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Active Engagement: The New Currency for 21st Century Learners

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Educators have the opportunity to improve the student experience by incorporating contemporary culture and real life experiences into the core curriculum. This is particularly noteworthy considering the findings in Toppo's (2015) recent USA TODAY article, noting reasons that impact students' inability to learn. For example, Toppo notes work by Mark Bracket, Director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and Professor in the Child Study Center, demonstrating that students are generally tired, stressed, and bored.

The clear message from the results of his work with tens of thousands of students is that educators need to try a new approach. In fact, Bracket suggest that the biggest obstacle to learning is an outdated curriculum that is out of touch with the 21st Century students and leaves them yawning.

Why Active Engagement?

Active engagement activities researched over three decades consistently notes that learners gain more from their studies when they devote time and energy to activities that require interacting with peers, instructors, and the business community (Kuh, 2009). Coupled with that, learners have repeatedly maintained that relevant engagement applied to concrete situations helps them understand concepts and connects the dots to what is being taught from the text book and

classroom lectures. Additionally, as Brackett, the researcher from Yale University stated above, students are bored, stressed and tired. Therefore, to engage students yet meet the required institutional imperatives, educators might look into a tool box of creativity to engage learners to prepare them to compete on the global stage.

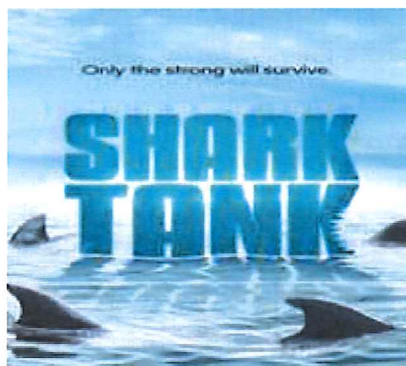
With my own students falling asleep in class, I developed a few strategies I use to keep them awake and engaged. I modified the core curriculum to include contemporary culture (music, art, and role playing). I also invited outside speakers to discuss real-world activities and share their expertise and experiences. The course curriculum was not disregarded, it was modified. This minor modification allowed students to move from passive to active learning and changed the trajectory on several fronts.

First, as an instructor, modification of the lesson plan manifested an elevated form of enthusiasm in me that was transferred to the students: my reduction in boredom helped my students to be less bored. Second, with new methodologies immersed into the curriculum, coupled with the infusion of contemporary culture, student behavior quickly moved from lassie faire to complete absorption. This had a positive impact on expected outcomes. Third, combining text book theory with real-world assignments (inviting outside speakers), allowed learners to connect the dots of theory to the realities of business. Finally, the unanticipated outcomes realized as a result of real-world engagement is that students extend their learning beyond the traditional classroom and the lessons learned were applied to real life experiences. Below are some generic and specific examples of engagement activities for educators.

Examples of Active Engagement Exercises

Shark Tank

Using the theme from the popular TV series Shark Tank, learners bring their dreams to fruition in this engagement exercise. Using the syllabus and textbook, learners develop a business idea and bring it to our very own local sharks (industry professionals, institution administrators) for evaluation. Learners strive to convince the sharks to invest in their idea. If their plan is not fully developed, the shark will make suggestions for improvement asking the participant to return to the drawing board.



The poster features a photograph of the Austin skyline at the top. Below the photo, the text reads "Lilly Conference" in a large, white, serif font, followed by "COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND LEARNING" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. A horizontal line separates this from the event details: "Join us in Austin" in a white, serif font, followed by "January 5 – 7, 2016" and "DoubleTree Austin, TX" in a white, sans-serif font. Another horizontal line follows. The bottom section contains the text "The Lilly Conference on College and University Teaching and Learning will have many opportunities for faculty members interested in evidence-based strategies to improve student learning. Please join us to network with colleagues, learn strategies from educational experts, and strengthen your scholarly teaching." in a white, sans-serif font. Below this is the "Plenary Speakers:" section, listing "Gladys Childs", "Terry Doyle", and "Todd Zakrajsek" in a white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, it says "For conference details and registration, visit us at www.lillyconferences-tx.com" in a white, sans-serif font.

The poster features a photograph of the Anaheim skyline at the top. Below the photo, the text reads "Lilly Conference" in a large, white, serif font, followed by "COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND LEARNING" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. A horizontal line separates this from the event details: "Join us in Anaheim" in a white, serif font, followed by "February 23-26, 2016" and "DoubleTree Anaheim, CA" in a white, sans-serif font. Another horizontal line follows. The bottom section contains the text "The Lilly Conference on College and University Teaching and Learning will have many opportunities for faculty members interested in evidence-based strategies to improve student learning. Please join us to network with colleagues, learn strategies from educational experts, and strengthen your scholarly teaching." in a white, sans-serif font.

Institutional Marketing Plan to Increase Enrollment (generic)

Learners are asked to create a marketing plan for a small business individually or as a collaborator on a team. Using a marketing template and theories from the text book students learn various marketing strategies and how to apply these principles to an actual or potential business. This active learning exercise requires learners to create a marketing strategy that can be implemented for any business. The final presentation can be presented stakeholders for implementation or elimination.

