

# 07 Active learning strategy

ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGY 07

## Four Corners

Caroline Ferguson

Bridgette Atkins

University of Ontario  
Institute of Technology

# THE STRATEGY:

## FOUR CORNERS

Four corners may be used at any point during a lesson or workshop to promote meaningful conversation. The strategy requires minimal preparation and gets students moving, so it may be used as an energiser as well. In addition to being an active learning strategy, four corners can also be used as a formative assessment technique, allowing the instructor to gauge student understanding.

For this strategy, students are presented with a question (or statement) to consider. In each corner of the room, pre-set answers or responses to the question are posted by the facilitator, and students are asked to select one of the posted responses and stand next to it. They are then encouraged to participate in group discussions, explaining to others at

their corner why they selected their chosen response. Thus, this activity allows students to develop richer rationales through collaboration, explain their ideas to their classmates and brainstorm with one another to generate new ideas, thereby learning from one another. It promotes listening, communication, problem solving, and reflection.

This strategy may be used as a warm-up activity by asking students to respond to a question or statement that they will encounter in the lecture. It may also be used as a check for understanding after a particular concept has been covered, in order to clarify difficult concepts or address common misconceptions.

---

## RESOURCES

4 sheets of letter-sized or A4 paper (one for each answer option that will be placed around the room). *Optionally, if you prefer to use larger sheets of paper to improve visibility in larger spaces, you may hand-write or draw answer options.*

Roll of masking tape/blue tack for posting four sheets of paper around the room.

---

# WHAT YOU CAN DO TOMORROW

Print the letters A, B, C, D on four separate pieces of paper in large font and distribute them near each of the four corners of the classroom (or in any four convenient locations). Create one or more multiple choice questions, with four alternative answer options, and type each question with all options (A–D) on a separate slide to display on the screen during the exercise. Poll students in class by having them get up off their seats and stand next to the

letter that corresponds to the answer they believe is correct. Ask students to discuss their rationale for selecting their answer within their groups and invite each group to nominate a spokesperson to explain to the rest of the class why the group believes their answer is correct. You can then announce the correct answer, explaining why the other choices are not correct.



Image 1: Group work

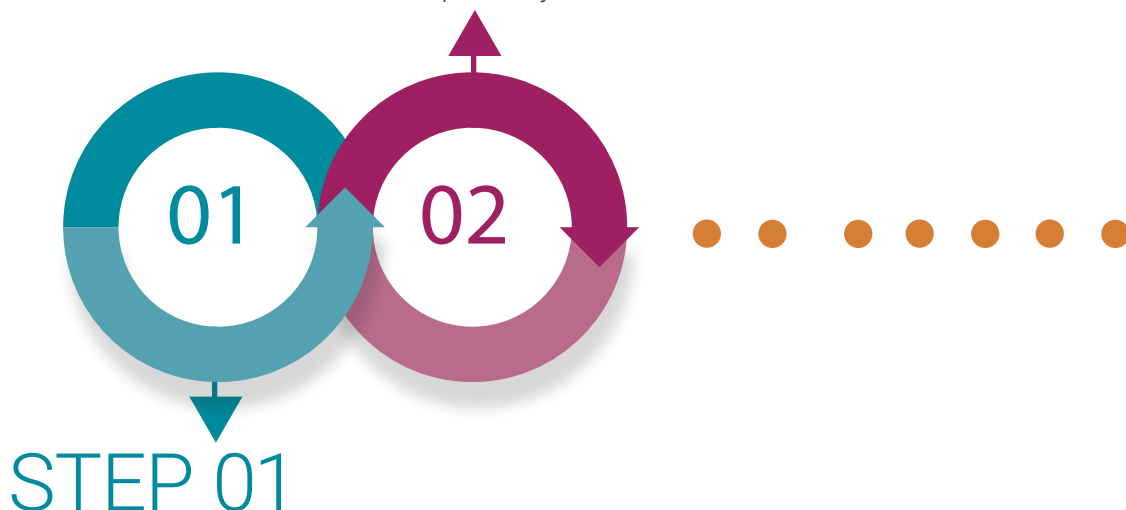
# FULL IMPLEMENTATION

The full implementation of four corners requires some additional time to generate creative options for the students to select. These may be controversial or insightful in nature. The four alternatives selected are not confined to letters; they can be words, images, symbols, or even objects placed at various locations around the room. Steps one through four below are adapted from 'Four Corners', The Teacher Toolkit (n.d.):

