

## TEACHER ROADMAP TO INTERACTIVE LEARNING

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### Abstract

Education relies on depth of learning. Without interactive learning, this is often a struggle. Interactive learning empowers the learner and instructor by placing the initiative and a bit of control in the hands of the student. Beginning with the first moments and first materials of the class, educators have the ability to invigorate and engage learners with simple but effective additions. By outlining some of these methods, the authors explain the impact and importance of developing these skills in students including preservice teachers of all ages.

Keywords: *interactive learning; engaged learners; engaging methods*

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### Teacher Roadmap to Interactive Learning

#### Introduction

In education, the goal is to leave students with the knowledge and skills they need and the tools that will help them meet with success. Much of the time, this closely relates to how actively engaged they are in the classroom. Incorporating strategies, such as those described below, allows educators to actively involve students in the learning process. This is particularly important when the students are preservice teachers because preservice teachers have the potential to take these best practices and pass them on. Still, these active learning instructional methods should not be limited to only classrooms serving preservice teachers who are students. For this reason, throughout this article the word “students” will be used to avoid unintentionally excluding others.

#### Syllabus Reconnaissance

Each semester educators prepare well-developed syllabi that they believe will excite students as well as motivate them to map out their success in their course. The notion is to create and design syllabi to allow students in their classes to independently navigate through their courses. Strong course design has been linked to increased student satisfaction, retention, and achievement of student learning outcomes in college (Rienties & Toetenel, 2016; Stewart et al. 2012).

Class syllabi allow students to find their own answers to questions most often asked in class such as *when is the assignment due? Is late work accepted? How many points do I need to earn a specific grade in this class?* Syllabi should be viewed as teaching assistants for the course outlining expectations,

course guidelines, and making students aware of educators' preferences in class and for students in their courses.

The barrage of surface-level questions that can easily be answered through the syllabus leave educators shouting the loud refrain, "It is in the syllabus!" Students review course syllabi the way they review owner manuals, not knowing or realizing that the unspoken rule is that they should become intimate with the syllabus, not merely learn course expectations through osmosis.

In theory, students review information in the class syllabus before the start of class to help them formulate any questions they may have regarding assignments, due dates, etc. If students refuse to read the syllabus, the question then becomes, *how do we make students aware of the information included in the class syllabus? Are students unaware that educators expect them to review course expectations before the first class meeting?*

### **How do we get students to read the syllabus?**

The answer to this question has eluded most professors for decades. Why do students not correlate their success in class with their familiarity with the syllabus? Some students may feel intimidated by the amount of information included in class syllabi. Current syllabi are 10 to 15 pages which for most students appears to be a momentous feat to read. Incorporating the syllabus reconnaissance allows professors to guide students through the syllabi.

To implement the syllabus reconnaissance strategy in the classroom professors provide students the opportunity to peruse the syllabus before coming to class. During class, students are given five minutes to mark five things in the syllabus that they feel are important to every student in the class. The highlighted items may include course expectations, due dates, etc. Students are then paired with their classmates to compare notes. After collaborating with a partner, students are permitted to ask questions about the expectations of the course.

The syllabus reconnaissance activity allows students the opportunity to interact with the syllabus while collaborating with classmates. During the class discussion, students ask questions about information in the syllabus. The discussions prefigure what students can expect regarding class assignments. More importantly, including the syllabus reconnaissance strategy in your class will allow expectations and learning outcomes to be established at the start of the semester.

### **Initial Instruction**

One of the most powerful ways to make interactive learning a foundation and regular practice in a classroom is through directly interactive learning experiences. For some teachers the idea of interactive learning feels like too much of a strain to get students doing the work themselves to learn the material in a way that is true to the content, upholds the standards, and maintains the integrity of the course. For those kinds of teachers, their concern is well supported when one considers the impact and consequences of high stakes testing. However, when that is the only consideration made for instruction, very little *real* learning occurs. Creating an instructional framework that includes interactive learning, even in the initial interactions students have with each other and the content can lead to positive long-term academic and personal impacts (Swift & Godwin, 2021).

