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# Learning Through Active Learning Projects [1]

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I would like to test two related issues: do active learning projects make a measurable difference to students' learning, and does the type of project make a measurable difference? It is my strong sense that active learning projects (ALPs) help students learn — not just content, but also the synthetic, analytical, and interpretive skills that are key to my discipline and also transferable to students' lives in all areas. I would like to use a two-step process that can illuminate both learning outcome and the process of learning. In AY 2013-2014 I will be teaching three classes: a large 1000-level lecture class, a small 4/5000-level lecture class, and a graduate seminar. This will let me assess learning through ALPs in three different environments. I would use the PTS teaching development fund to hire a graduate student to help me with data collection and interpretation, and if that student were interested in a joint publication I would be delighted to consider it. I will apply for IRB permissions myself.

**Step 1:** The first piece of this project is to assess whether ALPs help students internalize methodologies and approaches, and also to consider whether different sorts of active learning projects have different impact on students' learning. This step has two components in data collection: (1) to assess students' knowledge before they participate in an ALP and after, through written questions in class; and (2) to assess their learning and understanding by giving them essay questions on exams for which they have completed an ALP and for which they have not. Thus I will set up an essay question on the first exam that everyone takes with no associated ALP. Do they do worse on this than on the other essays? On the second exam, I would set up a question for which all students had done an ALP — but some of them would have done one kind of ALP and others a different sort (say, using words or drawings to express ideas, or going on a scavenger hunt versus brainstorming in the classroom). Does it make a difference to their essay? I would of course discard the disadvantaging question from their final grades. There are multiple ways in which I wish to analyze the data collected here. I would like to look, for instance, at struggling students: do ALPs help them more? Is there a gender split? Can I see a difference between people who are majoring in Classics and cognate disciplines, and those who are not?

**Step 2:** The second piece of this project investigates process. As an educator, I can see there might be different reasons why ALPs enhance learning and understanding, but I would like to speak to students to gain their input. Free writes are an obvious first step: I can ask the students to write for 10 minutes, making sure they know this is voluntary and confidential. I would do two free writes in the course of the semester, the first with the prompt "What kinds of things are helping your learning in this class," and the second with a more specific prompt "What is the effect of active learning projects on your learning? What is the effect of taking essay exams on your learning?" Then I would randomly select a small number of people,

offering them each $10 for a 30-40-minute interview. This one-on-one environment allows for greater detail and less structure, so my assistant and I could ask the students to discuss their thoughts about the impact of ALPs on the process of their learning, on what they learn (content- and agenda-related), and on the social side of class. We could ascertain what they thought was working well and what not. We would try to elicit stories: “Give me an example of a time when you learned something that will stick with you for the next 20 years.”

Publication of this project would be interesting and fun. It is uncommon for projects to be able to assess both learning and the process of learning, so this work should be of real interest to a broader audience, and to a graduate student in Sociology or Education as well as to myself. I plan to submit it to a journal on pedagogy, but I would also like to see if the Archaeological Institute of America might consider posting it on the “education” section of their website, in order to reach the widest possible audience within my own field.

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