Example Syllabus Statements about Active Learning Pedagogies

Glenn Blalock, Our Lady of the Lake College

Class Environment

"Interaction" and "Community" will be key concepts for us this semester. Through our various interactions we will be participating in and creating a learning community. This course relies on interactions of various kinds. We will engage in regular class discussions, online, one-to-one, in small groups and perhaps as a whole class. Much of the work in this class challenges you to work individually and with classmates to achieve objectives we establish together.

Much of the work you do--formally and informally--will be done in small groups. Many of you may have had negative experiences with "group work," but I can assure you your experiences in this class will be different. You will learn to work effectively in small groups, and you may be part of several different small groups, formed for different purposes. I've been using groups for a number of years, now, and I consider them to be an integral part of every course I teach. Participating in group activities will not be optional. Learning to work productively as a community member is one of your goals for this semester. I'm convinced that you will find the group environment to be one of the most useful and meaningful features of this course.

Although I understand that effective group work requires that group members become comfortable with one another, and that a certain amount of sociability is required to maintain positive group dynamics, I also assume that when you work in groups, you are responsible for fulfilling the goals of that particular activity and that behavior in small group settings will be as respectful and professional as it is in our whole class settings.

Sharing and Responding to Work in Progress

Because writing and reading are both cognitive process and social practice (processes and actions), because all writing and reading is purposeful, because all writing (and reading!) has an audience, we will share most of our work-in-progress in this course--with groupmates, with other classmates, and when appropriate, with public audiences. Often during the semester, we will use student work in progress as a model for a whole class discussion.

Sharing work in progress is most useful when we all participate in the exchange and response process seriously and fully. I expect that we will provide full, useful, honest commentary to one another when we exchange work. I am evaluating your participation in and contributions to this ongoing process. I understand that most of you have not had experience with this, or you've had negative experiences. I can assure you that we will learn how to share and respond in ways that are effective and positive.

Sharing Responsibility

In our class, we are attempting to create and support an active learning, student-centered environment, one in which students share with the teacher the substantial responsibility for initiating and maintaining the kinds of activities and discussions that are most meaningful for achieving our [[learning objectives]].

Though I will emphasize this notion of shared responsibility throughout the semester, please understand that I am not abdicating my responsibility or authority. I am, after all, the person responsible for managing this course and for submitting accurate, valid assessments of your performance. I have made decisions already about what will constitute the intellectual work of this course: the readings, the writings, the overall environment and structure of the course. But within those larger frames, I am offering you an active role in the decision-making.

As the course develops, I will expect you to accept my open invitation to help me consider how to make this course more useful for us all.

Important Note
Students often struggle with the difficult transition from a "teacher-centered" classroom environment to a "learner-centered" environment. They want me to tell them "what to do," "how to do it 'my way'," "what I want"; they often struggle with the flexibility, independence (and responsibility), wanting me to set firm deadlines and to be more authoritarian (as opposed to more authoritative).

Please recognize that I understand how difficult it is for many / most of you to be comfortable in this kind of learning environment, at least at first. Most of you have never been in a class such as this, and you can't expect to adjust overnight (especially not after 20+ years of "teacher-centered" instruction). Please discuss your discomfort or struggles with me and with your classmates, as often as necessary.

BSN Program, Our Lady of the Lake College

This class is different

You will notice from the first day that this class is meant to be different from most of your other classroom experiences. For every class, lab, or clinical day, your instructors are focusing on these primary questions:

- What are the learning goals for this time with students?
- How will we know if students are achieving those goals?
- What will students do during our time together that will enable and promote their learning?
- What resources and support does the instructor need to provide to facilitate student learning; or, what will the instructors do?

Your instructors have designed activities for class time (or lab or clinical), when you are all together, to challenge you to use the information from the pre-class activities. In other words, this will be a class that primarily uses “active learning” strategies. Or to say this another way, this will not be a class for which you can “show up,” sit still, listen to lecture, take notes on a PowerPoint printout, and be a passive learner. Your instructors expect you to prepare for class--read, view videos of the lectures, listen to podcasts, view / read online resources, complete various writing assignments.

Why is the class designed this way? (And thus why is the BSN curriculum designed in this way?) Success in your future will depend on the extent to which you can adapt to unique situations, make critical evidence-based decisions, interact with diverse others in various ways, and know how to find the answers to questions you are encountering for the first time. In addition, you will need to be an active learner, as information and knowledge expands exponentially. You will not achieve this level of expertise by being a passive listener to lectures and taker of notes; nor will excellent skills at multiple-choice tests represent this kind of learning. The kinds of learning you have to achieve require your active, repeated, and expanding attempts to use information, knowledge, and skills in situations and settings that simulate as much as possible the contexts in which you will practice as a professional.

Dr. Ed Nuhfer, Cal State Fresno

Chosen Pedagogy The course will make use of many learning approaches. We’ll use lots of visual aids, cooperative work, writing, and short projects in class with fellow students. Weather permitting, you'll have opportunities for one or two field trips in spring. But your most valuable pedagogy will be your own study & self-assessment. My role with you will be primarily as your guide—a kind of Sherpa—the climb and trip belong to you.
How you’ll acquire knowledge You’ll obtain knowledge initially from my teaching and that of your lab TA’s, but increasingly from your own efforts and introspection. You’ll learn the information system of geology, work with me and with one another to gain an understanding of it, and by end of the course you, ideally, won’t need the TA’s or me!

Dr. Li Jin, Florida State University

Since writing is a process of making meaning as well as communicating, students should expect frequent written and oral response on the content of their writing from both teacher and peers. Classes rely heavily on a workshop format. Instruction emphasizes the connection between writing, reading, and critical thinking; students should give thoughtful, reasoned responses to the readings. Both reading and writing are the subjects of class discussions and workshops, and students are expected to be active participants of the classroom community. Learning from each other will be a large part of the classroom experience.

