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Active Learning Techniques Versus Traditional Teaching Styles: Two Experiments from History and Political Science

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ABSTRACT: Group role-playing and collaborative exercises are exciting ways to diversify college students' classroom experience and to incorporate active learning into your teaching. This article reports the results of two experiments that compared the effectiveness of role-playing and collaborative activities to teacher-centered discussions and lectures. Using both history and political science classes, we show that the students who participated in the role-plays and collaborative exercises did better on subsequent standard evaluations than their traditionally instructed peers. Presented here is a discussion of active learning, descriptions of the two experiments, and an explanation of the outcomes and implications of the study.

At many large colleges and universities like ours, the lecture still seems to be the centerpiece of instruction, where students passively absorb pre-processed information and then regurgitate it in response to periodic multiple-choice exams. While graders and teaching assistants make essay examinations and discussion sections possible, rarely do they effect significant change in the passive nature of the learning experience for these (mostly introductory or survey) classes. Such an environment provides incentives to learn only at the surface (passive) level rather than at the deep (active) level (Marton & Saljo, 1976). According to Jaques (1992), the traditional format encourages students to concentrate on superficial indicators rather than on fundamental underlying principles, thus neglecting deep (active) learning. Active learning refers to "experiences in which students are thinking about the subject matter" as they interact with the instructor and each other (McKeachie, 1999, p. 44; Gamson, 1991). This type of learning is important to all disciplines and fields, but it is critical to the humanities and

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the social sciences. Human interaction lies at the heart of the disciplines in these areas, yet instructors too often expect students to acquire relevant knowledge in a learning environment with little interactive content. While logistic necessity (large class sizes) dictates that the lecture format will likely continue to be important in the learning process, this only increases the need for balancing passive with active learning wherever and whenever the possibility arises.

This article empirically examines the effectiveness of active learning strategies that are applicable to most social science and humanities courses and to other areas of study as well. Specifically, we describe two activities—one a group role-play in a history class, the other a collaborative exercise in a political science class. The role-play required students to grasp the notion of multiculturalism in America during early colonization as they identified with one national or ethnic group. The collaborative exercise required students to analyze critically the wording of opinion poll questions as a source of potential distortion in opinion poll surveys. Both exercises emphasized the active participation of the students in the learning process. Both, therefore, are alternatives to the standard passive lecture and the teacher-centered discussion period. After describing the activities, we present the results of controlled experiments that tested their effectiveness as learning tools relative to the traditional formats. We then conclude with an analysis of the implications of our results and suggestions for possible directions in future research.

Benefits and Costs of Active Learning

For the purposes of this article, active learning strategies refer to a variety of collaborative classroom activities, ranging from long-term simulations to five-minute cooperative problem solving exercises (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Sutherland & Bonwell, 1996). Rather than facilitating the memorization of large quantities of information, activities like these stimulate inquiry and interest as students acquire knowledge and skills (Sheckley, 1989, p. 278, cited in Montgomery, Brown, & Deery, 1997, p. 219). Active learning techniques yield many benefits—they are student-centered; they maximize participation; they are highly motivational; and they give life and immediacy to the subject matter by encouraging students to move beyond a superficial, fact-based approach to the material (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Ladousse, 1987; McKeachie, 1999; Schaftel & Schaftel, 1976; Van Ments, 1994).

Several recent studies support these propositions (Elliot, 1993; Somers & Holt, 1993). Miller and Grocchia (1997) made a direct

controlled comparison between the standard lecture format and the cooperative learning format in an introductory college-level biology course. They reported that students taking the cooperative format option indicated significantly higher levels of satisfaction with the course than those taking the traditional format option. In a similar vein, DeNeve and Heppner (1997) examined role-play simulations in an industrial psychology course. Student responses were highly positive both immediately following the simulation and in follow-up interviews conducted eight months later. Montgomery, Brown, and Deery (1997) reported similar results. Applying Kolb's (1984) "experiential learning model" to a school board simulation used during an introductory education course at a small liberal arts college, they concluded that, "The simulation not only energized the students but also personalized an in-depth understanding of educational issues" (p. 217). These studies indicate that active learning strategies and techniques help create a more stimulating and enjoyable classroom environment for students.

