



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## TEACHING STUDENTS TO BE ACTIVE LISTENERS

The simple act of nodding your head in acknowledgment when someone is explaining an idea to you is something we learn at a relatively early age. Saying “yes” in agreement or repeating back what was stated to you to confirm understanding may seem simplistic, yet it is very powerful in human interaction. Communication becomes much more difficult when active listening is not practiced, which is the case with many students in the classroom.

### The Explanation

In my daily discussions, I consistently use the phrase “bounce off each other.” I try to impress upon my students that classroom discussions should take the form of an extremely sensitive ball that just keeps bouncing off the walls. Meaning, when one individual makes a comment, another student should paraphrase the point. This allows other students time to possibly infer a different meaning on the topic or add another element to the conversation that branches us into a new direction. The larger goal is to keep the discussion rolling in order to come to a more in-depth conclusion about the topic. In essence, we are building a house of ideas where the slab on the very bottom is as essential as the roof.

### Why We Don't Speak

This may sound simplistic—which in theory it is to some degree—but the actual practice within the context of a classroom is far from simplistic. For instance, if two students are speaking with one another outside of the classroom, the subject matter being discussed is presumably at a level at which both are comfortable. There is little to no fear of rejection because both participants most likely have a familiarity with the topic being discussed. To add to the comfort of this scenario, the interaction is one-on-one, so there are not others participating who could agree or potentially disagree. Within a classroom setting, students are more cautious and reserved. Their natural ability for active listening is reduced due to the unfamiliarity of the topic and the fear of being ridiculed for their response.

### The Solution

To alleviate this problem, I explain on the first class day that there are no wrong comments. I make the point that disagreements are inevitable. More importantly, disagreements are desirable! Of course, this is not a classroom structure with which most students are familiar. The perception of most students is that the professor is all-knowing, and, therefore, should be supplying information that cannot be disputed. Professors are all guilty of believing this fallacy at times. That being said, as an historian, I let my students know that I do not know every detail in history. My training is on how to study and interpret history; consequently, I am endlessly learning various and substantial new perspectives of how to look at historical events. In emphasizing this, my hope is to show that success in the class is not the amount of prior knowledge brought to the course, but the consistent effort to acquire it.

### Incorrect May Be Correct

The use of corroboration is what assists in solidifying this argument. Physically showing them journals of the discipline being studied is the strongest evidence to support the fact that “all-knowing professors” do not exist. They soon realize that if professors knew everything, they would not need journals. Showing students that wrong arguments are important is a significant lesson that educators should teach their students. In a collaborative setting, incorrect arguments inevitable; moreover, they are a vital element needed achieve the correct answer.

I use an example from my experience in college. A professor gave the class an assignment to read a lengthy article out of a peer-reviewed, well-respected journal. The next day, he asked what we thought of the article. Of course, we all gave it plenty of praise, the ever-loyal group of students. He stated, “I’m glad you enjoyed it. The argument is completely wrong.” Now years later, as a historian, I can tell you that my professor was right in his analysis. The argument was unsubstantiated and has been proven incorrect since, despite the good research the author used to back the theory. Nevertheless, the greater meaning of that lesson was to show that the incorrect research did two things. It taught us to be critical of even the most respected work and that even

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corroboration between scholars is not an absolute answer, but merely what they believe to be the most probable. More importantly, it showed that incorrect arguments enhance learning. In other words, if we had never thought about the radical argument published in that journal, we would have never really considered the contrasting side of the work, which in turn had a rather large bearing on the outcome of the historical event.

### **Conclusion**

My father used to tell me that you have to be bad before you can be good, and you have to be good before you can be great. With a nurturing classroom environment, where there is freedom for students to share thoughts and perspectives without ridicule, even the most difficult material can be mastered through collaboration. However, for this student-centered learning to succeed, active listening is an indispensable ingredient. Let us show our students that there is no shame in starting somewhere—correct or not. Regardless of our level of expertise, one cannot learn without participating in the discussion.

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