

Transcript

Steel Wagstaff: Hey, so I'm really excited that everyone's here today! I'm Steel Wagstaff. I work for LSS (Learning Support Services). We have three guests with me here today with me here today. I'm really excited about all educators and people who care a lot about active learning. If we could just go around and you can say briefly who you are and what you do? Want to start with Mary?

Mary Claypool: Sure. My name is Mary Claypool. I am a recently defended PhD student in the department of French and Italian.

Jim Brown: My name is Jim brown. I'm an assistant professor in the English department, and I also teach in the brand new Digital Studies program, undergraduate certificate that has folks from different disciplines: communications, art, English, journalism, library and information sciences.

Beth Fahlberg: I'm Beth Fahlberg, and I teach in the School of Nursing as a Clinical Associate Professor. I'm helping our faculty implement more active learning activities.

Steel: Fantastic. I'm really pleased that everybody's here, and what we were hoping to do is just kind of have a pretty loose, free-flowing conversation about your experiences with active learning, talking about things that you've learned, best practices, and then advice for other practitioners. So, the people who will be listening will be largely instructors or academic staff, both on this campus and elsewhere, that are interested in improving their teaching, using technology, thinking about ways to have more effective learning happen in whatever kind of professional setting they're in.

So, the question I wanted to start with, I guess, is just an open question for anybody, but when you think of the phrase "active learning" how would you define this idea? And why is it interesting to you as a teacher, an educator?

Mary: I'll start. For me, it means that students are taking responsibility for their education not just in the classroom, but also they are taking their learning outside of the classroom. So, their being taught skills that they can apply in the class room and outside as well knowing where to find information. For me, I teach French, so it's giving them resources in class that they will then consult outside just because they are interested.

Beth: And, for me, I think of it more as kind of the application piece of the learning experience. So, much of the time when we're lecturing we're providing content. Then, in nursing, our students have to actually do stuff, applying that with patients. And in our programs active learning really is that bridge between the content and what they do with the patients, giving them opportunities in the classroom and in the simulation lab to then practice things before they get to

the patient. And, of course, that clinical experience with the patient is also a piece of that active learning experience.

Jim: Yeah, and I sort of think as these things as well. For me, there are a couple of things that come to mind. One is that teach rhetoric and writing which really is of little use without doing. So, I'm kind of force to have student learning by doing because the content of my courses is an activity, is a skill, which is really sort of a great thing. There is content there. I'm teaching rhetorical theory. I'm teaching some ideas there, but really all with an eye toward production.

And the other thing I think of in regard to what I've been doing recently in terms of active learning is I'm teaching a graduate seminar right now on the non-human in rhetoric and in the humanities more generally. And, In that course students are making things. The idea there is that we can better account for what the non-human is doing in certain situations by engaging objects that we normally think of as static, or still, or just sort of matter. If you are forced to engage with things that you think are just sitting there, you start to see that they are doing things that you perhaps wouldn't have noticed.

So, that's another thing to this active learning that I think is something we could all maybe talk about today is how does it force you to engage materiality in ways that gazing at something, looking at something, writing about something doesn't really get you.

Steel: I think that the point that Mary said at the beginning. She said she wants her students to take responsibility for their learning, and that sounds like a common thread that each of you talked about. Was that part of your own training in your field? Was there a moment when you became active learners? Or was it something that you started thinking about after you became educators?

Mary & Jim: That's a good question.

Jim: I'll start. I think the first moment that I really had any sort of realization that this was happening, and I say this because I guarantee there were people in my undergraduate education trying to get me to take responsibility. I was probably not taking them up on it like a lot of people don't. But, the moment I remember it happening was in one of my graduate seminars I took with Peg Siverson at the University of Texas who does a lot of work on cognition, embodiment, distributed cognition.

We used a system for evaluation called the learning record which I now use in my own classes in which we built an argument for your own grade based on a system of learning outcomes, based on grade criteria. And, that was probably the first moment I really felt like I was forced to take responsibility for what's happening. I wasn't just consuming information and handing in a paper and moving on with my life. I was forced to explain what was happening, to look back from the situation and say this is working for me or this isn't.

And that's what I have students do now and I find that to be really important in terms of evaluation.

Steel: So, this was a structural feature of the class that caused you to choose to take responsibility.

Jim: Yes, exactly. And what was great about it was, in doing it, I realized I have to do this for my students now too. I couldn't see going back to some regular mode of assessment after doing that seeing how much I got out of it which is really important for everything that you want us to talk about today.

Steel: You learned by doing and then wanted to do it yourself. Other people?

Mary: That sort of resonates with me as well. I know in my undergraduate experience I was a French major and our professors always encouraged us to speak French as much as possible, live in the French house, do everything you can to use the language. And like many undergraduate, I was reticent to make mistakes and sound funny while I was using the language. I lived in the French house and didn't always speak French, but when I went abroad and I lost my baggage and had to use French for the first time in a real, non-educational setting, I realized how important all of that practice was and was less reticent to practice later in my education.

Steel: So, having that experience where your education was useful-?

Mary: Yes, exactly. Like, oh, I understand what's going on, but I really should have practiced a little bit more. Or maybe there was nothing that the classroom could have done to prepare me for this. I need to go to France and put my skills into practice.

Steel: And you, Beth?

Beth: I think for myself, it was in my doctoral education. As an undergrad I don't think I did a very good job taking responsibility for my learning. I kind of went with the flow in my classes, but in that PhD program, I really had to decide what was going to be my focus, my emphasis. And I took responsibility for that learning process all along the way. And I think the other piece of that experience was that I was married with a young toddler and I had a job. It forced on me that commitment aspect of my learning.

Looking back, I wish that I had engaged and been a lot more responsible for my own learning earlier in previous degrees, but it was a lesson I learned well in my doctoral education. I think the challenge becomes though, as you were saying, Mary, the undergrads often have a lot more reticence and they don't have so much confidence to go ahead and step out and try things. So, how do we make these active learning experiences a little more comfortable with them or

help them develop the skills that they need, or the confidence that they need, to be able to engage with this kind of learning.

Because I know that for our students it has been challenging, especially with the traditional undergrads to really feel okay about this active learning type of experience when it's not what they're used to and it's challenging them to do things that maybe they don't feel very confident about doing.

Jim: You know, what's interesting is that we all three sort of talked about graduate moments and graduate work where we came to this realization and it strikes me that perhaps part of the problem is that in graduate school there is slightly more. It's not that you are asked to take more ownership of it, but also maybe you're allowed to tinker and maybe failure is more built into the system in certain ways.

Steel: You're nodding, Mary.

Mary: Its process oriented. You can't be afraid to fail.

Beth: That doctoral education was very process oriented and you've got to try and fail and try again until you finally...

Steel: That's perfect though. So, the question then would be how do you build that into undergraduate education and get them, not to a point where they feel comfortable, but where they feel comfortable with the discomfort. Or, they're feeling okay that this might not work out. This thing that I'm about to try. This is where I always end up talking about assessment and grading because if trying something and failing means an 'F' then no one is going to try and fail. So, if portfolio-based systems allow people to say, "I tried that. It really didn't work, but here's why and here's what I can do differently next time." and maybe we would foster this ethic of, "It might not work out. That's okay."

Now, that's a fine line because then students can read that as a blank check to do whatever, so there is still structure there. You still have to have conversations about what's a good experiment and what is maybe not such a good experiment.

Beth: And I agree. It is much more of a having a formative process in there. So that okay, this is not their ultimate grade but they're trying things, and they're learning and they're getting that feedback, you know? Which I think is critical to that learning process and based on the feedback they are trying again and growing. Then, they've got their summative, right?

That process has been working towards.

Steel: I hear what you're saying as kind of a way of stimulating or encouraging what we would call metacognition. Thinking about thinking. Where the students are thinking about what they are

doing. They're thinking about their activities. And it leads into one the questions that I wanted to ask and it came from Alexander Astin, who is one of the big thinkers in educational research over the last 50 years.

He's developed a theory of student involvement, and he says that "Student learning is greatly enhanced the more that students are involved in the process." And I think we all realize that being a charismatic instructor, it can be infectious. You can be excited and get people excited, but that's not what makes active learning active.

It requires planning like you said. It requires structure. It requires smart design and thinking about your activities and how you're going to change student activity from passivity to participation.