



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Learning Through Engagement

As the division chair for arts, social sciences, and public services at Randolph Community College (RCC), I have the opportunity to work with and observe individuals who teach a variety of disciplines. Our division houses Early Childhood Education, Criminal Justice Technology, Human Services Technology, Funeral Services, and Associates in Arts (College Transfer). Faculty and staff call it the “from birth to death and everything in between division.”

At RCC, our mantra is, “Creating opportunities and changing lives.” Despite the variety of classes we teach, we have one goal in common: We want our students to succeed. In the following lessons, RCC faculty implemented active learning and technology-relevant strategies to engage students and make learning more impactful. Hopefully, instructors in any discipline can gather ideas from the lessons below and apply them to their own courses.

Active Learning

Active learning is the process of involving all students in activities that encourage them to develop a deeper understanding of content by working with and reflecting upon the material being presented. With the active-learning process, students transition from being mere recipients of information to being participants actively engaged with new information. The following examples are ways RCC faculty have employed active-learning strategies such as collaborative activities and interactive simulations to make course content more meaningful.

Collaborative Activities

Collaborative learning is a methodology that transforms a traditional lecture or teacher-focused classroom into a student or learning-centered classroom. Students work together to help each other understand content, solve problems, or create projects with the instructor working as a facilitator.

Though I mainly teach online now, my favorite lesson when I taught traditional face-to-face classes was a collaborative process analysis activity. In my English classes, I taught the process of making brownies. Recipes are always a great way to teach content, and students love the end result. We started the class activity by going through the recipe together, step-by-step (the process). I had the students tell me what I needed to do to create brownies and they learned quickly that they must be very specific with each task (i.e., “crack an egg in the bowl and make sure the shell isn’t included” instead of just “add the egg”). The latter instruction leads to adding an entire egg

including the shell into the mixture, while the former is more specific as to how the egg should be properly added. During the activity, students discuss what details are critical for the recipe. The discussions challenge students to work together to create clear and specific instructions. As we moved on with the lesson, each student had to do an informal process analysis presentation on a different topic. When the student presenting wasn’t detailed enough with instructions, I would whisper, “Crack the egg, first.” By the end of the class session, all students were chiming in, “You better crack that egg, first,” “Your egg is not cracked,” and “Shells are in the brownies,” and so on. By presenting the class material in an interesting and compelling way—a collaborative process analysis—students weren’t passively learning; they were actively participating.

Every semester in Dolores Vargas de Haro’s RCC Spanish classes, all students participate in a collective-composition activity. Students take turns writing a story together in Spanish on a Smartboard. A Smartboard is an interactive whiteboard that uses touch detection and can connect to the internet. The activity begins with students creating a character for the story. Then, each student writes a sentence in Spanish on the Smartboard working off of the previous students’ work. The Smartboard allows students to easily alter and build off of each other’s input. By the end of the activity, students have written a complete story in Spanish, which demonstrates students’ language comprehension skills. It produces an entertaining story that every student enjoys and remembers. An important aspect of whole-class collaboration is that students bond as a group. Moreover, the larger the group, the more variety there is in the ideas, opinions, and experiences that contribute to the learning process. Whole-class activities generally encourage fluency and a meaningful exchange of ideas among the participants, like in the collective-composition assignment.

Interactive Simulation

Cultural simulations and other simulation exercises take students out of their normal roles of listening and discussing and ask them to participate in activities relevant to course learning. This kind of active learning increases student interest in the material, makes the material more meaningful, allows students to refine and elaborate their understanding of the material, and provides opportunities for students to relate the learning to broader concepts and situations.

Every semester, Dorothy Hans, an RCC British Literature professor, simulates an interactive Burns supper in celebration of the poet, Robert Burns. She brings in a variety of Scottish foods including Haggis, one of the

main courses of a traditional Burns supper. Haggis is a traditional Scottish dish that consists of heart, liver, and lungs of sheep, minced with suet, onions, oatmeal, and seasonings, all boiled in an animal's stomach. Prior to the supper, Hans has students write a toast in the spirit of Robert Burns. Students are required to directly quote and cite three lines from at least two of Burns' poems. During the supper, students stand and give their toasts. This simulation helps students understand Burns' literature and the historical context in which it was written. Simulations in the classroom can be an effective way to immerse students in the course material and improve their knowledge about the topic being taught.

Make It Relevant Using Social Media

Over the past decade, social media has become prevalent in the day-to-day lives of many college students. Since students are spending a considerable amount of time on social media websites, faculty should integrate Facebook, Twitter, and other networking platforms into their curriculum to better engage students.

Social Media Assignment

Social media is a tool that helps faculty create and present interesting and relevant content to students. According to a consumer insight report, *Social Media Analysis*, more than 98 percent of college students use social media (Experian Simmons, 2012). When learning is relevant to students, they become engaged and active learners.

In the same British Literature Class mentioned above, Hans integrates social media into an assignment to increase student engagement and course comprehension. Hans requires her class to read the Jane Austen novel, *Emma*. She then tasks students with imagining that the characters in the novel have access to social media—Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter—and recreating a scene from the novel on one of the social media platforms. Hans makes it clear that the most important parts of the assignment are to be creative and to make sure students' creations provide insights into the novel. Students are then required to write a one-page essay explaining their social media creations. Most students present poster boards containing hilarious Twitter feeds, Facebook comments, and Instagram pictures. The assignment connects students to the course content by using social media, a tool that is familiar and relevant. The ability to connect life in college with life outside of college has a positive impact on students' attitudes and allows their learning to be more personal.

Conclusion

Passivity dampens students' motivation and curiosity. The key to creating an engaging classroom is to make learning more student-centered by involving students in discussions, providing them with relatable and relevant material, and presenting content in multiple formats. In other words, make students active participants in their learning. As Benjamin Franklin said, "Tell me and I forget.

Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."

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