Very little research, however, examines the actual effectiveness of active learning relative to traditional teaching formats. DeNeve and Heppner (1997) reported that a search of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) covering a three-year period unearthed 175 articles about active learning, but among these studies only twelve involved a direct comparison between active learning and other teaching methods. A number of these twelve studies reported no significant differences between active and passive teaching techniques in terms of student performance (p. 232). Based on their own study, DeNeve and Heppner concluded, "These results agree with recent research that suggested that active learning techniques are more effective for achieving some goals, while lectures are more effective for achieving other goals" (p. 243). In their structured comparison of cooperative versus traditional formats, Miller and Groccia (1997) obtained similarly ambiguous results. In a post-course evaluation to test five dimensions of critical thinking skills, the students participating in the cooperative class performed no better than those participating in the traditional class.

These results highlight the need for further research, particularly into whether there are costs as well as benefits to using active learning techniques in the classroom. Regardless of the evident benefits of activities, they may not be the most efficient technique for imparting information or for enhancing retention. Perhaps traditional methods like lectures might meet these goals more effectively. This issue is especially pertinent in the context of introductory courses in the humanities and social sciences, where instructors must cover large quantities of basic

information in a limited period of time, yet have an obligation to nurture students' intellectual skills. Assuming that an important goal of such courses is for students to leave the class with a firm grasp of the subject-matter, it seems valid to question whether the time devoted to active learning exercises might not be better employed elsewhere. Simply put, if one of the primary goals is to impart the substance of the material to students, do traditional methods, such as lectures or teacher-centered discussion sections, achieve this better than more stimulating, student-centered classroom activities? Conversely, can active learning techniques help students acquire a level of knowledge equivalent to or greater than that acquired through the traditional formats while they stimulate student interest and help them develop critical thinking skills? In the following section, we describe two experiments designed to examine these questions.

A number of important criteria guided the selection of these activities. They addressed the important issues of early multiculturalism and the reliability of opinion polls, both of which are central concepts in introductory history and political science courses. Second, the activities consumed about the same quantity of class time as the traditional formats. Replacing a fifty-minute lecture with a three-day simulation activity, covering the same quantity of material, would not be an accurate comparison. Third, the goals of the activities were directly comparable to the goals of the traditional lecture/discussion-group periods that they replaced. Simulations, however, often capture dynamics that are difficult to convey in the form of a lecture. A simulated meeting between the President and his National Security Council can convey to participants a sense of the pressures involved in making decisions during a crisis, but this would be quite difficult to convey in a lecture. In such a case, making a direct comparison between the two methods would be inappropriate. The activities described here addressed issues that instructors can use traditional methods to teach—a discussion section in the case of multiculturalism and a lecture in the case of opinion polls. Fourth, both activities were collaborative. Students worked together and, in effect, taught each other. Many activities inside and outside the classroom involve students working individually or only with the instructor, but the interaction among students in activities like these stimulates interest and increases pressure for students to perform well. Finally, the activities provided a contrast. The political science activity was relatively structured and required little preparation outside of class, while the history activity was more free-form and required greater preparation and planning.

While these activities took place in history and political science classrooms and the knowledge that students acquired in them is germane to those two disciplines, group role-plays and other collaborative exercises can apply to almost any humanities or social science classroom as well as to an array of other subjects. The important issue is that, if they can enhance student participation and interest as well as the acquisition of skills and knowledge, they should be an integral part of many different courses.

Multi-Cultures in the New World: A History Role-Play

Background

Multiple cultures interacted in North America even before Europeans of diverse origins stepped upon its shores. Adding to the variations among the societies and cultures of the people already inhabiting the continent, the relationships between English, French, Spanish, Native American, and African cultures proved an interesting mix in the 1600s and beyond. It is important to get students to view America and the United States as a multicultural region and nation from the very beginning. In fact, even the basic survey-level history courses should have a certain amount of multiculturalism, for, despite the overwhelming English character of the United States, numerous cultures have contributed to what is often referred to as the American tapestry or kaleidoscope.

