

# Learning Activities and Active Learning Online



## Designing and Teaching for Impact in Online Courses

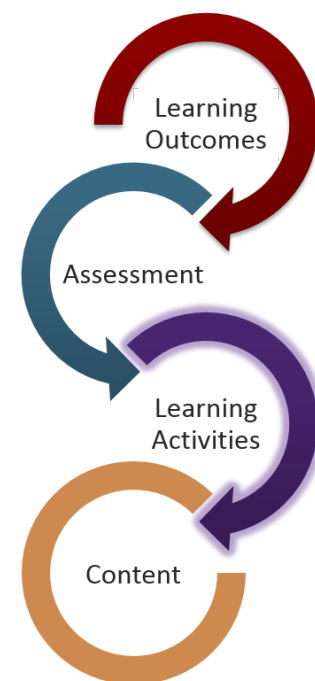
Connecting teaching, learning, and technology

In this module, we will look at learning activities that require students to **actively "do something"** with the content and concepts and **reflect on the doing** (individually or in pairs or groups). By the end of this unit we hope that you will be able to

- identify learning activities with different types of interaction (student↔content, student↔faculty, and student↔student) and
- plan a mix of active learning activities leveraging different types of interaction to enhance your course

In the framework of Backwards Design, learning activities include any type of activity that students undertake to work with the concepts and skills that lead to reaching the desired learning outcomes. This means that most assessments - especially authentic assessments - are also learning activities, so much of this module will also be helpful as you think through assessments as well.

In a traditional distance education class students would receive books and workbooks in the mail, read and work independently, and mail their work back in for a grader to mark. In IU Online classes, the focus is on breaking through those individual silos and providing opportunities for students to **actively** learn, share, and work with their fellow classmates and the instructor.



## What is Active Learning?

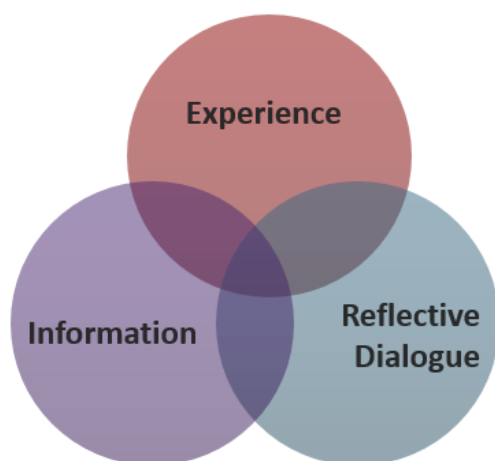
The concept of active learning encompasses a wide variety of learning activities in which students engage with the course content. The focus of active learning is to foster that engagement. When students sit and passively watch or listen to lectures - whether in person or

on video - they are not actively engaging with the content. If you think about the difference between your engagement with the topic at hand when you are simply listening to someone report out on the topic at a committee meeting versus when you are actively debating the topic with colleagues, you can see the difference. If students are actively involved in working with the content, they will learn more, be more satisfied, and be more successful in your course.

You may have come across active learning through the [Seven Principles of Undergraduate Education \(pdf, 267k\)](http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED282491.pdf) (<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED282491.pdf>). Chickering and Gamson note that students "must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves" (p. 4).

Dee Fink (2005), a leading author in active learning, suggests thinking about active learning as the intersection of three components

- **doing or observing** (what Fink calls a "rich learning experience"),
- **information and ideas**, and
- **reflective dialogue**.



A "rich learning experience" is an activity that aligns with both learning outcomes and assessments and provides opportunities for students to **learn** new concepts and skills or to **practice** with concepts and skills they have recently learned. Providing "hands-on" activities for students, either individually or in small groups, is an important way to both increase motivation and support learning. Situations where students actively participate and work with the content are more effective in encouraging students to think reflectively and push their understanding of the

concepts than situations where students receive information passively. Well-designed learning activities promote that kind of active learning.

An example from a Spanish class might be having students explore a local Hispanic market, observing the types of food and how it is organized, reflecting on the differences and similarities to a standard American grocery store, and connecting their reflections to course concepts about culture and its influence on shopping, cooking, and eating. In an online class, the students could share pictures or video of their exploration and their reflection with the class through a tool such as VoiceThread or in a discussion forum where they can compare and contrast their experience with those of their classmates.



## Reflection and Reflective Dialogue

For Fink, the Reflective Dialogue component of active learning includes having students reflect on the meaning of their learning experience individually or with others. The reflection can take many different forms from that of a journal to a series of minute papers to a debrief conversation with a peer. The key is that they are prompted to answer questions such as:

- What am I learning?
- What is the value of what I am learning?
- How am I learning?
- What else do I need to learn?

This sort of regular, structured reflection provide opportunities for those "ah-ha" moments when connections between concepts are made, alternative perspectives are clarified, and metacognition is improved. Regular reflection also encourages students to notice how much of what they do involves and is grounded in tacit knowledge. Having them verbalize and share their understandings can turn up underlying misconceptions that can be hindering their learning without them being consciously aware of the problem.

If the concept of actively inquiring and reflecting in a cycle sound familiar, they also serve as the basis for Dewey's Practical Inquiry Model (shown below), on which the [cognitive presence](https://canvas.ucdavis.edu/courses/34528/pages/types-of-presence-cognitive-and-social-presence) (<https://canvas.ucdavis.edu/courses/34528/pages/types-of-presence-cognitive-and-social-presence>) aspect of the [Community of Inquiry Framework](https://canvas.ucdavis.edu/courses/34528/pages/being-present-in-your-online-course) (<https://canvas.ucdavis.edu/courses/34528/pages/being-present-in-your-online-course>) is also built.

