10 engaging strategies to consider implementing in your courses

Peruse these examples of teaching strategies that encourage student engagement and active learning. As you read through, try to imagine examples in your discipline where these strategies could apply.

Motivating and orienting

1. BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE PROBES

Why? Instructor determines effective starting points. Students focus their attention on important material.
How? A background knowledge probe asks for brief responses (short answers, show of hands, multiple choice questions) from students who are about to begin a module or study a new concept.
Example: In an introductory geology course, ask students: "What words come to mind when you hear "plate tectonics"?

2. STUDENT-GENERATED QUESTIONS

Why? Students ask and answer questions emerging from course materials, thus providing motivation to complete readings and allowing students to reflect on the materials.
How? Ask students to create questions based on the course materials and then answer their own questions. Questions and responses can be exchanged with other students in small groups for peer feedback or even be used on quizzes and exams. Variation: Students can generate questions based on peers' presentations.
Example: In an introductory law course, students engage with the course readings and articulate their questions about courts that emerge from those readings.

Informing

3. TEN-TWO STRATEGY

Why? Students process information presented. Instructor and students fill in any gaps or correct misunderstandings. Students build upon peers' knowledge.
How? (1) Instructor shares information with students (e.g., through lecture, presentation) for ten minutes. (2) Students take two minutes to summarize/recap the content or address a question instructor has posed. Students can do this individually or in pairs. (3) Instructor asks what questions arose. (4) Repeat the procedure every 10 minutes.
Example: Following a 10-minute lecture on Newton's laws of motion in a physics course, students are asked to summarize the laws.

Practice and feedback

4. THINK/PAIR/SHARE

Why? Students organize knowledge and summarize, apply, or integrate new information. Students build individual accountability and contribute to class discussion.
How? (1) Instructor poses a question and asks students to think about the question on their own (1-2 min.) (2) Students pair up and share responses/thoughts, or they work together to synthesize ideas or come to a consensus. (3) Regroup as a whole class; instructor then calls for volunteers or chooses a few pairs to share their responses.
Example: In an education course that addresses classroom management, students describe how they would respond to a student's disruptive behavior. Students propose a solution individually, discuss their solutions in pairs, and share their ideas with the whole class.

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5. BUZZ GROUPS

Why? Students develop teamwork and cooperative learning skills.

How? (1) Instructor divides the class into small groups to discuss an assigned topic or solve a problem. (2) Students have a set amount of time to engage with the topic or problem. Enforce the time limit to keep students focused. (3) Students briefly present their findings to the whole class; instructor can respond to comments and encourage discussion.

Example: In a microeconomics course, students are asked to calculate the likely change in cost of a widget further to a supply shortage but with stable demand.

6. PICTURE PROMPT*

Why? Generate discussion by promoting students' ability to think creatively and make connections between an image and course topics/concepts.

How? Show students an image and ask them to relate it to course content. Ask them to either (1) identify/explain it and justify their answers; (2) write about it using terms from your lecture; or (3) name the processes and concepts shown. Do not provide "answers" but rather allow students to explore meaningful associations with the image.

Example: In a literary theory course, students are asked: How does this image relate to a deconstructionist theoretical approach to interpretation? Justify your response.

Image by edith lüthi from Pixabay

7. WRITTEN RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

Why? Students are actively involved in class as they apply concepts and content learned. Instructor determines student comprehension.

How? (1) Instructor poses engaging, challenging questions or offers a prompt for students to address. Questions/prompts should relate to learning outcomes and be thoughtful and reflective – simple yes/no or basic factual questions are not enough. (2) Students then have sufficient time to develop answers either working individually, with a partner, or in a small group. (3) Students share their answers.

Example: In a course on North American economic history, instructor asks students to compare and contrast circumstances leading to the Great Depression (1929-1939), the Great Recession (2007-2009), and the more recent 2020 recession.

Closing and reflection

8. ONE MINUTE PAPER / FREE WRITE

<u>Why?</u> Students explore ideas before discussing them. This can also bring closure to a class.

<u>How?</u> Assign a prompt or pose a question pertinent to the content of a given class period. Ask students to respond in writing for 1-5 minutes.

<u>Examples:</u> (1) In a Canadian Studies course: "Based on Sheila Watt-Cloutier's book *The Right to be Cold*, what are some of the ways in which climate change is affecting the Arctic and the communities living there?" (2) "The concept I am struggling with as I prepare for the final assessment is …"

9. CLOSING SUMMARY (LIST KEY CONCEPTS OR IDEAS)

<u>Why?</u> Students summarize what they understood to be the key points of the class period; instructor determines if students grasped the key topics.

<u>How?</u> (1) Students write a closing summary individually or in pairs, listing or summarizing the main ideas about the topic presented during the class. (2) Students can compare and contrast their summaries in pairs to build upon one another's understanding of the material. (3) Students submit their written responses.

<u>Example:</u> In any course: (1) "What were three key points or "take-aways" from today's class?" (2) "What is a question you have about what we discussed today?" (3) "Create a quiz question based on today's discussion."

10. HARVESTING*

<u>Why?</u> Students summarize what they have understood further to a class experience or activity, promoting synthesis and retention.

<u>How?</u> After an experience or activity in class, instructor asks students to reflect on and then respond in writing to the following prompts: (1) *what* they learned; (2) *so what*: why it is important and what the implications are; and (3) *now what*: how the learning can be applied. Have students share their responses in small groups or with the whole class.

<u>Example:</u> In any course, after a class debate, students respond to the "what," "so what," and "now what" prompts.

Looking for more ideas?

- See the Teaching Strategies described in TLS' Teaching and Learning Knowledge Base (TL KB), especially "discussion generation," "problem-solving," and "synthesis and reflection."
- Explore McGill-approved learning technologies that support student engagement: Which Tools Should I Use?

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