While history classes should provide students with fundamental historical literacy, they are also an essential part of a liberal arts education. As such, any history class should help students to think past thoughts, to understand the motives and perceptions of other people perhaps very unlike themselves and inhabiting different conceptual worlds, and to comprehend the perspectives of others even though they might not agree or personally identify with them. A well-crafted and expertly delivered lecture can only go so far in conveying these notions to students. Simple discussion periods are the common teaching technique instructors use to help students develop these skills more fully. There is at least a partial assumption with this method that the more active students become in the learning process the more likely they are to attain historical and critical thinking skills. Many instructors have students read and reflect upon primary sources to this end but return to a teacher-centered classroom approach when discussing the materials

and the perceptions that they reveal to the readers. In-class role-plays can round out the process, making every facet of the particular learning experience active and student-centered.

The Activity

For this role-play, students divided into groups of three to five, one week before the actual activity. Each group assumed an historical collective role, the number of which depended upon the size of the class. There were seven possible roles—English-Americans in New England, English-Americans on the southern coast, Spanish-Americans in future Florida and on the Gulf Coast, French-Americans in the far north and in the Mississippi basin, Native Americans in the North, Native Americans in the South, and African-Americans predominantly in the South. The instructor gave all of the students a series of general questions to think about as they prepared for the next week's activity. Requiring each group to meet outside of class or to turn in a two-page synopsis of their answers (collectively or individually) as homework provided motivation. To answer the questions, students reviewed materials from the textbook, lectures, and any other primary or secondary sources the instructor assigned. Such preparation questions included: What is the nature of your contact with the other groups? How would you assess that contact? What are costs and benefits to you? Do you prefer interacting with one group to the others? What are your motivations for being in North America? What is your vision for North America over the next 50 years? What is the role of women in your society or group? What is your approach to the land, property, and trade?

When running the activity, the instructor moderated a debate among the different groups such that every group member represented the group's ideas and opinions to the class during the activity. Before the debate began, however, each group had a few minutes to review their positions and points of view. Having thought about or even prepared answers to the questions above, all the groups were able to debate more specific, contentious questions like: Why are the Europeans in America? Can the Native Americans effectively keep the Europeans off their land if they want to, and which side would the African Americans join in a conflict? What efforts, if any, should Europeans make to work constructively with Native Americans? What happens when war breaks out between two of the colonizing European powers? Can the Native American groups and African Americans integrate with or work with any of the European cultures better than the others? In which group

would you prefer to be a woman? After this experience, students were prepared to answer overarching exam questions:

- Was English cultural domination of the North American continent inevitable? Explain why or why not, taking into consideration the interaction of multiple cultures.
- What would you say to someone who complained about America getting too multicultural, citing that it was not like this before the Civil War?
- What were the varieties of cultures intersecting in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? What were the major differences between those cultures and how did they resolve them?

An important, final part of the role-play was the debriefing in which the instructors used these three questions to help the students contextually organize the information and perspectives they presented to one another in the activity. The role-play's effectiveness would be lost, unless the students could carefully review it under the instructor's guidance in this manner.

The Experimental Design

The setting for the history role-play experiment was an introductory course covering United States history up to 1865. The class we used was a large course that divided into eight discussion sections, each meeting with a teaching assistant once per week outside of lectures. Two of these discussion sections were control sections, while the other six sections experienced the group role-play as test sections. We randomly selected three of these sections for inclusion in this study as test sections. One week before the experiment, the teaching assistants of the test sections divided their classes into groups and assigned them historical roles according to the description above. The control section teaching assistants told their students to prepare to discuss the chapter and lectures regarding early contact and exploration of the Americas, hinting that a quiz was a possibility. On the day of the experiment, these instructors conducted traditionally formatted, teacher-centered discussion periods. Summarizing and explaining the contents of the readings and the lectures, they asked questions of their groups as a whole. Meanwhile, the test section instructors moderated a debate among their groups over the specific questions, occasionally lapsing into the more general preparation questions. Two weeks after the in-class portion of the group role-play experiment, students in both the test and control

sections took an exam that included an essay question about multiple cultures in the New World. For the essay, they had to select four different cultural groups, identify their similarities and differences, and analyze the sources and resolutions of conflict among them. Two blind graders unassociated with the course assessed the responses, grading them on a one- to ten-point scale.

