

Active Learning in a Socially Distanced Classroom

Active learning, which helps students engage with course content, will be especially important in a socially-distanced (also referred to as physically-distanced) classroom. There are a variety of active learning strategies that can be implemented without any modification, but some active learning strategies will require modification and creative thinking to make it work in socially-distanced classroom configurations. Below, you'll see that we've taken five traditional active learning techniques and provided recommendations to help you modify them so that students can still engage while adhering to safety recommendations.

01 THINK-PAIR-SHARE:

Begin by presenting students with a problem and allow them time to think about the solution, jot down ideas or work the problem. Then, have students get into pairs to consider the problem together. Finally, have students share their solutions with the class.

- To avoid traffic flow issues or cross-contamination of surfaces, have students pair with the person closest to them so that they do not have to move seats.
- In alternating pairs, ask half the pairs to use text messaging or messaging apps to communicate. This cuts down on noise and allows the other half of the pairs to better hear one another while still 6 feet apart.
- When you repeat the exercise with a new problem, maintain the same pairings but switch which students are messaging and which are talking.
- For a hybrid or hyflex class: Partner one student in the face-to-face class with a student participating online via Zoom breakout rooms. Have students in the face-to-face class use ear buds to cut down on audio feedback.

02 GALLERY WALK

Post a series of question on several posters around the room and invite students walk around and add their ideas on the posters

- Assign students different questions to start with and have them write their responses on post it notes.
- Ask students assigned to different questions to get up and add their post it note to a poster so that students aren't approaching the same poster at the same time.
- Then, have those students tackle a different question as another group posts their answers until all students have responded to all questions.
- Once all students have added their ideas, have them get up again in small groups to view each others' responses.
- For a hybrid or hyflex class: Use a Google doc divided into columns or Google sheets with a question at the top of each column and allow students to add their responses to those columns.

03 FISH BOWL

A group of students form a circle in the middle of the room and discuss a topic. The remaining students listen and observe the dialogue.

- Before class begins, organize the chairs in a large circle with seats 6 feet apart to avoid students having to move desks during class.
- Use colored tape to mark 4 spots in the middle of the circle that are 6 feet from one another and 6 feet from any chairs in the outer circle.
- Ask 4 students seated in different areas of the circle to move into the circle and stand on a marked spot.
- Use microphone technology to amplify the voices of those in the fish bowl.
- For a hybrid or hyflex class: Ask 4 students participating virtually to serve as the “fish” in the fishbowl. After observing the dialogue, have the other virtual students as well as face-to-face students respond by asking questions via the Zoom chat window.

04 TEAM PAIR SOLO

Students begin working on a task or problem in a small group. The group then splits into pairs, and eventually the students work individually.

- Assign students to permanent teams that will consistently work together during group work time.
- Prior to class, designate and mark off areas where the groups will meet, making sure that there is at least six (6) feet between each student in each group and significant space between each group to reduce the possibility of groups disturbing one another.
- Have students work on the problem using some application where they may share what they are working on like Google docs or Microsoft teams.
- Have students stay in the same configuration throughout the process even as they work in pairs and then solo.
- Use microphones or microphone technology where appropriate.
- For a hybrid or hyflex class: Use breakout rooms in Zoom to break online students into teams and pairs.

References

- Bruff, Derek. (2020). Active Learning in Hybrid and Socially Distanced Classrooms. Retrieved from <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/2020/06/active-learning-in-hybrid-and-socially-distanced-classrooms/>
- Interactive Techniques. University of Central Florida Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning. Retrieved from http://www.fctl.ucf.edu/TeachingAndLearningResources/CourseDesignAssessment/content/101_Tips.pdf
- Silberman, M. (1996). Active Learning: 101 Strategies to Teach Any Subject. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

05 SEND-A-PROBLEM

In teams, students participate in a series of problem-solving rounds and then evaluate alternative solutions offered by the different groups.

- Prior to class, designate and mark off areas where the groups will meet, making sure that there is at least six (6) feet between each student in each group and significant space between each group to reduce the possibility of groups disturbing one another.
- To reduce the number of physical interactions that students might have with one another, students will work together on their problem using a shared application tool like Google docs or Microsoft teams. Additionally, they can designate one individual within the group to explain their solution if called upon to do so.
- Each group electronically sends their solution to the instructor who presents all solutions. Teams review and discuss the solutions developed by their peers, evaluate the answers, and develop a final solution.
- For a hybrid or hyflex class: Use Zoom breakout rooms to break online students into teams. Alternatively, create teams with both face-to-face and virtual students by having face-to-face students also participate via Zoom breakout rooms and use their headphones to cut down on audio feedback.



You can find more teaching and learning resources for the socially-distanced classroom on teaching.utk.edu.