PolyU teachers are busy teachers. We have to juggle our teaching load, our research interests, our professional and industry/consultancy activities and other commitments. New initiatives can bring concerns about work overload and stress. However, teaching is at the heart of what we do. Our responsibility to our students is to help them to make their time at PolyU productive and successful.

In the last academic year, the Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) has proposed and promoted the idea of the "Active Classroom" that would prepare our students to meet the challenges of a knowledge-based society. The ideal classroom for the 21st century would be one characterised by four key features:

- **Thinking**: Students are motivated to think deeply about the concepts and theories in their respective disciplines, and to apply their new understanding to solve real-life problems.
- **Task-focused**: Students are engaged in meaningful learning tasks.
- **Teamwork**: Students are involved in learning activities that require them to work in teams with their peers both inside and outside the classroom.
- **Transcendence**: Learning transcends across time and space as students participate in different, out of class activities including workplace and community-based experiences and even international exchanges.

If you wish to read the full discussion paper you can access it at http://www2.polyu.edu.hk/ltc/active_classroom.pdf

Making the “Active Classroom” a reality requires us to review curriculum and instructional design as well as re-examine our existing ways of teaching. We need to think about what helps (and what hinders) our students’ learning, and try out different teaching techniques that will involve our students more actively in their learning. “Activate” aims to provide practical ideas, underpinned by sound theory, to help you do this.

**How Will Activate Work?**

This is an introductory issue of “Activate”. You will receive 13 further issues at approximately three-week intervals throughout the academic year. Each issue will focus on a different topic linked to active learning. For example, forthcoming issues are planned covering topics such as:

- Active learning in large classes
- Promoting active learning via technology
- Active learning in fieldwork/practicum
- Active learning in project work
- Authentic assessment for active learning
Sharing a Vision of an Active Classroom

Professor T. P. Leung
Vice President (Student Development) and Chairman of the Learning and Teaching Committee

As I walk around the campus and talk to teachers I am struck by how committed PolyU teachers are to excellence in both teaching and research. The Review Panel during the Second Round TLQPR identified many good learning and teaching practices in the Departments, and I was delighted that some of these were shared at the LTC Mini-Conference on Good Practices in Learning and Teaching in PolyU held last May. “Activate” will draw on these (and other) sources of ideas in order to disseminate practical and effective active learning approaches. Enhancing teaching and learning quality is an ongoing process that we are all actively involved in.

I hope you agree that the paradigm is shifting away from an emphasis on teachers teaching towards a student-centred learning approach. This brings with it many challenges. I know that many teachers at PolyU already promote active classrooms for their students. I would like all teachers to think about the four key features that characterise the active classroom: thinking, task-focused, teamwork and transcendence. I hope that all PolyU colleagues will consider how their own teaching can inspire the next generation and prepare them to meet the challenges of the 21st century. There are many ways to create an active classroom and I certainly do not wish to impose a single “best” way on teachers. But I am sure “Activate” will stimulate you to think about and try a wide range of active learning strategies with your own students.

What Exactly is “Active Learning”? When learning is active, students really use their brains. They think about concepts and ideas, they solve problems and they apply what they learn. Active learning is fast-paced, fun, supportive and engaging. Sometimes students are out of their seats, moving about, thinking aloud and interacting with other people. However, even when they are not physically mobile, students can still be active mentally in large classes, in small classes, in laboratories, studios and workshops. They can also be active in an online environment.

Active learners see their learning stretching beyond the four walls of their classroom and into their chosen professional community. They work with their peers and friends but also belong to teams that may involve local and international members (other students and work-based/professional partners). They are better able to be independent lifelong learners who have the skills to apply what they have learned to solve real-life problems. So, in an active classroom, students are

• engaged in the learning process
• encouraged to “own” and construct knowledge
• provided with real-life connections and experiences
• required to think critically and creatively
• learning with reference to their different learning styles
• building on their prior knowledge/experience
• evaluated using multiple authentic assessment strategies

If you want to know more about the theory that underpins active learning and have time to read just one book, we suggest you try this one:


“What Can I Do with Activate?”

• Find practical ideas to create an active classroom for your own students.
• Read active learning tips from fellow PolyU teachers.
• Explore some of the recommended websites to get a more in-depth understanding of the teaching and learning strategies.
• Talk to colleagues and the course leader about some of the active learning strategies. Choose and try out some active learning approaches, evaluate and reflect on them.