The Trouble with Opinion Polls: A Political Science Activity

Background

Few would question the importance of public opinion as a guide to political action in a democratic state. As George Gallup, the grandfather of the opinion poll, wrote, "in a democracy we demand the views of the people be taken into account. This does not mean that leaders must follow the public's view slavishly; it does mean that they should have an available appraisal of public opinion and take some account of it in reaching their decision" (Gallup, 1965–1966, p. 547). Gallup would no doubt be surprised to see how critical the public opinion poll has become in contemporary American political life. It is probably no exaggeration to say that few politicians, be they members of Congress or even the President, will risk making a political decision without first ascertaining the public's view of the issue.

While much of the opinion polling done in America is conducted by entirely reputable firms such as Gallup or Mori, the ease with which polls can be manipulated to achieve the desired results means that they are often abused for purely political gain. A recent example of this was evident in the battle in Congress to secure passage of the Tobacco Bill. The results of an opinion poll—one purporting to show that the American people opposed the bill's passage—circulated on Capitol Hill and ultimately derailed the bill in the Senate. Despite its influence, the tobacco industry funded the so-called "DiVall poll," slanting the wording of the questions heavily against the bill. Given the ubiquity and pervasive importance of opinion polls in the American political system, it is essential to expose students of American government to the mechanics of the opinion poll process and to equip them with the information and critical faculties necessary to make an informed assessment of their merits or otherwise. Specifically, students should learn to question the wording of those polls. Whether by accident or design, the wording of opinion poll questions can have a dramatic impact on the results.

This exercise had two basic purposes—first, to encourage students to dissect opinion poll questions and to make judgments concerning

the neutrality, or otherwise, of the wording; and second, to confront students in a very direct and immediate way with how results can vary, sometimes dramatically, as a consequence of often subtle changes in question wording.

The Activity

For this activity, students worked in pairs. Each pair received a copy of either sheet A or sheet B (see Appendix). The pairs discussed and tried to reach a consensus on which of the eleven opinion poll questions were problematic in terms of the wording of the questions. The wording of the first seven questions was identical on both sheets. The problems involved with these were fairly straightforward, but they allowed students to grasp many of the basic concepts (the biased phrasing in question #1 or the use of the morally pejorative term "partial birth abortion" in question #3 for instance). The last four questions on each sheet were from genuine opinion poll surveys, but questions #8 through #11 on sheet A were different from the corresponding questions on sheet B. For example, question #8 on sheet A was from a poll commissioned by Ross Perot and was clearly worded to maximize "yes" responses. The equivalent question on sheet B was from a Gallup poll and addressed the same issue area—campaign contributions from interest groups. The wording of this second question, however, avoided the use of pejorative terms and was therefore more balanced. Because these questions were part of actual surveys, the students saw clear evidence of how wording altered responses. The Perot question generated 90 per cent "yes" responses, yet the question on sheet B produced a majority (51 per cent) who thought groups should have the right to contribute to campaigns. Hence, while questions #1 to #7 allow students to tackle the basic principles underlying scientific opinion polling, questions #8 to #11 provide powerful evidence to show how even small changes to the wording of a question can generate strikingly different results.

The Experimental Design

We conducted this experiment across two honors level "Introduction to American Government" classes—one formed the experimental group, the other, the control group. The same professor instructed both classes, so we were able to control for the possible confounding effects of two different instructors. The experimental group performed the activity described above during the class period. The control group received the same basic information about the nuances of opinion poll wording but

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Control and Experimental Groups in Both Disciplines

	Political Science		History	
	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental
Number of Cases	14	16	30	47
Mean	6.8	7.6	6.7	7.7
Standard Deviation	1.3	0.8	0.9	0.8
Difference in Means		0.8		1.0

in the form of a conventional lecture. A week later, both groups took a short written test during class in which they wrote a two-page answer to the question: "What are major issues to be considered when designing a good opinion poll question?" Another instructor then graded these exams "blind" on a one- to ten-point scale.