### *Self-evaluation*

One important way to help empower students to tap into and find ownership in their learning is through enacting self-evaluation instruments in your classroom. Self-evaluation tools are an important formative assessment tool (Black, & William, 1998) that can be used daily, through KWL charts, quick formative assessments, or even student learning journals. Or, teachers may choose to utilize long-term self-evaluation tools such as pre-and post- interviews conducted at the start and end of a grading period can provide powerful bookends for students to understand their learning journey. These interviews can be conducted in a number of ways: virtual postings into private online forums such as Seesaw, Blackboard, and others. The interviews can be conducted in private learning journals, or even in a Google document. Through asking pre- and post-interview questions to students, teachers are able to not only get a feel for what students already have established in their curricula schema, it also promotes active self-awareness, good communication, and reflective dialogues.

### *Making connections: SEL*

In Rita Pierson’s 2013 TEDTalk she explained, “in order for any real learning to occur we have to make connections.” Now more than ever the need for consideration of student social and emotional needs in tandem with teaching curriculum is critical. With the emotional stress and trauma of the Covid-19 pandemic, many teachers are turning to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies to supplement their class activities which can help students develop character traits and behaviors that can benefit themselves and society (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015).

Teachers are striving more than ever to engage students in the content but also to educate and enrich the “whole child”. After all, school is one of the places where students learn the social and emotional skills they need to be successful not only in school settings but also in communities and ultimately in their future workplaces. Durklak et al. (2010, 2011) suggested the SAFE acronym as a directional focus for good SEL programs to follow, they should be:

1. Sequenced: connected and coordinated sets of activities to foster skills development
2. Active: active forms of learning to help students master new skills
3. Focused: emphasis on developing personal and social skills
4. Explicit: targeting specific social and emotional skills

In other words, social and emotional learning should be step by step, it should be continually practiced with an application of concepts, it should be pointed and specific. The impact of SEL programs on student success includes graduating high school, being ready for higher education, success in personal and professional life, a reduction in criminal behavior, and more civic engagement (Hawkins et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2015).

### *Arts-based assessment*

One fantastic way to support student social and emotional health and growth is through the implementation of arts-based formative assessment (Swift & Godwin, 2021). Although there is a strong, established and long-lived body of research that supports students have multiple forms of intelligence, there is now a growing community of researchers supporting the necessity of arts-based formative

assessment in order to really allow students to express themselves in the way that works best for their form of intelligence and their ways of communicating understanding.

Not only does arts-based formative assessment support student academic achievement, it also provides tangible practice with being creative, an established 21<sup>st</sup>-century skill (Zhao, 2012). Recent movements in awareness, advocacy, and action have encouraged using artistic mediums including dance as a non-violent form of communication and civic engagement. Supporting student creativity can enhance student academic achievement, problem-solving skills, and confidence, qualities that will serve them well not only in class but also in life.

### *Teaching with stories*

Brene Brown (2013) encourages us to “embrace our vulnerability,” and good teachers know this to be true from their own experiences in facilitating effective, impactful lessons. Good teachers have students explore the stories and experiences of others in order to gain intellectual, social, and emotional capital of others to enrich their own understanding of others. Furthermore, teaching through stories that exist outside of a traditional narrative can enrich student understandings of those around them by creating a transformative learning experience (Miller et al., 2020). Teaching with stories is an important component of folk culture that helps individuals connect with their roots and their cultural surroundings, leading to self-discovery (Bruner, 1990), another critical component of social and emotional learning.

