

In the Classroom 84

The Active Teaching and Learning Strategy That Has Had the Most Impact on Me

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Stan Skrabut: Welcome back. Thanks ever so much for joining me on this podcast. Certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are doing other things, but you're still hanging out with me and I really do appreciate it. This week, I'm going to share a teaching and learning strategy that I would have to say has had the most impact on my thinking about education. I was exposed to it while I was a student at the United States Air Force Academy Preparatory School, better known as the Prep school. I have briefly mentioned it in previous episodes but now I'm going to provide more details in this episode.

Why am I talking about this strategy? There's a number of reasons that I decided to select this time to talk about this particular strategy. First of all, it happened to come to mind when I was reading Dan Levy's book, *Teaching Effectively with Zoom*. It conjured up all kinds of memories, fun memories I might say, of this learning strategy or teaching strategy. Learning and teaching strategy.

Due to COVID-19, many instructors are now finding themselves teaching differently. In many cases, they're teaching remotely and they have to weave things together both asynchronous and synchronous platforms. I thought this particular strategy could help them create impactful instruction. Lastly, I was explaining this strategy to another faculty member and thought that you guys would like it. This is what this strategy happens to be. It's not very difficult strategy. It actually involves only three parts. Four. Three parts.

The first part is that you have students read, watch, otherwise consume some course content. The content that you want them to see during that particular module, the content that you want them to consume as part of that week, what have you, but you want them to consume it. This could be reading chapters from a textbook. It could be having them watch a series of videos or reading articles, anything like that.

Next, and I think this is really important. You have to have students participate in an asynchronous activity. This can be a discussion, it could be homework, have them do a quiz, something. This allows them to engage with that material they consumed. It has to count, it has to have points assessed to it, but it tests their knowledge on that recently digested material. Now, a little add on to that is you as the instructor need to go back and review the results of what your students did prior to the synchronous or live session where you're going to discuss the material rather than lecture on it. This is novel. The fact that if you do it right, they will have knowledge about the content where you can actually enter into a discussion rather than what typically

happens that you assign material to read prior to class, they don't read it now you're lecturing.

This is a very simple but powerful strategy. It's one that worked in my mind extremely well when I was at the Air Force Academy Prep School. In 1981, I had the fortune to be a student at the United States Air Force Academy Prep School. Academics at the Prep School was vastly different than what I had been previously exposed to. Normally in high school, teacher would tell us to go read something and then in class they would lecture about the same material. Why read it? In most cases I didn't. Prep School entirely different. I had to read the material.

Each academic day, we had four one hour classes of instruction with guaranteed one and a half hours of homework for each of those classes. In other words, we were guaranteed to have six hours of homework each night on top of all the other things that we're doing involving physical fitness and military studies and such. This was six hours of guaranteed homework. Now, to help facilitate that the instructors provided very detailed syllabus. You knew exactly what you had to read, what homework you had to do and you could work ahead if you wanted to. The weekends, because we had nothing else to do, we often did our homework so we could get ahead in the class.

Basically, we were doing self directed learning. We would go ahead and work on this material because there was an expectation that we would read the material and do the homework prior to going in and receiving a lecture on the content. There was an expectation so much that every day we would have to turn in our homework prior to the start of the class. Each of those home works was graded. We would be assessed point. We had to go in, learn the material ourselves, do a homework assignment that was graded prior to receiving the lecture on it.

Lot of power there because it got us engaged in the material. When we showed up to class, we already had prior knowledge of the content. The classes, their purpose was to help clarify any misconception. Now, on top of this, every other day, we had a time quiz and these quizzes were cumulative. In other words, we would see questions that were not only about the recent material that we just covered but it could be anything for that entire course from day one to the present time we could be quizzed on it. We had to always stay up on prior information. In some cases we had a quiz on the first day of class because the syllabus and your course content handed out to you well ahead of time. The first day of class, you could have a quiz and in a lot of cases, we did. That was educational in itself.

I would have to say that this way of teaching had a very positive effect on me and after doing it for a year, I got into the habit of a lot of self directed learning. When I went to classes for the rest of the time that I was taking formal classes, I read the content before I showed up to class and I was ready to engage. Very positive effects on me. That was in 1981, roll the clock forward 1999 I got out of the Air Force and I was working as an instructional technologist for Hobart and William Smith language department. Hobart and William Smith Colleges modern languages department. As part of the grant, we were spear meaning with a number of technologies to support

language learning. One of the technologies we started to use was a learning management system.

Prior to that, all the courses I had taken, I had not ever used a learning management system. This was new to me, but it was also new to our faculty and the learning management system we selected was Blackboard. We were experimenting with a learning management system which is really designed for online learning even though we were a residential institution. The classes at Hobart and William Smith colleges were all face to face but we're figuring out how to use a learning management system to do a lot of different things.

One of the ways that we used this was in support of a Chinese literature class. I suggested to the Chinese Professor to use Blackboard to support his face to face classes. My recommendation built upon what I had learned at the Prep School. Basically, I encouraged the instructor at the last class of the week to assign reading that students had to go in and read their content basically and then had to respond to an asynchronous discussion that was going to be due by 10:00 PM the night before their next face to face class.

Here we are, we have this activity, they're going to read their content, asynchronous learning. They are then going to participate in a discussion, another asynchronous activity. Then they show up for a synchronous activity face to face class. Prior to the discussion, prior to coming to the face to face class, the instructor could review the discussion to look for gaps in learning as well as start the discussion as at a deeper point than he would normally do. This turned out to be very successful. The professor reported that his discussions regarding the content was much richer than for previous classes and these discussions would continue on after the course was even done. He left the discussions open and students were in there discussing and talking about issues well after the course was done. That was really positive.

All right, bringing it up to today. Recently I finished reading a book called *Teaching Effectively with Zoom*. The reason I chose this book is we are very much in a remote learning environment and we are very much reliant on digital tools. Basically, we're going to be holding discussions on virtual platforms such as learning management systems, webinar platforms like Zoom. We have to figure out how to reconcile all this, how to leverage the best out of both asynchronous and synchronous platforms.

Dan Levy, in his book, *Teaching Effectively with Zoom*, offer some thoughts for maximizing the effect of asynchronous and synchronous platforms. How to get them to get the most out of both. As I mentioned in the beginning, he got me to think about a strategy that I had used a long time ago. With that strategy he brings it up to date, basically describing a blended learning process where you're blending asynchronous and synchronous, and this closely resembles what I have described.

First of all, you're going to have your students engage with the content on their own. It's basically asynchronous, which means you're going to have them read the content or watch the content, whatever you put in front of them. You're going to have them consume that. Then you're going to have them participate in an asynchronous

assignment. This asynchronous assignment can be discussion. It could be a quiz, other homework assignments. It doesn't matter, but you're going to have them do something and prior to your live session, you're going to review the results. You need to give yourself adequate time to review those results.

The last piece is conduct a live or synchronous session, where you explore the topic deeper, where you go ahead and clear misconceptions and fill in the gaps based on what you have observed from your students. If you are you using a discussion as an activity? I would encourage you to go back to episodes 29 and 30, where I talk about online discussion, these asynchronous discussions and strategies for getting the most out of those discussions and it's all based on this idea that the students are going to consume content first and then getting involved in the discussion.

What you want to do once the discussions are done is very quickly, you want to determine what the students understood about the material, identify any misconceptions and help them develop correct mental models about the content that you provide. Different strategies that you can consider when doing these asynchronous activities, discussions, homework, quizzes, projects, reflections. You have an array of opportunities in front of you where you can have them work through that material.

When I was at the Air Force Academy Prep School, for example, a math class we would have to read our chapter, our different sections on the chapter, dealing with math and then we would have homework sets that we had to work through. We would do the homework sets that we were assigned, and that was us engaging in that content prior to the class and then the instructor would lecture. Now we had to turn our homework in as we walked into the classroom, so the instructor did not have an opportunity to really assess where our gaps in learning were, but there was another strategy they used in the classroom that quickly pointed it out. I'll leave that for another time, but basically the results from those activities are going provide you the meet for your live session.

It's really critical that you review what those results are. Those are three different ways, and they're all similar, but three different instances when I have run into this strategy, and I think it's tremendously powerful strategy. Here's some keys to making it work. One, students have to consume the content before they show up to a live lecture, right? They need to be able to have consumed this content so they've got this sloshing around in their brain and they're starting to make connection. You want them to start building mental models before you talk with them.

Next is having this asynchronous activity. You want students to engage with the content. You want them to do this before you move to your live lecture. This is, I think the absolute key piece to this. Is not just have them passively consume content, but you want them to actively engage with it before they interface with you. If you do this, it'll take your learning up a number of notches. I would love to hear about results that you're having based on doing this. It was revolutionary in terms of my learning while I was at the Prep school and it fueled how I would learn past that, and it definitely helped me.

Well, there you have it. A simple but powerful teaching and learning strategy. It is one that you can use regardless of modality. It can be face to face or online or in this remote modality that we're now involved in. I encourage you to go check it out. Before I let you go, here is a quick plug for my book.