The Results

Table 1 presents a summary of descriptive statistics for control and experimental groups across the two disciplines. As the final row in the table indicates, the difference in the mean performance of the experimental group in political science was +0.8, while that in history was +1.0. These results suggest that the groups exposed to the active learning activities outperformed those taught by traditional methods. To ensure that these differences were statistically significant, we ran two bivariate regression analyses, using student performance (measured on a 1 to 10 scale) as the dependent variable and membership of either experimental or control group as the independent variable. We coded the independent variable as a dichotomy—scored 1 for membership in the experimental group and 0 for membership in the control group. Table 2 presents the regression results.

The results presented in Table 2 provide clear evidence that, across both disciplines, students who engaged in the active learning activity performed significantly better than those exposed to the traditional methods. In the case of the history classes, the probability that chance alone could have achieved these results is less than one in a hundred. The B scores provide a substantive measure of the impact of group membership on student performance. In the case of the political science classes, a one-unit increase in the independent variable (moving

Table 2
Regression Results of Group Membership on Student Performance

	B	Standard Error	T
Student Performance (Political Science)	.84	.34	2.2*
Student Performance (History)	.93	.2	4.7**

*significant at the .05 level.
**significant at the .001 level.

from control to experimental group) increased the test score by .85 of a point on average. For the history students, the impact was close to a whole point on a ten-point scale. Overall, these results suggest that using active learning techniques in the classroom can enhance student performance on standard measures relative to traditional teaching approaches.

These results, however, are suggestive rather than conclusive. Neither experimental design was truly "scientific" in that neither involved the use of randomly selected samples; nor, in the case of the history experiment, were we in a position to control for potentially confounding factors such as differences in instructor performance or the academic levels of the students in the groups. Despite these limitations, the results provide interesting and suggestive evidence about the potential utility of active learning in the classroom relative to the lecture and teacher-centered discussion section formats.

In the case of the role-playing history sections, it is conceivable that as much of the difference among the test and control groups came from the preparation for the role-play as from the role-play itself. Not all learning does or should occur in the classroom. The type of classroom activity or its absence will influence how much extra-class time the students devote to the process. Students expected to be on their toes in class are likely to be more prepared and more engaged than students who simply take notes for an hour during class.

While our primary objective was not to examine systematically the difference in student interest and participation between experimental and control groups, we did obtain some indication of this through videotaping the history classes and administering a short survey to the political science test class. What emerged very clearly on the videotapes was the striking disparity between control and experimental groups in

terms of student speaking time. Students in the group role-plays were three times as likely to participate in the class. This is because the students in the test sections felt the need to make greater individual investments in the material so that they would be prepared for the debate, rather than for a simple quiz. In addition, the students had already grown more comfortable with the material by discussing it in smaller peer groups at the beginning of class.

After completing the political science activity, we asked the students in the experimental group to rate the activity based upon the interest it generated and how useful it had been. We also asked them to supply any additional comments, either negative or positive about the activity. The rating scale for both "interest" and "usefulness" ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 representing "extremely interesting/useful," and 5 equal to "of no interest/use." We received sixteen responses. The mean score for "interest" was 1.5, and for "usefulness," 1.6. The students' comments were generally positive, with most stressing the effectiveness of the activity in conveying both how pollsters manipulate opinion poll questions and the ease with which it can be done.

Conclusions

Most of the extant literature on using active learning techniques has focused on how they enhance student interest in the subject matter and generate a more stimulating classroom atmosphere. To date, few studies have attempted to compare directly the *effectiveness* of active learning with other, more traditional teaching methods. The purpose of this study has been to contribute to this significant area of research by empirically examining the relationship between active learning strategies and student performance on standard measures like essay examinations.