Furthermore, using stories as a critical thinking tool for instruction has been supported by research (Howard, 1991) not only to supplement student content area knowledge and reinforce something great (Briody et al., 2012), but they can also be told as a warning can help grow empathy and awareness of others (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014). Consider having students read “Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky” as a way to explore African American identities as well as how to cope with loss through a magical lens threaded with traditional stories. Although this text is fictional, the powerful themes that radiate throughout provide a safe space for students to discuss topics they may be too afraid to address directly in class dialogues.

For students needing a supplement to history instruction, consider using historical novels with authentic voices such as “Number the Stars” to learn perspectives on Jewish identities and struggle during WWII which contrasts nicely with the experience of Japanese Americans during the same time period with “Farewell Manzanar.” Again, through exploring the experiences of others, students are not only working through an activity in empathy (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014), but they are also gaining cultural awareness and sustained cultural practices through the people and experiences that they read about.

Storytelling as an instructional medium is not limited to novel readings but can also transfer into technology-based learning strategies. There are webinars and interviews with people who have experienced historical events and phenomena who provide their story in their own voices in real time and the imprint of that recollection can be found on the Internet. Other resources such as Stories That Move, A Toolbox Against Discrimination <https://www.storiesthatmove.org/en/> and others have been developed with the intention of classroom teachers having resources and support to address tough topics with students using authentic voice and interactive tools to bring the hard stories to life so that we can not only learn from history, but also grow from it.

### *Student Choice*

Students need to have a choice and a voice in their learning activities. Students who have a choice in their learning are more likely to be involved in meaningful and engaging learning (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015) and are more invested in good work habits (Denton, 2005, p.208) that have a positive impact in their overall learning. When students are able to enact choice with their learning, they feel a sense of responsibility and happiness in their work, and students who are more joyfully engaged are better able to process the material and retain the content and skills they used (Willis, 2006).

One of the best ways to construct a community of respect, excitement and genuine learning is through providing student choice and voice. Choice boards allow teachers to organically construct standards-based assignments that are congruent in the tasks being completed and the topics being addressed but differentiated either by student input or student output. An example of a choice board that is differentiated by student input would be one that allows students to choose a way in which to learn, a practice which takes into consideration the idea that students come to class with multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). For example, students can choose to learn through individual research, work on a research team, watch approved documentaries, listen to approved podcasts, or even take a virtual museum tour.

Choice input can be adaptable to other subjects and can of course include a variety of other different methods of instruction, even with real time interactions with more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). Allowing students to have choice transforms the classroom into a space of interaction with others around concepts rather than passive transmission of packaged information (Wood, et. al, 2018). Bishop and Verleger (2013) argue that the teacher-student interactions involve a ‘zone of proximal development’ where a student can achieve more with the help of a more knowledgeable other than they can by themselves.

Some other ideas include in mathematics, a student could learn another perspective on a lesson from a friend at a different school via Zoom. Some teachers have found success in developing and maintaining pen pals from other country’s math classes. By writing letters to each other, students are able to not only practice good written communication skills, they are also able to learn a different way of solving the same problem. A student in a science lab could interview a geologist in the field. A student in an English Language Arts class could attend a live stream of an interpretive Shakespearean play. The possibilities are endless when one considers the cultural and intellectual capital that students could be exposed to through supplemental choice assignments such as these and others.

Allowing those kinds of choices are not only impactful in creating authentic environments for enriching learning to take place on a students’ own terms, using their own forms of intelligence (Gardner, 1993) but it also allows for students to feel a spark in differentiating how he or she chooses to express his or her understanding. That means practicing differentiation through student output. This is perhaps the more controversial area for some teachers because of the previous drill and kill style teaching that has been so popular in the era of high stakes testing. Many teachers have taught to the test in a drill and kill way (Kohn, 1999) for so long that teaching for authentic learning is a difficult idea to understand. However, when teaching in an authentic way to students who are enthusiastically learning the content on their own terms really changes the flow of the classroom and the retention of content.

