

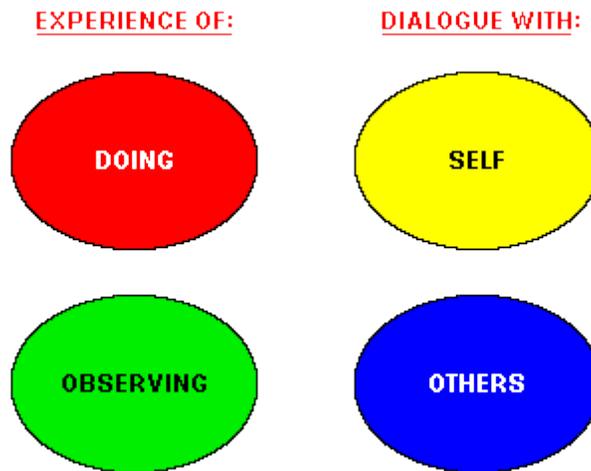
Active Learning¹

By L. Dee Fink

Many college teachers today want to move past passive learning to active learning, to find better ways of engaging students in the learning process. But many teachers feel a need for help in imagining what to do, in or out of class, that would constitute a meaningful set of active learning activities.

The model below offers a way of conceptualizing the learning process in a way that may assist teachers in identifying meaningful forms of active learning.

A Model of Active Learning



Explanation of the Components

This model suggests that all learning activities involve some kind of experience or some kind of dialogue. The two main kinds of dialogue are "Dialogue with Self" and "Dialogue with Others." The two main kinds of experience are "Observing" and "Doing."

Dialogue with Self:

This is what happens when a learner thinks reflectively about a topic, i.e., they ask themselves what they think or should think, what they feel about the topic, etc. This is "thinking about my own thinking," but it addresses a broader array of questions than just cognitive concerns. A teacher can ask students, on a small scale, to keep a journal for a course, or, on a larger scale, to develop a learning portfolio. In either case, students could write about *what* they are learning, *how* they are learning, what role this knowledge or learning plays in their own life, how this makes them *feel*, etc.

Dialogue with Others:

This can and does come in many forms. In traditional teaching, when students read a textbook or listen to a lecture, they are "listening to" another person (teacher, book

¹ L. Dee Fink, "Active Learning," University Oklahoma Instructional Development Program, University of Oklahoma reprinted with permission by the University of Hawaii at Honolulu. Retrieved June 22, 2010 from <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/active.htm>.

author). This can perhaps be viewed as "partial dialogue" but it is limited because there is no back-and-forth exchange. A much more dynamic and active form of dialogue occurs when a teacher creates an intense small group discussion on a topic. Sometimes teachers can also find creative ways to involve students in dialogue situations with people other than students (e.g., practitioners, experts), either in class or outside of class. Whoever the dialogue is with, it might be done live, in writing, or by email.

Observing:

This occurs whenever a learner watches or listens to someone else "Doing" something that is related to what they are learning about. This might be such things as observing one's teacher do something (e.g., "This is how I critique a novel."), listening to other professionals perform (e.g., musicians), or observing the phenomena being studied (natural, social, or cultural). The act of observing may be "direct" or "vicarious." A direct observation means the learner is observing the real action, directly; a vicarious observation is observing a simulation of the real action. For example, a direct observation of poverty might be for the learner to actually go to where low income people are living and working, and spend some time observing life there. A vicarious or indirect observation of the same topic might be to watch a movie involving poor people or to read stories written by or about them.

Doing:

This refers to any learning activity where the learner actually does something: design a reservoir dam (engineering), conduct a high school band (music education), design and/or conduct an experiment (natural and social sciences), critique an argument or piece of writing (the humanities), investigate local historical resources(history), make an oral presentation (communication), etc.

Again, "Doing" may be direct or vicarious. Case studies, role-playing and simulation activities offer ways of vicariously engaging students in the "Doing" process. To take one example mentioned above, if one is trying to learn how to conduct a high school band, direct "Doing" would be to actually go to a high school and direct the students there. A vicarious "Doing" for the same purpose would be to simulate this by having the student conduct a band composed of fellow college students who were acting like (i.e., role playing) high school students. Or, in business courses, doing case studies is, in essence, a simulation of the decision making process that many courses are aimed at teaching.

Implementing This Model of Active Learning

So, what can a teacher do who wants to use this model to incorporate more active learning into his/her teaching? I would recommend the following three suggestions, each of which involves a more advanced use of active learning.

1. Expand the Kinds of Learning Experiences You Create.

The most traditional teaching consists of little more than having students read a text and listen to a lecture, a very limited and limiting form of Dialogue with Others. Consider using more dynamic forms of Dialogue with Others and the other three modes of learning. For example:

- Create small groups of students and have them make a decision or answer a focused question periodically,
- Find ways for students to engage in authentic dialogue with people other than fellow classmates who know something about the subject (on the web, by email, or live),

- Have students keep a journal or build a "learning portfolio" about their own thoughts, learning, feelings, etc.,
- Find ways of helping students observe (directly or vicariously) the subject or action they are trying to learn, and/or
- Find ways to allow students to actually do (directly, or vicariously with case studies, simulation or role play) that which they need to learn to do.

2. Take Advantage of the "Power of Interaction."

Each of the four modes of learning has its own value, and just using more of them should add variety and thereby be more interesting for the learner. However, when properly connected, the various learning activities can have an impact that is more than additive or cumulative; they can be **interactive** and thereby multiply the educational impact.

For example, if students write their own thoughts on a topic (Dialogue with Self) *before* they engage in small group discussion (Dialogue with Others), the group discussion should be richer and more engaging. If they can do both of these and then observe the phenomena or action (Observation), the observation should be richer and again more engaging. Then, if this is followed by having the students engage in the action itself (Doing), they will have a better sense of what they need to do and what they need to learn during doing. Finally if, after Doing, the learners process this experience by writing about it (Dialogue with Self) and/or discussing it with others (Dialogue with Others), this will add further insight. Such a sequence of learning activities will give the teacher and learners the advantage of the Power of Interaction.

Alternatively, advocates of Problem-Based Learning would suggest that a teacher start with "Doing" by posing a real problem for students to work on, and then having students consult with each other (Dialogue with Others) on how best to proceed in order to find a solution to the problem. The learners will likely use a variety of learning options, including Dialogue with Self and Observing.

3. Create a Dialectic Between Experience and Dialogue.

One refinement of the Interaction Principle described above is simply to create a dialectic between the two principle components of this Model of Active Learning: Experience and Dialogue. New experiences (whether of Doing or Observing) have the potential to give learners a new perspective on what is true (beliefs) and/or what is good (values) in the world. Dialogue (whether with Self or with Others) has the potential to help learners construct the many possible meanings of experience and the insights that come from them. A teacher who can creatively set up a dialectic of learning activities in which students move back and forth between having rich new experiences and engaging in deep, meaningful dialogue, can maximize the likelihood that the learners will experience significant and meaningful learning.

Material on this topic and other topics can be found in the CTL Library located in the Mason Room at the Smith House.