

Strategies for Making Large Lectures More Interactive

Written by Jess Gifkins

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JESS GIFKINS, OCT 17 2015

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

Active learning is what we would like students to be doing with the taught material: thinking about and engaging with the content, rather than mindlessly copying slides or thinking about something else altogether. In a previous post I wrote some thoughts on active learning as a concept – this week is all about strategies. Early experiences in lecturing are often focused on surviving the lecture (for you, not for the students) but moving beyond that we can think more about what the students are doing during the lecture and how to promote active engagement with the content.

A simple way to do this is to discuss note taking with students. It might seem basic, but if you provide students with PowerPoint slides (so they don't feel like they have to write everything) and give them cues on what to take notes of then you can open up more space for thinking about the material. This could be as simple as encouraging students to write down questions that arise while listening, concepts they don't yet understand, or connections they can see between lectures or examples. I also discuss with students how they take notes physically, as recent research suggests that people have better recall when writing notes by hand than they do from typing notes (I am not prescriptive on this – for me it's about giving students information to help them decide what is right for them). Giving students cues on what to take notes on can help them to recognise which sections are most important and can help them to prioritise.

After trawling through articles in Education and International Relations I've pulled together a list of strategies for encouraging active learning in lectures. One way of promoting active learning is via multi-week simulations – which are great for some topics – but I focused here on simple strategies that could easily be integrated into any lecture topic. The suitability of these strategies will obviously depend on the material being taught, the year level of students, and the size of the class. In collecting these ideas I particularly envisaged large first-year lectures. But part of my aim in collecting a big list of ideas was to have a range of different ideas to use, depending on the situation and content. I also find it helpful when introducing an activity to explain to students the rationale of the activity – whether it links to a certain type of assessment or to a particular skill like critical thinking. Being aware of the purpose of activities can also help students to recognise – and articulate – the transferable skills they are developing.

These are not 'activities for the sake of activities' but will need to be tailored according to what you want students to learn. The timing of activities will also vary depending on your goals; i.e. a quiz at the start of a lecture to check last week's learning; a quiz mid-way through a lecture to break up material and refocus; or a quiz at the end of a lecture to recap material. The ideas in this list are not specific activities to meet specific learning objectives, rather they are ideas that can be applied to the content you are teaching. The general premise here is to have some diversity not only in what students are doing, but also what they are seeing and hearing. This is also a way to support diverse learning styles, as different activities will appeal to different students.

1. Start the lecture with an activity so students feel that they have permission to interact with the material, the lecturer and other students.
2. Problem solving exercises in pairs or groups – applying a concept.
3. Video clips, with specific instructions on what to look for.
4. Questions listed on slides.

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5. Make connections between lectures to recap and to build on prior knowledge.
6. A vote on opposing perspectives.
7. Encourage students to ask questions – both during the class as well as at the end.
8. Give students 2-3 minutes to summarise a section or key idea before you move on.
9. Ask students to make a judgement on a situation.
10. Ask students to list and prioritise concepts presented in the lecture.
11. Stop and give students 3 minutes to write down their understanding of a particular concept.
12. Give students a few minutes to write down things they don't yet understand or were not sure about which they can then discuss with the person sitting next to them or direct questions to the lecturer.
13. Ask students to brainstorm possible exam questions on a given topic and then give feedback on whether they were about the right degree of difficulty.
14. Ask a question but give everyone a minute or two to write an answer before asking for responses.
15. Ask students to explain their understanding of a concept to the person sitting next to them – teaching is an effective means of learning.
16. A quiz with show of hands.
17. Give students a break to recharge – especially in long lectures.
18. Change the visual stimulus from text to images, or video.
19. Ask students to apply a concept individually or in pairs.
20. Use examples that are relevant to student knowledge and experience.
21. Vary student engagement between note taking, listening, and active participation.
22. Draw connections between experience and taught concepts e.g. to introduce globalization ask students to look at where their shoes were made and then collect responses on post-its to put on a map (or digital equivalent).
23. Read aloud a key excerpt from a book to break up the monotony of PowerPoint.
24. Break up PowerPoint slides with images, graphs, websites, primary sources or news items.
25. Ask students to identify a quote, image or date displayed on PowerPoint. Asking students to identify what happened on a series of relevant dates in world history can be a nice way to engage prior knowledge at the start of a topic.
26. Create crosswords for students (using free online tools) – I haven't looked into this but it sounds like fun – clues could be designed to require students to apply their knowledge rather than simply match definitions.
27. Provide four images and ask which one is the odd-one-out (linked to the concept under discussion).
28. Buzz groups i.e. small-group discussion for brainstorming the answer to a specific question.
29. Semi-structured debates on contentious issues. This is harder with large groups, but you can split students into two opposing sides and divide each side into smaller discussion groups – with time to prepare their argument – before drawing on some groups to participate in a wider debate. It can be a good way to practice developing an argument.
30. Give students activities to focus their weekly readings, such as writing a list of pros and cons, or matching a theoretical concept to a news item.
31. Put students into the role of diplomats e.g. ask how they would advise political leaders in a given situation.
32. Create opportunities for students to apply theoretical frameworks to a given scenario and develop arguments on the prescriptions different positions would advocate.
33. Use guest lectures (in person or via Skype) to give students access to people who are employed in an aspect of international relations (outside of academia).
34. Use regular multiple-choice questions as open-book activities where the questions are structured to require application of concepts to a problem or issue, rather than simple recall.
35. Bring critical thinking into activities by asking students to apply their knowledge. For example; apply International Relations theory to a current news item; give instruction on how a specific country should vote on a UN Security Council resolution; or a take-home examination to encourage deep learning rather than surface learning.
36. At the end of the lecture give students two minutes to write down the main point of the lecture and any questions they still have for discussion in tutorials.

This list is not intended to be comprehensive, rather it's an exercise in brainstorming. What other strategies can you

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think of?

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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*.