Be an Active Learner yourself!
The Active Learning Quiz

What do you think about active learning? Take this active learning quiz by indicating if you agree or disagree with the following statements. Check the box ☒ that best matches your point of view.

1. Active learning is not possible in large lectures.
2. Active learning is the opposite of passive learning.
3. Of the four key features* that characterise the active classroom, teamwork is always the most important.
   *thinking; task-focused; teamwork; transcendence.
4. When active learning is compared to traditional teaching methods, students learn more material, retain the information longer, and enjoy the class more.
5. PolyU students are passive learners and active learning techniques won’t work.

You will find a colleague’s response to the quiz on the last page. See if you agree with him.

Challenging Students: A Challenge for Teachers

As teachers, we have a wide range of instructional strategies to draw on in order to engage students’ interest, deepen their understanding and enable them to apply what they have learned. Over time, we can help our students develop their skills and successfully attempt more challenging work. Too little challenge combined with little support and a student may feel apathetic or bored (it doesn’t seem worthwhile doing). Too much challenge combined with too little support and he or she may feel anxious. The challenge for teachers is to know their students’ capabilities so that they can provide the appropriate amount of challenge and support. Getting it right can sometimes be tricky!

Challenge and support

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Warm and comfortable, but no work done</th>
<th>Rewarding and satisfying</th>
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<tr>
<td>Low support</td>
<td>High support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boredom, apathy, low morale</td>
<td>Stimulating but threatening and frustrating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low challenge</td>
<td>High challenge</td>
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Resources

   This comprehensive website by the Active Learning Online team at the ACU Adams Center for Teaching Excellence features the work of Mel Silberman. He has written extensively about active learning and conducted many seminars. By following the links, you can watch video clips of Mel Silberman in action and read his instructions about using a selection of strategies in the classroom and online. You may also find the Quick References (for example, Active Learning Resources, Active Learning tips) useful.

   This website by Jocelyn Robson (University of Greenwich) presents some useful points to think about for those who are actively considering getting started on active learning.
   You will find:
   1. A definition of active teaching and learning.
   2. Key characteristics of active teaching and learning strategies (both strengths and drawbacks).
   3. Theoretical justifications for adopting this approach in higher education.

Note: all links worked at Sept 2004, but things can change fast on the Web!
A Colleague’s Response to the Active Learning Quiz

Here are the views of a colleague for you to consider, but you are perfectly entitled to hold different opinions.

1. I disagree that active learning is not possible in large lectures. It does take careful planning. I often break up an hour or two hour lecture with a range of student tasks and short discussion questions. I find that a certain amount of unpredictability keeps most of my students awake and engaged.

2. I certainly agree that active learning is the opposite of passive learning. I see passive students essentially as “tourists” who learn very little.

3. I disagree that teamwork is always the most important feature of active learning. When I plan my lessons I think about the learning objectives and then select an appropriate teaching and learning approach. Sometimes asking students to work collaboratively is productive, appropriate and enjoyable for students.

4. I agree because in my experience active learning has many benefits for my students. There is also supporting research evidence.

5. I disagree. I don’t find that my students are passive learners. Many have been taught in a traditional manner at school but still respond very well to more participative and challenging teaching and learning methods. I personally feel I have to prepare my students to be lifelong learners and that spoon-feeding is inappropriate.

Recommended Reading

In July 2000, the journal Active Learning in Higher Education was launched by SAGE publications. This specifically addressed active learning issues across a wide range of disciplines. The Pao Yue-kong Library subscribes to this journal, which may contain articles that are of interest to you. To access it from your desk, log on to the library or use http://www.swetswise.com.

“Can I Tell You About What I Do?”

Of course! If you would like to share your experience of creating active classrooms we would like to hear from you. We know there is a lot of interesting and innovative teaching and learning happening at PolyU. EDC staff are always looking for examples of good practice, and for practical tips and techniques that are effective in the PolyU context. Please contact Elaine Tsoi on Ext.6284 or etetsoi@polyu.edu.hk.

Read “Activate” Issue 1 online at: http://edc.polyu.edu.hk/Activate/1.pdf

Thanks to ...

Many PolyU colleagues have generously shared their ideas about active learning with “Activate”. In this issue, we would particularly like to thank Professor T. P. Leung, VP(SD) and Chairman of LTC, for sharing his vision of an active classroom with us.

Further Information

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