

Ep. 050: That Active Learning Thing

Podcast: <https://ProDev.illinoisstate.edu/podcast/2019/ep050.shtml>

We celebrate our 50th episode with a discussion about THAT phrase... the buzz word of buzz words in the college teaching profession: active learning. We always hear about it, we often talk about it... but are we really doing it? Jim and Claire unpack this ubiquitous phrase and explore examples of what it actually looks like. They highlight the three different components that make active learning "active" and the different ways of introducing students to the trio. Along the way, you'll hear some metaphors being tortured and a potential jeremiad about ham-and-pineapple pizza... but all in the name of helping our students to learn!

Transcript

JIM: Hi there, I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching, a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me today, Dr. Claire Lamonica, our Director. Hey Claire!

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim!

JIM: Hey, we're going to go back today and talk about something that I realized we've never actually done an episode on. Something...

CLAIRE: Yeah, I'm scared

JIM: I know, it, something very, very basic that we've talked about all the time. But we've never actually devoted an episode towards the concept of 'active learning'

CLAIRE: So, I have a hard time believing this that we haven't ever done an episode on this.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: I know that you've told me and you're the man with the list, so I believe you, but it's just, we talked about it all the time.

JIM: We do, and I think that that's one reason why it deserves its own episode. Because what I'd like to do today is to really boil down and get to the essence of the definition of what it is. I had a lot of my own assumptions about what it was, and I think that it is something that is it's a phrase. That is so ubiquitous. My favorite word. Yeah. Well documented on this podcast it's so ubiquitous in teaching and learning circles that people are like well, "of course I have my students engaged in active learning."

CLAIRE: You know, it's one of those buzz words that's just lost its meaning, you know? If you read any teaching philosophy you read any you know, listen to any podcast and you know it's just out there, so it is ubiquitous.

JIM: I was reminded of this recently be from approaching teaching and learning from a different aspect professional development working with peers from other institutions to put on an event and we were soliciting calls for proposals and you know one of the things you know active learning but we want we want the participants the faculty members and the staff members who are going to these events to engage in active learning as well and so we asked, how are you going do that? And the answers were rather interesting and not necessarily completely reflective of active learning so I think there has been an equivocation between this concept of active learning and good teaching which is which is not necessarily a bad thing but I think we just tend to use them as synonyms now, right? So of course, I'm, I'm, a good teacher so therefore my students are actively learn.

CLAIRE: I must be using active learning.

JIM: Right, yeah. Yeah. And that's not necessarily the case

CLAIRE: No, you know and, and that's really interesting the way you said that that "oh, of course, my students are, are actively learning" and...

JIM: Because they're not sleeping in class, right?

CLAIRE: Right, or they're taking notes, or you know or whatever but um and that that's really interesting to me because that maybe we should well, I don't know. I'm not going try to re-brand anything. Let's just stick with active learning and but this is something not that students do, but that faculty design so.

JIM: Okay, so that's an important...

CLAIRE: So, I think that's where we have to start. We have to say, okay this isn't something students are doing. We talk about active reading, which is you know something we expect students to do and I think active learning is something that we sort of almost for students to do. We design and we design...

JIM: We kind of trap them into doing it...

CLAIRE: ... learning experience. Yeah, right. We, you know, it happens by design...

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: ...in our classroom.

JIM: Yeah

CLAIRE: So, let's start by saying that, D. Fink most recently but also people before him, have defined active learning as having three major components the first component... Well, and, and, they, okay so the first and the second component, even the third, they can happen in any order. Okay?

JIM: Sure.

CLAIRE: So.

JIM: This is not a hierarchy. It's not a hierarchy, and it's not even necessarily a chronology, but the components are information and ideas, experiences, and

CLAIRE: reflection. Now, I would argue, and I think that Fink argues this as well that we're much better at the first two: information and ideas. We're really good at information and ideas.

JIM: Sure.

CLAIRE: Experiences, we're pretty good at. Reflection is all too often the piece that gets left out and yet, going all the way back to Dewey, reflection the piece that matters, you know, and Dewey is said to have said, "we don't learn by doing, we learn by reflecting on doing" and I haven't ever managed to track down that specific quote but, you know, it's true.

JIM: So, you, taking up your challenge win, because we had talked off, off mic, and, and I actually did go back and look at, the epi, our past episodes and I actually think reflection is the one component that we probably have talked about the most in our series.

CLAIRE: Well, good.

