

Chapter 44

Engaging Students in a Large Classroom and Distance Environment

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ABSTRACT

The economic climate is pushing educational institutions toward larger class sizes and distance education. As both physical and virtual class sizes increase, the use of active learning becomes a challenge. The authors report a decade-long experience converting students from passive to active learners in a large classroom with an asynchronous distance component. As class size increases and a distance pathway is added, the foundational pedagogy, technology, active learning strategies, the integration of distance and campus pathways, and the teaching of intangibles are recounted. This chapter describes a model that achieves a reasonable, efficient, learner-centered, delivery of an educational experience.

INTRODUCTION

Frequently in the teaching literature, authors describe activities and research demonstrating the benefits of active learning. Bonwell and Eison (1991), in a report to the Association for the Study of Higher Education, emphasized the responsibility of learning being placed on the learner. The

authors proposed a working definition for active learning as anything that “involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2). Passive listeners in an audience begin to disconnect from a lecture in about 15 minutes. Some keys to changing a passive lecture environment into an active learning environment involve pausing,

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testing, questioning, demonstrating, case studies, role plays, simulations, games, and using any method possible to engage students and change the pace of the presentation. Important to this whole process is a supportive learner friendly classroom environment. Bonwell and Eison (1991) also described barriers to changing from a passive environment to one that is active. There is less stability, a sense of loss of control, a general resistance to change, discomfort and anxiety of doing something new, and a loss of the self-enchanted feeling that faculty have thinking aloud as they lecture. A consequence of an active classroom is the professor may feel unable to deliver as much material as in a traditional classroom. The goal of having students learn more may be difficult to see given these risks and barriers.

Most published work on active learning strategies is based on relatively small class sizes. This work has shown a class size of roughly 30 or fewer students is ideal for an interactive environment (Leshowitz, DeCerbo, & Symington, 1999; McCarroll, Pohle-Krauzza, & Martin, 2009; Burruss, Billings, Brownrigg, Skiba, & Connors, 2009). However, the economic climate is pushing institutions toward larger class sizes and distance education. As the class size increases, the use of active learning in the classroom becomes a challenge (Cuseo, n.d.; Russell & Curtis, in press, Hattie, 2005). If the complexity of a distance cadre of students and the technology necessary to connect different settings is added, the challenge becomes even greater.

This chapter is the result of about a decade of experiences in classroom and distance education. It is presented in sections relevant to individual components of these experiences. The initiation of the process in 2003 subsequently evolved in response to reflection, summative reviews, course evaluations and a desire to achieve learning outcomes considered essential for the course. The chronology is of less importance than the description of the experiences. The sections are:

1. Structural Environment
2. Student Evaluation
3. Technology
4. Active Learning Strategies
5. Tried and Discarded
6. Pathway Integration
7. Teaching Intangibles
8. Summary

STRUCTURAL ENVIRONMENT

The course discussed in this chapter is taught in a professional pharmacy doctoral degree program. Creighton University is a private Catholic Jesuit university located in Omaha, Nebraska with 7736 students. The University is ranked #1 Midwest University for the 10th consecutive year by U.S. News & World Report in the 2013 rankings. The School of Pharmacy and Health Professions pharmacy program is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education and provides a doctoral degree with a minimum two years of pre-pharmacy and four years of professional curriculum. Current enrollment in the pharmacy program is 742 of which 456 are in the campus pathway and 286 are in the distance pathway. There are 70 faculty.

The nonprescription therapeutics course is intended to provide competency to second year pharmacy students in the knowledge and skill of making nonprescription drug recommendations. The course is 4 credit hours and taught annually. The course structure was lecture based, with the conventional instructor driven pedagogy/andragogy. The spring class of 2002 was conventionally taught with 80 classroom students, high stakes examinations, very little active learning, and the first class in which the students had school issued laptops in a wired classroom. The class was semester based and content driven. It used a single instructor and a classical textbook in the field of nonprescription drugs. In 2003 an additional instructor was added to the course and a distance

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