration.

What Is 'Active Learning' and Why Is It Important?

Written by Jess Gifkins

About the author:

Jess Gifkins is a Research Fellow at the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. Her research focuses on decision-making practices in the United Nations Security Council and international responses to mass atrocity crimes. Her work has been published in *Cooperation and Conflict*, the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, *Global Responsibility to Protect*, among other outlets. She is Associate Editor of *Critical Military Studies*.