## STEP 02

### DISPLAY THE QUESTION

Display the question on the screen and read it out loud, allowing students time to process it. Ask students to jot down the answer they would select and provide a rationale. Then display the four answer choices on the screen. Read them out to the class and ask students to select the option they believe to be correct.



## STEP 01

### WRITE THE QUESTION

Prepare a thought-provoking question or statement that is aligned to the learning objectives for your lesson or the overall unit. Write four answer options related to the question or statement on four separate pieces of paper to place around the classroom space (ideally at four separate corners). If you are planning to ask more than one question, the answer options may be displayed on the screen as multiple choice questions with the letters A, B, C, D printed on four pieces of paper and posted in four different areas of the room.

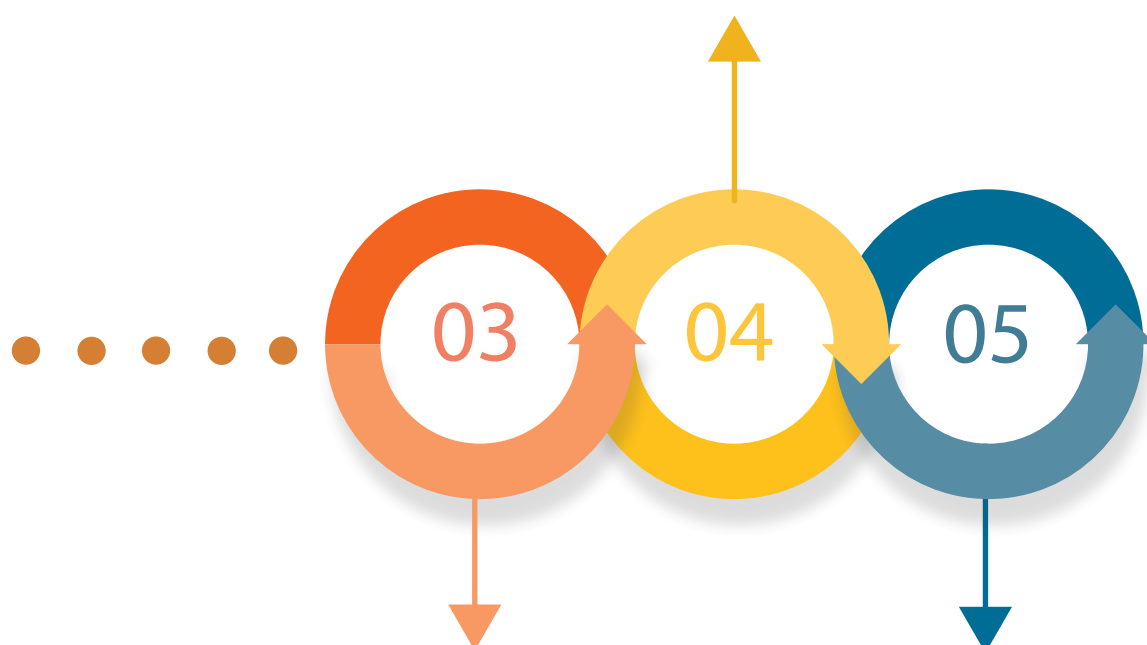
The following are sample options that may be used:

- Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, neutral
- Red, blue, yellow, white (to represent various feelings such as anger, sadness, happiness, neutral)
- Yes, no, sometimes, unsure
- Pictures or objects that represent four different answer options (examples: emotions/reactions, sports, roles, categories)

## STEP 04

### PROMOTE DISCUSSION

Encourage students to discuss why they selected that answer option with other members of the group. At this point, you may permit students to change groups if they like. Allow two to five minutes for discussion. Once you notice discussions are quieting down or are becoming off-topic, call on students within each group to present a summary of their discussion points, explaining why they believe their selection is correct.



## STEP 03

### INVITE STUDENTS TO MOVE TO A CORNER

Tell students to go to the corner of the room in which their answer option is posted.

## STEP 05

### DEBRIEF

Facilitate a discussion of the motivation for the students to go to a specific corner. If there is one correct answer, take up the problem, ensuring that everyone understands why it is the correct choice.

# OVERCOMING PUSHBACKS

There may be instances where students resist in participating in active learning activities such as four corners. There are a variety of factors that can impede the successful implementation of this activity; however, we as facilitators can help create a space that encourages student participation in this activity.

## INSECURE ABOUT ANSWER CHOICE

Some students may wish not to participate in four corners because they lack confidence in their answer choice. Create a safe space where students feel comfortable taking risks and selecting the incorrect answer (if there is one). Be sure to value your students' responses, even if they are not correct, and explain that this activity will help the facilitator understand what concepts should be reinforced in class. If students know that it is okay for them to select the incorrect answer, they will be more likely to participate, even if they are insecure about their answer choice. Also, if the questions are of a sensitive or controversial nature, consider providing a 'not sure/prefer not to respond' option or let students know they can pass on certain questions if they prefer.

## STUDENTS NOT WANTING TO GET OUT OF SEATS

Some students attend class expecting that they will be passive participants; that is, they will simply watch and listen to the facilitator deliver content to them. It is important to convey your expectations to the class early on in the course/module and begin implementing active learning strategies as soon as possible. If a student still resists getting out of their seat, consider allowing students the ability to pass on the activity if they are not comfortable or able to.

## STUDENTS NOT STAYING ON TOPIC DURING THE DISCUSSION

Some students attend class expecting that setting a time limit can help focus the discussion that takes place at each of the four corners. Additionally, students can be warned that they should assign a spokesperson who will summarise key points from their corners. This way, they will feel accountable and will be more likely to remain on-task.

---

## CASE STUDY

As part of an onboarding training session for a group of approximately 20 new instructors, the four corners strategy was implemented to get participants out of their seats and moving around the room at the halfway point of a full day training session. The strategy

was also used as a means of dividing participants into groups of individuals with varying communication styles. These groups would eventually work together to discuss case studies exploring challenging communication scenarios.



Four different quotes were selected to represent four different communication styles (see Figure 2). Each quote was placed on a single sheet of paper and printed in large text, so it would be clearly visible to participants as they walked around the

room. This particular session was held in a large room with plenty of space to freely move around. That said, this could have been facilitated in a smaller classroom space, as long as all learners could move around the room.