Community Engagement Project: Thompson Brothers BBQ (TBBBQ)

A community business owner presented the history, current environment and future vision for TBBBQ. The students were divided into three groups (marketing, business campaign and the research team). Leveraging text book theory through multiple engagement activities (in/out of the classroom) relevant engagement activities were executed via individual group projects. The final project culminated with a marketing presentation overhauling the business. TBBBQ immediately executed several of the suggestions made by students and invited them to the grand opening of their new business.



A recent graduate and young entrepreneur (accounting major) was invited to present the launch of a T-shirt business Honor Roll. This dressed down proprietor provided students with the details, the challenges, and opportunities of creating a thriving apparel company and the active engagement activities he participated in that resulted in his success.



Papa Johns

A local franchise owner/operator presented the pro/cons of franchising. She discussed her journey into the franchise business starting as an administrative support personnel during the early years of this pizza company's startup. The learners appreciated the pizza brought in for them to sample.

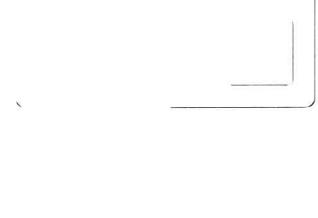
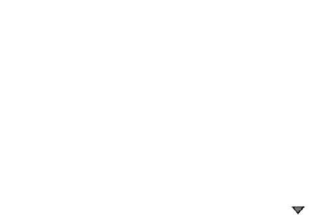


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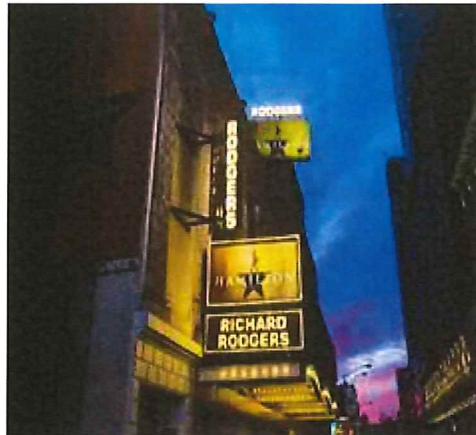


Active learning through Contemporary Culture

Mathews, Formachi and Ruebens (2013) found that using feature films with meaning can serve as a metaphor for life and be an effective way to demonstrate engagement through art. As examples, the Wizard of Oz, the Great Debaters, Wall Street, the Pursuit of Happyness, Remember the Titans, Roots, All the King's Men, Selma and Straight Outta Compton, have been used to teach and illustrate a variety of theories and concepts ranging from ethics, diversity, tolerance, strategic decision-making, economics, communication, critical thinking and leadership (Ambrosini, Billsberry & Collier, 2012; Canlas, Argenal, & Bajaj, 2015; Shaw, 1998). Below is an example of a Broadway production in NYC that is bringing the classroom into the theater.

Hamilton

Instructors in NYC leveraged contemporary culture through the arts, which proved to be an effective engagement activity, as they found with the Broadway play Hamilton (Stacio, 2013). The production is a revolutionary tale of America's fiery past told through contemporary music, hip hop "melodic love ballads, gentle lullabies, R&B power ballads, jazz that tells a story"



(Schonfeld, 2016). It is a part of American history that the creators came up with a way to share American history and teach life's lessons in a rap play format that resonates with the young and old alike. These are the type of engagement activities we need to do to get our kids involved and loving to learn (Perez, Ross, & Koroma, 2015). Teachers in NYC witnessed how Hamilton impacted students and designed syllabi around the play to teach "Revolutionary-era nation-building." (Schonfeld, 2016).

The examples above demonstrate a variety of engagement activities that energized learners and delivered exceptional outcomes. Instructors considering incorporating active learning activities into their lesson plan might leverage community partners, businesses or activities within their own environment to determine appropriate activities best suited for their learners. Below are exercises educators might consider when planning active engagement.

Be Intentional:

- Determine appropriate active engagement activities and customized them for your learners
- When selecting engagement activities connect and collaborate with community partners for mutually beneficial engagement outcomes
- Create relevant engagement projects that inspire, empower, motivate allowing learners to connect the dots

Merge assorted activities into your engagement activities:

- Include in core curriculum, lecture, reading, writing, social media, 3-D graphic demonstrations robotics and real world activities
- Infuse contemporary culture into the classroom (art, music, movies, poetry, local stage productions)

Inspect what you expect

- Leverage a satisfaction survey as an instrument to gage the pulse of learners
 - Give learners immediate feedback
 - Extract activities that worked Use them as a benchmark and tweak them for future engagement activities.
 - Mastery of engagement activities can be a multidimensional victory for the instructor, the learner and the institution

Initially, engagement activities can be time consuming, yet the time involved in planning is worth the effort as witnessed in the results. Educators should not be surprised when the light bulb clicks on for students. Learners gain confidence when they are able to connect the dots between classroom theory and real world activities. Active engagement can assist educators to create a blueprint that identifies the gaps and provides input for future planning. Finally, best practices can be tweaked and adopted for future engagement exercises that are repeatable.

Using effective engagement activities as a part of a balanced approach can help learners develop an awareness by obtaining knowledge through a different educational lens. Active learning, inspires critical thinking which enhances intellectual capital that can increase capacity to become economically stable (Howe & Strauss, 2007). The outcomes underscore the importance of involvement to student achievement and educational attainment.

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