

## what is it?

Active learning is student centred, not teacher focused: the teacher is “the guide on the side”, not the “sage on the stage”.

Using this approach, teachers plan activities to engage learners in the discovery of materials and guide them to an understanding of learning objectives.

As such, learning is not a simple knowledge transfer from teacher to student. Rather, students work through learning activities, on their own or in pairs or groups, and find their own way to the knowledge.

How can we integrate active learning into library instruction? There are numerous ways to do so:

- Let students take databases for a spin while you're there to help rather than just telling them about these tools.
- Have students look at some websites and describe the “good” and the “bad” features of these sites rather than describing how to evaluate websites for credibility.



Painting: The Ultimate Classroom  
by Todd Berman ([www.theartdontstop.com](http://www.theartdontstop.com))

## how does it work?

Students complete activities on their own or in pairs or groups and practice in order to learn. As the librarian planning an active learning session, your focus changes from, “What am I trying to tell students?” to “What will students learn?”

You plan your lessons or sessions with learning objectives such as:

- students will be able to define a search strategy
- students will find the appropriate database to search and find appropriate articles to complete their assignment.

Then you design activities to meet these specific learning objectives. In class, students do not just listen to a lecture. They see, read, search, discuss and might even show each other—their learning is more meaningful and better retained.

The active learning classroom is welcoming:

- a friendly librarian greets students for their information literacy instruction
- there are computers or laptops available for student use
- students may share their discoveries with each other, their professor and librarian using white boards and markers or projectors

If you are new to this approach, start out with simple activities like a Think-Pair-Share exercise. As your comfort level increases, try breaking the class into groups in which students devise search strategies, search databases and report to the rest of the class on what they've done. Given time and collaboration with a faculty member, you could also plan complex multi-week activities such as a webquest or paper trail assignment.

Examples of active learning activities are easily found in the literature and on the web. We especially like the University of Texas at Arlington's site:  
[http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/tips/al/al\\_example.html](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/tips/al/al_example.html)

## who's doing it?

While active learning is more prevalent in elementary and secondary schools than in colleges and universities, it is being used more and more in post-secondary classrooms and libraries. As college and university centres for teaching and learning grow in importance, teachers are slowly turning away from the lecture as the main teaching method. Librarians are changing their approaches too. A scan of information literacy as well as university and college library websites shows that many librarians value an active learning approach to information literacy instruction.

## why is it significant?

The ACRL *Guidelines for Instruction Programs in Academic Libraries* state: “Instruction should employ active learning strategies and techniques that require learners to develop critical thinking skills in concert with information literacy skills.” One of Chickering and Gamson's (1999) seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education is that good practice encourages active learning. Further Michael (2006) found that, “Properly implemented SCL (student-centered learning) can lead to increased motivation to learn, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes towards the subject being taught.”

## further reading

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## what are the challenges?

Librarians face special challenges in using active learning. For example,

- If students have a professor who lectures, then being asked to take a more active role in their own learning feel uncomfortable.
- librarians often have an hour or less with students which can make it difficult to understand group dynamics or to build the level of trust needed for students try active learning exercises if these activities are unfamiliar.

In addition, faculty input and feedback are crucial to the development of a strong and successful information literacy program which uses an active learning approach.

- faculty are not always willing to provide the extra class time needed for active learning;
- faculty do not always give feedback—they like what we do but don't always have the time to tell us.

Finally, planning is crucial. You must consider specific learning objectives and chose the activities that directly support them as well as think about class size and academic level (e.g., are students first year or fourth year?). Building a library of successful active learning activities takes time. However, once built, activities are easily tweaked or changed to suit different subjects and class situations.

## where is it going?

Active learning is only going to be more prevalent and more widely used in higher education because student retention requires engagement.

Engaging students in information literacy instruction classes—particularly as institutions adopt blended and online learning programs—will mean moving away from lecture-based teaching towards active learning as well as companion approaches such as problem-based, case-based and collaborative learning.

## what are the implications for libraries?

Academic library staff help lead the shift away from lecture-based teaching by:

- employing active learning practices in their information literacy programs and thus becoming resources for faculty;
- supporting the objectives of their institutions' centres for teaching and learning by modelling active learning teaching methods, by doing research on active learning and by curating learning activity libraries to share with faculty.

Our students are very confident about their online skills but many are not as competent at finding credible resources and writing papers as they are at texting and using Facebook. They need 21<sup>st</sup> century digital and information literacy skills to ensure that their confidence is matched by competence to be successful in a world that expects them to be technologically savvy and able to keep up with ever-changing online media.

We can be central to enhancing and supporting students' digital literacy at school and for the rest of their lives by using active learning practices in library instruction.