Michelle Everson, University of Minnesota

This is not a class where you only come each day, listen, watch, and take notes! The primary method for learning new statistical concepts and methods will be by reading provided materials before class, participating in class activities and discussions, and working through homework assignments.

This course makes extensive use of small group and large group activities and discussions to introduce ideas and content, as well as to deepen your understanding of material encountered in the readings. Your learning experience is thus dependent—to some extent—on your classmates and vice versa. Because of this, it is essential that you not only attend class each day and participate in the activities and discussions, but that you show up prepared having completed the homework and reading assigned.

Internalizing a disciplines’ way of thinking about and solving problems is a time consuming process, with the keyword being “process”. It is not something that can be taught to students in a semester, or even year–long, course. Learning statistics takes much more than memorizing formulae or software commands. It requires active participation and questioning both in and out of the classroom. The instructors of this course will provide you with many opportunities to learn the material through class activities, readings, and homework assignments, but in the end, you will have to do all of the hard work of actually learning that material.

Susan Shadle, Boise State University

Course Format
This course uses a non-traditional approach to teaching and learning chemistry. Class meetings will consist primarily of students actively engaged in processing and understanding course content. My role as instructor is to a) design and plan in-class work that will provide you with a basic understanding of each topic, b) guide and support you in the process of understanding material, and c) offer short lectures to clarify ideas and provide examples of relevance when needed. During class meeting times, you will be working on guided inquiry activities in groups with your peers. (Note, however, that all quizzes and testing is done individually in this course). A basic schedule of what activity will be done on which day is provided on the “Skeletal Course Schedule” (last page of the syllabus).

In-class groups: Each day in class, you will work with a self-managed group of peers to answer questions on guided inquiry activities. Group work will not be graded. The purpose of group work is to learn the material, dispel misconceptions, ask questions, and get feedback.

Because this kind of work is a new experience for most people, we will spend time at the beginning of the semester talking about how to do this well so that the experience benefits everyone’s learning. (see Group Roles
handout and Group Performance Rubric handout, posted on the Bb course site). You will be assigned to a group within a given neighborhood. These groups will be rotated occasionally based on my observations of how the work is going. Each day you will be invited to appoint a manager, or you may choose to collectively ensure there is agreement on each question before moving on, that no one is going ahead or falling behind, no one dominates the discussion, and everyone feels comfortable speaking up, especially if they are frustrated, confused or behind.

It is normal to have some concerns about how the course is structured. Most students, however, come to appreciate the approach after they’ve adjusted to its differences. At the end of the syllabus are some representative comments from people who’ve been students in a class like this.

Comments from students who have taken a course like this:

- Don’t be afraid to ask questions and argue in your group. That is the way learning is done in this class.
- Give yourself some time to settle into group learning. Lots of us did not think we would like it or that it would work. It does.
- I really didn’t want to do group work at first because I have been successful taking notes and studying by myself. But it works. Do not hesitate to talk and meet other students in and out of class. They understand things you don’t, and vice versa.
- I wish I had asked more questions and been more engaged in group discussions from the start.
- Do not let yourself feel discouraged. The teacher and your classmates can and will help you.
- Feel free to ask a question in group even if you think it is a stupid question.
- This format is much more fun and less intimidating than a lecture.
- You actually learn in class. In my lecture classes it was always about going home and trying to figure it out later.
- This method helped me learn more and remember more than I thought possible.
- It seems strange at first, but get to know your classmates. The faster you meet people and become comfortable the better the class will be.
- At the start, I didn’t think I would like it. I usually like to work and study individually. But I really liked the group work.

- If you think you are right, speak up to your group. You might be, but in any case your whole group will learn from it.
- I liked the idea of group work, but was afraid it would not prepare me for the final exam. My advice to future students: Don’t worry. Fall into the format and it will carry you through.
- Don’t let yourself take the course lightly just because class is fun and relaxed. Do the homework and reading.

Virginia Lee, Virginia Lee & Associates

This class may be different from other courses you have taken in a couple of ways: what we do in class and the types of assignments you will have. In class I will spend very little time lecturing, and you will spend little time taking notes. Consequently, some of you may feel initially that I’m not really teaching, and as a result you’re not really learning.

In some senses this class may be more like an art studio in which you do art or an aerobics class or gym in which you exercise or lift weights. In the same way that you can’t learn how to paint without painting or get in shape without exercising, you can’t learn psychology without doing psychology. Further you wouldn’t show someone you could paint by defining “color,” “shade,” “volume,” “contour,” or “perspective.” Instead you would paint a picture. You wouldn’t show someone you were in shape by defining “bicep,” “tricep,” “pectoral,” and “aerobic.” You would bench press one hundred pounds. And you won’t show me and prove to yourself that
you know how to do psychology by defining “operant conditioning,” “self-actualization,” and “superego.”

You’ll do psychology.

Throughout the semester, we will explore ourselves as learners: how we learn and what it means to learn something. For now, I’ll say only that knowledge is more than facts, and learning is more than memorization. If you turn back to the first page of the syllabus and look at the goals for this course, you’ll see that only one of them—the first—has to do with factual information. The rest require you to do, think, apply, and reflect using psychological concepts only as a springboard or starting point. In this class you will really work with psychological concepts, using class time to do exercises, conduct experiments, work on problems in groups, discuss psychological concepts and their implications, and apply these concepts to real world situations. In the process, you’re going to both do and make psychology.

In this semester, I hope you will come to believe that you cannot only read and understand what other psychologists have discovered about human behavior and thinking, but also think like a psychologist and add to our existing knowledge about psychology yourself as a novice psychologist.

Bland Tomkinson
Video -  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWfyLvUojns