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## How to promote active learning in online spaces [HPEC Fast Facts]

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## HPEC Fast Facts

# HOW TO? PROMOTE ACTIVE LEARNING IN ONLINE SPACES



Active learning is an approach which “engages students in the process of learning through activities and/or discussion in class, as opposed to passively listening to an expert. It emphasizes higher-order thinking and often involves group work” ([Freeman et al., 2014](#)). It’s intuitive to consider that student activity leads to deeper learning, and a growing number of studies support this idea. Research across different settings and contexts indicates that active learning approaches achieve better educational outcomes ([Wieman, 2014](#); [Harris & Welch Bacon, 2019](#)).

Despite this gain in understanding, there is little clear guidance for educators on what works in practice. There are few studies which unpack how to design and implement “effective” active learning experiences. A further challenge is how to bridge across to online learning environments. The recent pandemic has caused educators to reflect on how best to bring students together and encourage interaction at a time when traditional classroom settings have been disrupted.

For all of these initial misgivings, it is now clear that there are many ways to generate active learning strategies in online spaces, promoting rich and vibrant educational experiences. Here, [HPEC educationalist Jenny Moffett](#) outlines ten tips to promote active learning in the online classroom:

1. **Plan with the end in mind.** As with any educational development, the concept of backwards design is useful. Use your learning outcomes for a module or session to highlight where active learning best fits. If you want your students to “define”, “describe” or “memorise”

then a simpler learning resource, e.g. slides, video or podcast, will suffice. If, however, you want your students to “design”, “develop” or “critique”, then an active learning strategy may be the better choice.

2. **Use a lesson plan.** When we incorporate active learning into a session it can make timing unpredictable. The student-centred nature of the process means that some groups will take longer, or be naturally more engaged, than others. A lesson plan with adequate space for student discussions and feedback, and built-in flexibility, can help prevent timing issues.
3. **Lead with the pedagogy not the technology.** When designing online active learning, there’s a natural inclination to build our approaches around the platforms and software that we have access to. However it’s more helpful to begin with existing pedagogical theories, e.g. cognitive load theory ([Sandars et al., 2015](#)), in mind. Such theories give insights as to the process of learning, and help educators to have confidence in transferring their skills to the online environment.
4. **Involve the students.** Many of our students are digital natives with valuable perspectives on online learning experiences. By involving them in the design and testing of on line active learning resources, we can gain a much fuller and accurate picture of what works for them. If this isn’t feasible then a next best option is to ensure that students can feed back on their active learning experiences.
5. **Choose your activities.** You don’t need to re-invent the wheel for online activity. Many of the strategies that we use in the classroom, e.g. [think-pair-share](#), [reflections](#), [muddiest point](#), can be used equally well in online spaces. A key consideration is to ensure that the actions and discussions of the students reflect accurately the learning outcome you would like them to achieve.
6. **Consider the technology.** There is an ever-increasing number of technologies available to us as educators. These can be as simple as [polls](#), breakout rooms, [whiteboards](#), and shared documents which can be used in a live, online sessions. With a little more time and expertise, educators can also employ more novel approaches e.g. interactive [H5P elements](#), [educational escape rooms](#) and [storyboarding](#).
7. **Make it safe.** When implementing active learning, remember that it can be difficult for students to jump in “cold”, and they may need help in building trust and rapport with their peers, especially in new or large classes. Ice-breakers and low-stakes polls/questions can be useful here. Educators can also help by using “confirmation behaviours,” i.e. validating student responses and answering questions, to build students’ confidence ([Goldman & Goodboy, 2014](#)). Consider also that students will often engage more where there is an opportunity to share ideas and questions anonymously e.g. via a whiteboard or Google Doc.
8. **Where possible, promote peer learning.** Whilst online learning environments holds many advantages for educators and students, building a warm community needs some extra effort over the face-to-face setting. From the perspective of the educator, this means this means providing opportunities for peers to work together on group assignments and paving the way for online social activities ([Rapanta et al., 2020](#)).
9. **Sign-post active learning.** The transition from didactic to active learning can be hard for students to navigate. If they are used to more passive learning, they will need help to make change. It’s important to sign-post or give advance notice of your expectations around an

activity. Be open and transparent about active learning – tell your students what you are doing and why ([Nguyen et al., 2021](#)). They are much more likely to engage if they see the reasoning behind it.

10. **Don't be afraid to experiment!** Although we can feel the pressure as educators to provide polished, excellent educational opportunities, this is difficult when time and resources are limiting factors. A more practical approach is to plan your approach to active learning with built-in flexibility to adapt or change when needed. Each time we run a session is an opportunity to calibrate and develop (although keeping in mind that student groups within one cohort should not experience vastly different educational experiences).

## Learn more

To discover more about active learning, and how to promote it in online spaces, here are additional resources that you might find useful:

[Active learning in medical education: Strategies for beginning implementation](#)

[Active learning in the online environment](#)

[Demystifying the meaning of active learning in postsecondary biology education](#)

[Four ideas to spark active learning in an online classroom](#)

[Making it stick: use of active learning strategies in continuing medical education](#)

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