Chapter 33
Facilitating Active Learning among Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

A learner-centric approach to learning is widely known as active learning. This approach helps learners to develop higher order thinking skills and therefore facilitates deep learning. On the other hand, passive learning approach expects learners to receive information from the professor passively without much involvement in the learning process. This chapter aims to lead the readers to appreciate the role of active learning in positively influencing the process of learning among adult learners. The chapter begins by setting the context through a review of relevant literature on active learning. The subsequent discussions are structured around the four approaches to achieve active learning, namely, experiential learning, problem-based learning, participative learning, and cooperative learning. The discussions provide insights on how technological intervention is shaping each of these four approaches to facilitate active learning. While the chapter does not aim to present an exhaustive list of all possible technological interventions, the idea is to stimulate further thoughts on new possibilities in this direction. The chapter also discusses trends like the proliferation of Web 2.0 technologies, computing devices becoming increasingly portable, popularity of MOOCs, and eLearning that have the potential to positively influence active learning among adult learners.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to address the topic in the context of K20 education primarily in the business education field within the domain of humanities although some aspects may apply equally to other areas as well. Some examples discussed in this chapter may thus be seen from this perspective to better understand the underlying context. Facilitating active learning is a very broad area, which cannot be discussed within the constraints of a single chapter, therefore such an attempt is not being made here. In the modern day context of the digital age, the chapter would instead address a niche area within this huge area by exploring various possibilities of using technology in facilitating active learning. The chapter also does not attempt to exhaustively list all possible ways to use technology, but only a few relevant instances of such uses are discussed while retaining the focus on active learning. The idea is to lead readers to appreciate various possibilities of using technology to facilitate active learning among adult learners. The discussion in this chapter would be divided into two distinct halves. The first half builds the background context by briefly reviewing relevant literature in the area of active learning. The second half explores various possibilities of using technology in furthering active learning. The chapter makes a conscious effort all along to make the discussions less technical when it discusses technological interventions in order to cater to a wider audience, some of whom might be having just basic understanding of information technology.

BACKGROUND

An approach to teaching where learners are expected to passively receive information from the professor and internalize it through memory oriented techniques is regarded as passive learning approach as conveyed in existing literature such as in Stewart-Wingfield & Black (2005) and McManus (2001). Passive learning environments generally tend to merely transfer the knowledge from the professor's mind to the learners' minds. The centre of activities in a passive learning environment is the professor delivering the lecture, not the learner. As a result, the transfer of knowledge seldom leads to creation of new knowledge or even application of existing knowledge in a fresh context. The inherent weakness in passive learning environment lent prominence to what is called the facilitation theory.

Facilitation theory proposes that the professor should only act as a facilitator, thus making the environment less professor centric and more learner centric. The learner centric environment is in contrast to the professor being the proverbial "sage on the stage" under the passive learning environment. Thus, the focus on learner's involvement in the education process assumes more significance. Facilitation creates an environment that is conducive for learners to explore and share their ideas without bothering about external factors. Professors, as facilitators, should be open to others' beliefs, be able to listen to learners' opinions, and be able to accept creative ideas. Such a learning facilitation ensures an active learning environment which involves a learner centric approach, shifting the focus from teaching to learning.

Bonwell and Eison (1991) are widely credited with popularising the concept of active learning. The central idea behind active learning concept is to involve the learner in the learning process to maximize its effectiveness. For instance, creating a case for active learning, Lamont and Friedman (1997) note the role of interactive classroom teaching in increasing the opinion and ideas exchanged between students. Research (Chernay, 2008; Graffam, 2007) across a range of disciplines seems to build a consensus that to be actively involved, learners require higher order thinking including analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The active learner involvement should help in ensuring a deep learning experience for learners. As opposed to