



Creating Excitement through Active Learning Opportunities in Fully Online Courses in Sociology

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Abstract

The paradigm of active learning continues to be emphasized in U.S. higher education, at all levels, where traditional lecture formats have made good use of new teaching technologies to engage students beyond passive listening. While active learning can be thought of as project-based learning, in many academic settings, it is simply creating active engagement and excitement in the learning process, in order to facilitate higher-order independent thinking and discovery. Basic methods for injecting active learning into standard face-to-face classrooms involve pausing lecture for group or individual exercises, using digital media or old-fashioned pen and paper, facilitating kinesthetic activities, or assigning student responsibility for teaching particular topics in groups. [1] Today, lists of best practices or ideas of more detailed active learning strategies are shared across disciplines and institutions. [2] The widespread use of active learning strategies in the U.S. reflects the understanding that it yields positive learning outcomes. [3]

Online courses pose benefits and challenges for active learning. The move towards hybrid courses where online course delivery formats are melded with traditional face-to-face meetings offer excellent opportunities to facilitate active learning, while fully online learning courses on the other hand have greater challenges. In the latter, students often engage in online courses asynchronously, may never see each other or their instructors face-to-face, and they face different constraints. Even their kinesthetic options are typically reduced to clicking or swiping fingers across digital tablets. Yet, in other ways, students in strictly online courses must take greater control of their own learning, by maintaining self-discipline and contact, thus leaving open the possibility that they can be engaged actively, if differently, than in the face-to-face classroom. In some disciplines, this is easier than in others. In sociology where active learning exercises have long been an important component of the face-to-face classroom [for an example, see 4], the opportunities are particularly good for translating active learning strategies to the fully online forum. The author proposes to present a number of active learning strategies for sociology online courses, demonstrating their usefulness in creating excitement in the virtual classroom while meeting concrete learning outcomes.

References

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