Engaging Students

The Challenge

Research suggests that many students in the western world are victims of our educational system. Average students are guided day by day in simple passive learning activities. They read, listen to lectures, and regurgitate what they have “learned” on exams. In many classes, they have to do relatively little work and almost no deep thinking about the content. Unfortunately, this approach leads to shallow, surface, short-term learning. Clearly, this sort of learning is not the intent of higher education. Few among us would argue against leaning to be better thinkers. But moving beyond passive learning into active learning places some burden on the student – which inevitably leads to some resistance.

A Few Proven Methods

It is up to us to help our students make the switch from passive recipient of knowledge to engaged, active user of knowledge. Suggestions for helping students make this change abound in the educational, learning, organizational behavior, and other literatures. Nearly all articles and books that I’ve read agree on a few simple approaches to overcoming student resistance to change:

1. Establish a positive professional relationship with your students.
   Don’t play a part – be yourself. Trust and respect when properly earned can overcome nearly all resistance.

2. Explain your methods, and reasoning up front.
   When higher education students are told the whys and wherefores of active learning methods the majority will go along. For example, many students don’t know how the material of your class will be used later on. Further, most don’t know that learning for long term memory can make their lives easier next semester or on the job. Help your students to understand how active learning practices are in their best interest. For example, describe why you are making the assignment and explain what you expect students to gain from doing the work.

3. Explicitly teach active learning strategies for completing assignments and performing better on assessments.
   Remember that most students have not been taught explicitly how to learn and how to think through issues within a given discipline. Research suggests that think aloud modeling is an excellent tool for teaching students to think.

4. Establish reasonable rules for discussion and other interaction.
   Your goal is to maximize active thinking and learning yet protect fairness and safety.

See Keeley, Shemberg, Cowell, & Zinnbauer, 2010 for additional information on these issues.