Our results suggest that using certain active learning techniques in the classroom may well enable students to absorb and retain information just as well as, if not better than, the more traditional methods. The role-playing history students participated more in class *and* did better on the exam by nearly a whole letter grade than their peers engaged in the teacher-centered discussions. This is even more significant when one considers that the group role-play students assumed the role of only one historical group. Despite writing about four different groups on the subsequent exam—presumably three that they did not even "play" in class—they still did better. The political science students who participated in the opinion poll activity also performed

better on a brief essay quiz than students taught the same material in a lecture format. Moreover, both activities were efficient; they consumed the same amount of classroom time as their traditional alternatives.

These results suggest that, in addition to being more engaging for the students, active learning techniques can sometimes more effectively impart information than traditional formats. Given the limitations of the present study, these conclusions are merely suggestive. They do demonstrate, however, the need for more research in this important area. Active learning studies have tended to focus on education, psychology, biology, and business courses, but such techniques can be tried and tested in many areas. While our experiments used political science and history classrooms, activities like group role-plays and other collaborative exercises can apply to almost any social science or humanities discipline. It would be interesting to see if students in disciplines such as Economics, Religious Studies, or English might respond to active learning techniques as positively as have their colleagues in History and Political Science.

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Appendix

Sheets for Political Science Activity[1]

Sheet A

What is wrong, if anything, with the way the following opinion poll items are worded?

1. Do you oppose helping to destroy the moral fabric of American society by legalizing the sale of soft drugs?
2. Do you favor the legalization of soft drugs such as hashish?
3. Do you favor or oppose a complete ban on partial birth abortions?
4. Do you favor or oppose the President's recent decision not to sign the treaty prohibiting the use of anti-personnel land mines?
5. Generally speaking, do you favor or oppose the way the President is handling the recent constitutional crisis in Uzbekistan?
6. Do you favor or oppose greater tax cuts by the Federal government?
7. Do you favor or oppose the Federal government increasing expenditure to maintain current levels of welfare provision?
8. Should laws be passed to eliminate the possibilities of special interest giving huge sums of money to candidates?

   Yes **No** **No opinion**

9. The US Supreme Court recently ruled that the federal government is not required to use taxpayer funds for family planning programs, to perform, counsel, or refer for abortion as a method of family planning. Do you favor or oppose this ruling?

   Favor **Oppose** **No opinion**

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[1] If you would like a copy of an answer key with explanations for sheets A and B, you can e-mail Liam Anderson at Liam@arches.uga.edu.

10. When a person has a disease that cannot be cured, do you think doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life by some means if the patient and his family request it?

Yes **No** **No opinion**

11. Read the following two statements; which do you agree with more?

A. "President Clinton accomplished a lot in his first term of office, but has not received the credit he deserves."
B. "Given the amount President Clinton accomplished in his first term of office, he has received as much credit as he deserves."

A **B** **No opinion/neither**

Sheet B

What is wrong, if anything, with the way the following opinion poll items are worded?

1. Do you oppose helping to destroy the moral fabric of American society by legalizing the sale of soft drugs?
2. Do you favor the legalization of soft drugs such as hashish?
3. Do you favor or oppose a complete ban on partial birth abortions?
4. Do you favor or oppose the President's recent decision not to sign the treaty prohibiting the use of anti-personnel land mines?
5. Generally speaking, do you favor or oppose the way the President is handling the recent constitutional crisis in Uzbekistan?
6. Do you favor or oppose greater tax cuts by the Federal government?
7. Do you favor or oppose the federal government increasing expenditure to maintain current levels of welfare provision?
8. Should laws be passed to prohibit interest groups from contributing to campaigns, or do groups have the right to contribute to the candidate they support?

Prohibit contribution **Groups have right** **No opinion**

9. Do you favor or oppose the Supreme Court decision preventing clinic doctors and medical personnel from discussing abortion in family planning clinics that receive federal funds?

Oppose **Favor** **No opinion**

10. When a person has a disease that cannot be cured, do you think doctors should be allowed by law to assist the patient to commit suicide if the person requests it, or not?

Yes **No** **No opinion**

11. Which of the following statements do you agree with more?

A. "Given the amount President Clinton accomplished in his first term of office, he has received as much credit as he deserves."
B. "President Clinton accomplished a lot in his first term of office, but has not received the credit he deserves."

A **B** **No opinion/neither**