



## **USING SUPPLEMENTAL JOURNAL ARTICLES TO INCREASE STUDENT PARTICIPATION, DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL THINKING**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents a pedagogical approach to greatly enhancing student participation, genuine discussion and critical thinking. Students enrolled in a human resource management class were asked to create their own text of journal articles for each of the chapter topics to be learned. Each student presented a substantive overview of his/her article/case to the entire class. The information presented was then used as a springboard for student discussion and critical thinking. Student response to this format of learning was very positive.

### **Using Supplemental Journal Articles to Increase Student Participation, Discussion and Critical Thinking**

#### **Introduction**

Over the pasty ten years, there has been an explosion of interest among faculty in higher education to engage students in active learning (Felder and Brent, 1999). Even with this interest, there still remains some misunderstanding and mistrust of the pedagogical approaches that fit under the umbrella of "active learning". Thus, the majority of university faculty still teach their students using the traditional lecture mode. Some of the hesitation and criticism directed at active learning appears to originate with the myth that methods of active learning are realistic alternatives to, rather than enhancements of, the lecture approach. A wide variety of active learning techniques can readily function as supplements to the classroom lecture, rather than replacements (Fink, 1999). Thus, total abandonment of the lecture approach is in no way being advocated. Rather, the combined use of lecture and active learning is suggested.

"Active Learning" refers to anything students do in a classroom other than merely passively listening to an instructor's lecture (Bonwell, & Eisen, 1991). This includes everything from research exercises to presentations and short writing assignments to complex group exercises in which students apply course material to "real life" situations and/or to new problems. Regardless of the approach, active learning fosters questions and answers from students, immediate feedback from peers and instructors, critical thinking, engaged discussion, and increased student participation (Ramsier, 2001).

Faculty often hesitate taking on the challenge of integrating active learning into their courses. The change in pedagogical approach requires instructors to search out new methods for reducing structure in the classroom and increasing student-to-student and student-to-instructor dialogue (Bonwell, & Eisen, 1991; Hinde and Kovac, 2001). Critics argue that there is no way of assessing student learning. To the contrary, however, rather than hoping that learners can passively absorb knowledge through the lecture method, the active mode of learning enables students to critically examine and construct learning based on their own experiences and previously held knowledge (Burge, 1988; Bean, 1996). Furthermore, active learning provides opportunities for interaction that lead to reflection and deeper understanding.

### Method

Twenty-four students enrolled in a human resource management class were asked to compile a set of journal articles for each of the chapter topics to be learned. Each student was required to research a particular topic in the current assigned readings and to locate a scholarly journal article or court case related to the current the topic. Articles were disseminated to all class members using the Discussion Board on BlackBoard one week in advance of the scheduled date for that particular topic. All students were required to read all journal articles/cases prior to the scheduled class discussion.

On discussion days, each student presented a substantive overview of his/her research to the entire class. The information presented was then used as a springboard for student discussion and critical thinking. Instructor facilitation was used to encourage students to think critically about the information and to express their opinions/questions as well as share real-life experiences as it related to the substantive content of the article.

### Definition of Factors

Student Participation. In an effort to clarify my expectations of student participation, the main characteristics of good participation were presented to the students along with exactly what level of performance was required for satisfactory participation. Clarification and discussion of these course expectations eliminated ambiguity for the students and provided justification for the instructor’s final evaluation of student performance. A sample rubric that might be used for this purpose is shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
Sample Rubric for Assessing Student Class Participation

**Student's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

Positive Attributes					
(1) Enters into class discussions	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(2) Offers questions or comments during class	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(3) Provides substantive comments on the topic	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER

(4) Demonstrates critical thinking by posing questions and responses	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(5) Shares personal experiences related to the topic	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(6) Submits appropriate journal articles/cases for the topic under consideration	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
<b>Negative Attributes</b>					
(7) Skips class	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(8) Shows up late	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(9) Does not submit journal articles/cases in advance	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(10) Is unprepared to discuss his/her own article or another classmate's article	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER

### Discussion.

Class discussion is the core of good teaching (Hansen, 1998). The experienced professor wants students to pose questions and share experiences when it naturally relates to the lecture topic. The instructor may often interrupt his/her soliloquy to encourage students to share opinions and ideas. This is one such approach that allows students themselves to contribute to an atmosphere of learning and to realize that learning is not just the passive transfer of information from instructor to student (Hansen & Salami, 1990). The major challenge that arises for me, however, is how to engage the students; how to convince them that they will grow intellectually when they express an idea, defend an opinion, question material presented in lecture and texts and think creatively in front of an audience. Learning becomes truly active when this type of discussion takes place. A sample rubric that might be used for evaluating student discussion is presented in Table 2.

