

# Chapter 3

## Active Learning: Strategies for Engaging Students and Enhancing Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter introduces active learning and how students in various educational settings can best acquire, apply, create, and share knowledge. The chapter presents multiple forms of active learning that have been documented in the literature and deemed imperative to increase student engagement and deepen their understanding. The chapter also discusses the various perspectives concerning the implementation of active learning strategies in various educational contexts. A particular focus is given to the significance of metacognition as a critical skill that enables students to assess their own learning, and to critically assess sources of information. The chapter presents several suggested active learning strategies that are easy to implement in any classroom setting and are useful to connect classroom instruction, assessment, and management together.*

### INTRODUCTION

Active learning encompasses any learning style that necessitates both physical and mental engagement with the content or materials. This approach is grounded in constructivist theory, which advocates for engaging learners in hands-on and minds-on activities to enhance and optimize their learning experience (Wadsworth, 1996). Over the past few decades, active learning has surged in popularity in response to various calls for educational reform, such as those from the National Institute of Education (NIE). The central tenets of these reforms have been to foster increased student participation, promoting active teaching methods, and encouraging students to assume more responsibility for their own learning (National Institute of Education, 1984, p. 38). The adoption of active learning strategies and techniques has been further underscored in a number of recent educational initiatives and documents (National Research

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Council, 2012). This chapter will explore the foundational theories of active learning and present practical classroom techniques that can be seamlessly integrated into any educational environment. Additionally, it will examine potential challenges in incorporating these methods into classroom practice. The chapter will conclude with a selection of common active learning approaches and techniques.

## **DEFINING ACTIVE LEARNING**

Active learning involves engaging learners in interactive tasks, both physical and mental, such as role-playing, discussing tasks, and conducting experiments. This approach contrasts with passive learning, where learners are not actively involved in learning activities. Passive learning examples include listening to lectures or watching demonstrations, where learners are passive recipients of information. Bonwell and Eison (1991) described active learning as an instructional method that “involves students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (p. iii). Essentially, active learning involves activities beyond reading, listening, or watching, which deepens students’ understanding and connection with the material. It encourages learners to engage in metacognitive thinking and reflection on their learning practices.

Furthermore, active learning occurs not only with individual learners but also in group settings. For instance, the “Think-Pair-Share” technique prompts individual learners to think independently before sharing their thoughts with peers and groups. Active learning can also extend beyond the classroom. Learners might explore real-world challenges faced by their school’s counsellor or engage in service-learning activities related to specific assignments. However, this chapter primarily focuses on instructor-designed active learning in settings like classrooms, workshops, and webinars, which are more common experiences for educators.

## **WHY ACTIVE LEARNING MATTERS**

Constructivism, widely recognized as a prominent learning theory, posits that effective learning occurs when learners actively engage with specific activities to develop their thinking. It is essential for learners to have opportunities to discuss their ideas with peers and reflect on their learning experiences (Wadsworth, 1996). Proponents of constructivism, such as Bransford et al. (1999), have maintained that learners construct their own knowledge and understanding, necessitating active engagement with information to generate new meanings, interpretations, and understandings. Social constructivists, notably Vygotsky (1978), have underscored the significance of interactions with other learners in the construction of knowledge. According to these theorists, learners enhance their understanding by recalling prior information and integrating it with new knowledge. The motive to adopting active learning strategies in this century is for the many benefits that this strategy brings to learners. One of these benefits is to bridge the skill gap – or the prediction that there will be insufficient talent to meet the global demands for employment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Olson and Peterson (2015) stated that the global market in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would witness great demand for skilled workers who were characterized by having certain skills that enabled them to effectively contribute to the development of their national and global economies. The authors also stressed the need to provide future graduates with sufficient vocational training and education to bring real change to their lives (Olson & Peterson, 2015).

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