

Active Learning Works: the evidence

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“Active Learning? You must be joking, there’s no time for entertainment with all this content to cover.”

We have all heard such views in staffrooms, yet in official circles active learning remains the orthodoxy. Professors queue up to insist upon it, inspectors require it, and conference speakers chant its praises. Many of us also remember long lectures about its effectiveness during our teacher training. Yes, we all know the theory --- but does it actually work in practice?

Many researchers have asked this question, and have tried a ‘let’s suck it and see’ approach to answer it. These are rigorous control group studies with real teachers in real schools and colleges.

Hundreds, or even thousands of students are divided between:

- an ‘*experimental group*’ which is taught with active methods and
- a ‘*control group*’: which is taught the same material without active methods.

The control and experimental groups are carefully composed to be identical in their mix of ability, social background, and so on. The control and experimental groups are taught for the same length of time, by the same teachers, or by teachers of the same ability, and the students are tested to see which group has learned best. In study after study of this type, active learning produced much better learning

Active Learning adds a grade and a half to achievement.

Professor John Hattie has used careful statistical methods to average the findings of the 253 most rigorous studies on active learning. His findings show that if you put a student in the experimental group, then on average, they will do more than a grade and a half better than if they had been placed in the control group.

The time the teacher has to teach the topic is not a factor here. Remember that the groups taught with active learning methods were taught *for the same amount of time* as the control group. While the experimental group was engaged in the active learning methods, the control group was receiving more content and fuller explanations from their teacher. But the control group learned less.

Many teachers say active learning would be great ‘if they had the time’. But the research shows that if you make the time for effective active learning by doing less didactic teaching, then your students will do better. It may seem strange not to be able to say everything you know about the topic you are teaching, but it won’t help if you do. You know too much!

Active learning works best at every academic level. Graham Gibbs, in a large study, identified the university courses which produced the highest quality learning (deep learning) and the highest achievement. Researchers then visited these courses to discover how they were taught. The courses were found to use active learning, on tasks that the students found interesting, with plenty of student interaction. The teaching was also well structured so that new learning was built on old.

Peter Westwood, summarizing research on how best to teach students with learning difficulties argued for highly structured, intensive, well directed, active learning methods.

<http://www.geoffpetty.com/downloads/WORD/ActiveLearningWorks.doc>



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