

CoAT Brown Bag: Using Active Learning Strategies in Teaching Large Classes

I attended the CoAT Brown Bag session entitled “Using Active Learning Strategies in Teaching Large Classes” on March 13, 2008 in room 3265 of EB II. The session was led by Barbi Honeycutt and there were about six additional attendees. The purpose of the brown bag was to discuss ways to facilitate active learning in a non-traditional environment – namely, large classes. Barbi began the workshop by having the participants draw a layout of the classroom or lab space that they typically teach in. We then went around the room and the participants shared the difficulties particular to their environments. One scenario described by a few participants was a large lecture hall with students distributed around and with chairs bolted to the floor, making it hard to get the students together and for the teacher to reach all of the students. Other participants worked in labs with equipment and computer monitors that created visual and ergonomic impairments to group interaction. Prior to attending the session, all participants were asked to read two websites on active learning strategies. We discussed this material in the context of the classroom scenarios described, shared experiences creating active learning, and discussed possible strategies for dealing with problems particular to the large classroom.

One of my main concerns with a large classroom is how to create meaningful, informative, and helpful peer-to-peer learning. I wasn't sure how to go about this in a large lecture setting, aside from the “think-pair-share” method. As we discussed peer-learning methods, I came to realize that the effectiveness of the methods depends largely on the quality of the participants. Are the students prepared with the classroom knowledge needed to work together? What if one or both partners are ill-prepared or not motivated to participate? I learned that the effectiveness of many peer learning strategies was dependent on *student accountability*. This accountability means that students are prepared with an adequate knowledge basis to work with a partner, and that they are responsible for maintaining this basic level of knowledge throughout the semester. The instructor should reinforce basic knowledge on the student and, of course, help in learning the material. However, the responsibility of knowing basic material ultimately lies on the student and the student should be held accountable for this, particularly when it impacts others, such as is the case with peer learning. Accountability also means that, after participating in some peer learning activity, the students must demonstrate their involvement and attempt to learn the material. Working together and producing nothing, or working together and saying “I don't know” means that peer learning has failed. The students have a responsibility to one another to attempt to learn the material together, and the instructor has a responsibility to create an environment where this type of learning is possible.

The brown bag participants offered a number of strategies that should help encourage accountability in terms of both knowledge preparedness and effort produced. One participant (or maybe it was Barbi) suggested giving all students a notecard when they entered the room, then give them a verbal quiz question. This has the effect of encouraging good attendance and eliminating tardiness, but can also be used to check on the state of the student's knowledge. Another participant suggested doing a short bullet-point review of important topics from the last lecture. Another participant suggested having the students get together with partners to write two or three exam-style questions, which helps the students to assess what they know about the material compared to their peers. Strategies for encouraging accountability in peer-learning activities seemed to center on effectively questioning the

partners after an activity. Randomly select groups and do not let them off the hook if they don't know an answer. Make them delve into the question, or rephrase it. Students should understand that they will be putting forward the effort to learn the material, whether they want to do it privately in a pair or on the spot in front of the class. The students must understand, however, that their active participation will be required from the beginning of the course. This theme of "setting student expectations about active learning from the beginning" was prevalent throughout the brown bag session.

When I came into the brown bag session, I really was not quite sure how to effectively implement active learning in a large classroom. I left with some unresolved problems that the group did not have easy answers to, primarily dealing with ergonomics and the logistics of dealing with a large number of students. However, I left the session with many great tips and strategies for concrete activities I can use in my classrooms in the future, and I look forward to trying them out. It was another very helpful CoAT session.