Table 2  
Sample Rubric for Assessing Student Discussion

**Student's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Positive Attributes</b>					
(1) Provides substantive comments	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(2) Listens closely to other discussants	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER

(3) Comprehends information from non-verbal cues (Eye contact, gestures, posture, facial expression, voice)	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(4) Demonstrates understanding by posing questions and responses	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(5) Shares personal experiences related to the topic	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(6) Shares thoughts, feelings, ideas so others understand	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
<b>Negative Attributes</b>					
(7) Is unable to make connections with what others say	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(8) Offers none or minimal ideas to the discussion	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(9) Rarely talks during the discussion	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(10) Talks off the subject	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER

Critical Thinking. The move into the age of information has highlighted attention on good thinking as a critical element of success (Huitt, 1993; Thomas & Smoot, 1994). Although old standards of passing standardized tests of basic skills and vocabulary are still appropriate, they should no longer be the sole means by which we determine the success or failure of our students (Chance, 1986). Thus, it is incumbent upon teachers to incorporate critical thinking into their course offerings (Kaplan & Kies, 1994). Critical thinking is the disciplined mental activity of evaluating arguments/propositions and making judgments that guide the development of beliefs and taking action (Ennis, 1992).

Critical thinking is a complex activity, and teachers can not expect that a single method of instruction will be adequate for developing each component part of critical thinking. Research suggests that while we can teach critical thinking and its components as separate skills, they are developed and best used when learned within the context of a specific domain of knowledge (Carr, 1990; Slattery, 1990). In my course, student journaling was restricted to a specific domain of knowledge, although some aspects of the acquired information were readily transferable to other areas of knowledge and other scenarios.

Table 3  
Sample Rubric for Assessing Critical Thinking

Positive Attributes					
(1) Contributions are purposeful, reasoned and goal directed	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(2) Is capable of formulating inferences	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(3) Maintains open-mindedness	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(4) Demonstrates critical thinking by posing questions and responses	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(5) Demonstrates cohesive and logical reasoning patterns	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(6) Achieves understanding, evaluates view points, and solves problems	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
Negative Attributes					
(7) Does not apply understanding and knowledge to new and different problems	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(8) Can not define, analyze, and devise solutions for problems	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(9) Does not sort, organize, classify, correlate, and analyze materials and data	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER
(10) Is unable to integrate information and see relationships	ALMOST ALWAYS	FREQUENTLY	OCCASIONALLY	SELDOM	ALMOST NEVER

### Conclusion

One of the end-products expected from undergraduate education is the ability to think critically and communicate effectively. Fels (1969) identified these areas as “ripe for teaching and exploration by researchers.” In addition, he noted "Rarely is a concerted effort made to get students themselves to wrestle with thorny issues," and further asserted that learners can and should be trained in areas of discussion critical thinking. Responses to a short survey indicated that even those students who were initially reluctant to talk in class or to express their own ideas soon became comfortable with the approach and expressed perceptions of improvement in both discussion of ideas and communication of thought (87%). All students (100%) agreed that they preferred this teaching format to

straight lecture or lecture followed by discussion, and that the journal articles/cases provided them with an inside view of how concepts and theories from the text were being applied in the business world ((94%).

In practice participation, discussion and critical thinking are tools that professors often believe students will “pick up” as they proceed through their academic education. In reality, this is not the case. It takes a concerted effort in course development and delivery to achieve success in these areas.

Student responses to the Journal exercise have been extremely positive. Some of the comments I have received include:

- "Through the weekly exercise of using research journals, I was able to suggest to my company a new way to recruit employees."
- "Because of the journaling exercise, I was able to help my boss revise our application form after class discussion about what questions can and cannot legally be asked of job applicants."
- "My perception of employee performance appraisal has changed significantly after reading about and discussing the process during the journaling discussions."

The method of creating a supplemental source of information through the dissemination of information from scholarly journals and cases enabled students to learn the theories and techniques they read about in the text and understand how they are applied in the business world. In addition, students learned to critically evaluate research articles, gained practice in individual presentations to the class, and obtained some of the most current sources of information related to the topics of discussion.

In conclusion the underlying premise of this manuscript is that to effectively foster student participation, discussion and critical thinking it is critical that we are able to define and measure these factors. Building on the literature, this paper suggests a realistic approach to achieve that end. Furthermore, rubrics are presented to assist in the assessment of these factors. Although the journaling experience did not constitute an experimental study, it does provide descriptive support for the validity of this approach.

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