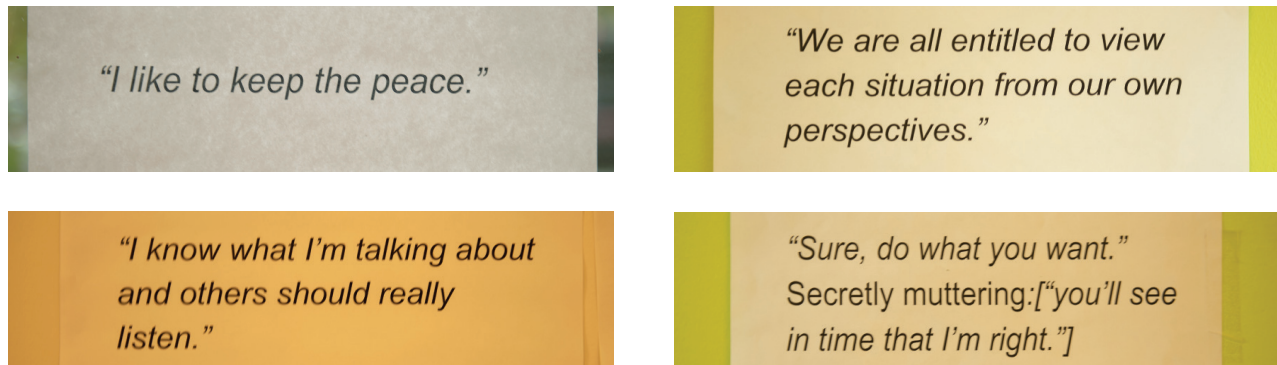


Figure 1: Images of four quotes adapted from Karell (2018) '4 Types of Communication Styles'

Learners were asked to circulate the room to read each quote and then stand by the quote that best represented their general communication style. The facilitators assured the group that there were no correct

answers and that they should not overthink the exercise. This was intended to encourage the learners to be comfortable to choose any of the four corners.



Image 2: Participants selecting which corner best represents their communication style



Visiting each of the four corners to read the quotes got everyone moving around the room and discussing why they chose to stand where they did with minimal prompting from the facilitators. This particular group included learners who were self-starters and easy to engage in discussion. If the group had been less engaged, the facilitators planned to have everyone discuss their reasons for selecting their chosen statement to others in the same corner. They would have then invited participants in each corner to summarise the discussions from their respective corners. Additionally, if the questions were more of the goal of the session, the facilitators would have spent more time debriefing on the learners' answer selections.

It took less than five minutes for learners to decide which of the four corners had

the quote that best represented their communication style. In this activity, there were approximately five individuals at each corner (some corners had fewer or greater than five participants). Once movement had settled in the room, each of the participants in corner 1 were given a different case study (identified as Case Study A–E in the table below). Likewise, each of the participants in corner 2 were given a different case study, which was also the case for participants in corners 3 and 4. For corners that consisted of more than 5 participants, two members received the same case study (such as in Corner 3 in the example below), and for corners with fewer than five participants, not all worksheets were distributed (as in Corner 2 in the table below).

Corner 1	Case Study A	Case Study B	Case Study B	Case Study D	Case Study E	
Corner 2	Case Study A	Case Study B	Case Study C	Case Study D		
Corner 3	Case Study A	Case Study B	Case Study B	Case Study D	Case Study E	Case Study A
Corner 4	Case Study A	Case Study B	Case Study B	Case Study D	Case Study E	

Figure 3: Schematic representation demonstrating how participants in each of the four corners were divided into different groups based on their communication style

Once all participants received their handout, they formed groups with others that had the same case study. The case studies presented challenging situations an instructor could face and focused on effective communication techniques. Thus, the four

corners technique allowed facilitators to create groups comprised of individuals with varying perspectives and communication styles. It was also a way to introduce members of the group to colleagues whom they may not have had the chance to meet.



Image 3: Members of each group had diverse communication styles and completed an effective communication case study together

## SUMMARY

The four corners strategy may be used to poll students and gain an understanding of their thoughts, perspectives and/or opinions. It allows students to move around the classroom and engage in discussions with like-minded peers. Questions may be simple multiple choice types with one, or

even several correct answers. Alternatively, they can be open-ended, thought-provoking or controversial. Four corners can therefore be used in a wide variety of contexts and disciplines and can provoke deeper learning and discovery through thoughtful group discussions.

## FURTHER READING

Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (2014). Peer learning in higher education: Learning from and with each other. Routledge.

Discovery Education Europe. (n.d.). Spotlight on Strategies: 4 Corners.

Retrieved from <https://www.discoveryeducation.co.uk/spotlight-on-strategies/try-a-strategy/item878998>

# TEMPLATE

Lesson	
Learning outcome of activity	<div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div>
Question	<div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div>
Alternatives	<div>1<div></div></div> <div>2<div></div></div> <div>3<div></div></div> <div>4<div></div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div>