JIM: So yeah, because and that me and you know, that makes sense because that's the one that we are constantly trying to promote to get faculty to think about that, so.

CLAIRE: I'm actually, so I just had a thought that you could almost see this not as three components, but as, as, a cycle that and a cycle that could be entered at any one of these points so that's something I'm going to think about actually.

JIM: The active learning merry-go-round. Depends on which horse you jump on and...

CLAIRE: That's right, yeah.

JIM: We'll have to refine that metaphor a little bit.

CLAIRE: We'll have to work

CLAIRE: on that, but I, so let's go back. Let's so let's start because I started earlier with information and ideas...

JIM: Yeah

CLAIRE: So, we can start with that and that's what we most often think of when we think of teaching. We think we; we often think of teaching as the process of exchanging information and ideas in one way or another. Um so the very sort of traditional approach to teaching is what Freire calls the 'banking model.' Which is you know the instructor has all the information and ideas and the students don't and the instructors'

job is to take those information and idea the information and ideas that she has and sort of plant them in the students' brain. Well, okay, that's not really how we think about that anymore, because it's doesn't it's not necessarily how it learning really works.

JIM: But it's a way that a lot of us actually went through our own learning and our own education. It's a way it's a way that many, most, if not most, if not all of us were taught. We had to go to some pretty unusual schools to have had other kinds of experiences.

JIM: So, it still persists because we tend to do what we, we learned ourselves. We teach as we were taught. There's tons of work, tons of research that shows that.

JIM: Yeah. So, information ideas, this is you know, this can happen in a lot of different ways which is also something that we don't always think about. So, if we do in fact, and there is in fact foundational information that students need to grasp before they can move on. That information might be presented in a lecture. It might be presented in a reading. It might be presented in a podcast.

JIM: Mm-hmm

CLAIRE: It might be presented in a video. Lots of different ways of presenting ideas and information to students at a very basic level. It can happen during class, it can happen in their dorm rooms as they read their assignment, it can happen online as they watch as they watch a video or a webinar, so that's, that's kind of the, the piece that we think about. Now the problem is that research shows us that just giving students that information and even when students can spit that infor... can successfully spit that information back at us...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: doesn't mean that they've internalized it or used it or changed their existing mental models to incorporate it or that it's become any it has had any long-term effect. What we know from the research, I mean I can't make this stuff up folks. Well, we know from the research is that students will more deeply understand, they will more successfully internalize, they will be changed more by information and ideas that are incorporated into experiences, so this is the second piece and in order to be actually transformed by learning or by an idea students need to have some experience that reinforces, puts into play, you know, there has something they need to do something.

JIM: They need to do, hence active learning, right?

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: They need to do something, yeah, do something with the information.

CLAIRE: They need to do it.

JIM: Yeah

CLAIRE: Watching it...

JIM: Yeah

CLAIRE: ...might help. Also, these experiences can be actual, they can be simulated. So, we watched we had some visitors recently here at CTLT and, and one of them was actually from a publisher. He was a publisher's rep and he gave a demonstration of this virtual dissection of a human cadaver.

JIM: Okay, Okay? So, this is a thing, you know? Cadavers are expensive, not all schools have, have access to cadavers.

JIM: This was right after lunch wasn't it? It was. It was right after lunch. It was also, as I said in the meeting, it was the reason I'm an English major.

JIM: Yeah

CLAIRE: But it was... But...

JIM: Yeah...it wasn't, you know, he didn't have an actual cadaver there, but the students were simulating the dissection of an actual cadaver. It was almost too realistic.

JIM: Yeah. So, for example, the College of Nursing has a great simulation lab.

JIM: Mm-hmm.

CLAIRE: Where the students can go in and practice on Dummies dummy patients.

JIM: Right, right.

CLAIRE: Pretend patients.

JIM: Yes, yeah.

CLAIRE: That look very human, um they look kind of dead, but they look very human and they they do all sorts of things, you know.

JIM: And they give responses, they have a pulse.

CLAIRE: They can give birth, you know. Yeah, so you can have simulated experiences

JIM: But, but, but an experience in terms of an active, in terms of active learning the experience doesn't have to be quite so grandiose is a word. It doesn't have to be high tech?

CLAIRE: No. No, it can be... it may just be you know; it may be practicing equations.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: Practicing solving equations.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: That's, that's...

JIM: Yeah

CLAIRE: ...as low-tech as I can get to. In in my classrooms it means sitting down at a computer and writing. It's not that I don't ever give them any information I do present them with lots of information about you know, what is an audience? What are some ways we can tailor writing to an audience? And although I do that in a in a more constructivist manner, but anyway, those are...

JIM: Yeah

CLAIRE: But the actual experience is sitting down and trying to create a text that's tailored to a specific audience.

JIM: So, it's doing something beyond just being tested on your knowledge?

CLAIRE: Yes. Yes. It's, it's, it's an authentic experience. Putting that into practice somehow. So those are the first two components.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: The third component, which Fink says has been neglected and yet which Dewey said was you know really the essence of learning is this reflection piece and that can mean a number of different things. It may mean. Reflecting on what you've learned. It may mean in some cases reflecting on how you learned it.

JIM: Mm-hmm.

CLAIRE: That can be very instructive for students. It may be something that students do on their own. It could be it could be a one-minute paper at the end of class, right? It could be a reflection on their writing process at the end of a at the end of a unit. It could be a whole class Conversation, you know, I'm kind of a proponent of at the end of the semester before the evaluations come out right having a whole class conversation about "hey, what have we learned this semester?"

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And sort of, you know, creating a massive something on your whiteboard or whatever

JIM: Well so as we're recording this I'm I have my final class period for the semester tonight and we're going to have pizza and we're going to have their final projects No, you're welcome to come but you're going to have to fight because I'm only getting one ham and pineapple pizza. This has been a this has been a source of debate all semester about whether or not this is actually a good thing or not. But I gave in and said, "for those of you who want this abomination, I'm more than happy to you know, I take no responsibilities for suborning... Your palate! Your palate, right? But one thing I want to

do tonight is so they've recently taken a test and I got they do an essay exam and I want to talk about some of the common themes that they wrote about that they may not have realized was as common so we'll talk about that. But then I also copy and pasted the learning outcomes for the course from the syllabus into my little notes and we're going to put that effort where I talk about "hey, you know this is what we were supposed to be doing. How..

CLAIRE: Did we do this?

JIM: Did we do this? Do you know of examples of it?" You know, we've emphasized here at CTLT, and certainly on our podcast we've emphasized this concept of reflection quite a lot. It's been the theme or related very closely to the theme of our annual symposium for more than one on more than one occasion but the reflection itself. You have to have something upon which to reflect, right? So, when we're talking about a basic definition you have to have had that informational portion and the experiential portion in order to have a true reflection there. Had to have been something that you did with something.

CLAIRE: Right. Or you might start the active learning process by with a reflection on prior knowledge. So, we can tweak this in a lot of different ways but the main thing is not how we tweak it or what order we do these things in or whatever but that we include all three of these of these components.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And the other thing that we need to remember and I know we've said this in another podcast but I'm going to say it again now is that students are not naturally reflective thinkers, just to say to them, "hey, write a little reflection piece about what you learned during this unit." That's that's not going to help they need more guidance than that and there are some I'm sure we have talked in other episodes about some sort of templates for promoting reflection and if we haven't then that could be our next time.

JIM: We might do we might well we'll certainly link to what we can in the show notes for this for this episode and then we can, you know, we always revisit these topics which is important, you know and I'm thinking that the experience aspect of that active learning now that I think about how do I introduce assignments to students? That might be one I'm kind of missing on. You know, often times I'll pose them a question about how do you think, you know, what, what makes for a good speech? Or what, you know, what makes for a good email? You know, something because I'm teaching communication so something along those lines, but just having them go up and try something and, and then we talk about the foundational, the knowledge behind it.

CLAIRE: Yes!

JIM: Okay. Here's here's why this was hard because you may not know.

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: And and, and then and then you know, so yeah.

CLAIRE: I mean, you know having students try something and fail is a great... that's a great way...

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: ...to sort of provide some impetus for learning, right? So, if they do if they try the experience first...

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: ...and then find that the results aren't what they were hoping for then that's a natural entree to that information and ideas.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: Now, you know you, you can get them asking questions and you can really, so you once again, you can start this at any point in the process. It's, it's the interweaving of these elements that that produces transformations and changes students mental models

JIM: Claire thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you, Jim

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about our podcast and about active learning and all these other things that we've talked about today by going to our website ctl.illinoisstate.edu For Dr. Claire Lamonica and for all my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology until we talk again, happy teaching. Show Notes Here are some additional resources: [Redbirds Keep Teaching](#) - an extensive collection of support for instructors [Online Teaching Mentors](#) - how to access a special ReggieNet site connecting faculty with colleagues highly experienced in online teaching.