With that in mind some ways to differentiate student output may include allowing students to choose between several methods of expressing understanding by constructing a student output choice board. Great choice boards are built with congruent output considerations. For example, it would not make sense to have students choose between making a map or writing a 2000-word essay. Art is a great medium to give students to explore this kind of output, but the output must be similar in the expected outcome as well as in the standards addressed, even if the assignments look a little different (Donovan, & Anderberg, 2020). Some examples of congruent output might be constructing a poem or writing a song, maybe creating a skit or choreography to not only show understanding, but also to demonstrate analysis and critical thinking about the content.

### ***Foldables***

Using foldables in elementary school is fairly commonplace. Approaching the idea in middle school is a little less common but can still be seen in a handful of classrooms from time to time. Foldables in high school? Or college? Practically unheard of. Why is that? What makes the use of a strategy such as foldables off limits for higher grade levels? NOTHING. Nothing at all.

Johanne Patry, in a 2010 conference presentation on concept mapping, argued that “students increasingly need to literally manipulate knowledge”. In order to continue to promote active learning and engagement in our secondary and higher ed classrooms, we must not forget or be afraid of the strategies that worked for elementary age students. Take, for example, the dodecahedron shapes commonly found at Dollar Tree stores. These can be used to review materials from a unit as a small group or individually. In a social studies/history course, this particular 12-sided foldable could be used to review four key concepts, four key events that led to the Civil War and four key leaders during the time, for example. Simple bound books can be used for qualitative and quantitative observation journals. As Dr. Nancy Frey explained in her 2009 presentation for BOOST Best of Out-of-School Time Conference, “Hands on does not mean minds off. Foldables can be used to promote content learning.” By using foldables in secondary classrooms, we can engage students in their learning while ensuring the essential knowledge and skills are embedded in their minds.

### ***Book Tasting***

A book tasting is when a teacher assigns reading based on chunks of text for students to read and then share. After all, chunking the text has been found to have positive outcomes in comprehension (Yang et al., 2020). In many elementary and middle schools, this instructional method is called book tasting. In high school, this can be adapted and called “Speed dating” to get students hooked into the idea that this is a quick and engaging way for students to interact with each other and the text.

Students read their portion of the text and then find the main idea, that is what they will share out and discuss with others during the specific “speed dating” activity which promotes not only a sense of urgency when things are timed in class, but also enhances the focus of time spent sharing with each other. There is an emphasis here on cross curricular and 21st century skills. When doing this method of instruction, students have to learn to read for understanding, find the main idea and put it in their own words, and they also have to learn the way that others communicate effectively so they can communicate that main idea to them. Then, students must listen carefully to what their peer(s) is saying so they can learn that part of the lesson as well. Here students are also learning that they can build a symbiotic classroom community and work together toward a common goal: learning!

## ***Review Strategies***

Fun and engaging activities to review materials are an entertaining way to add excitement and energy to any classroom. The time for reviewing worksheets and packets has passed. We can utilize many activities that broaden the minds of our students and enable them to work together, building community and engagement through active learning strategies such as ABC Graffiti, RAFT Writing, VoiceThread, QR Scavenger Hunts and a list of others.

### ***ABC Graffiti***

The purpose of the ABC Graffiti strategy is to allow students to actively engage with the material presented by enabling them to work together to complete the “graffiti”. This activity is often used as a fun competition. ABC Graffiti enables students to “work collaboratively to learn from and share with others; and to generate ideas and cover several issues or aspects efficiently” (Government of Australia Department of Health, n.d.) Students will work in groups of three or four.

Each group will be given a large sticky note and markers with which they will list the alphabet, leaving room to write by each letter. The students will then be provided a topic such as The Fall of the House of Usher. At the start of the timer, students will begin writing something on the topic by each letter that begins with that letter. For instance, by the letter P, students might write Poe for Edgar Allan Poe, the author of the story. An allotted amount of time will be provided for students to work together to complete as much of their chart as possible (Hawkins & Williams, 2020).

When the provided time ends, students will share their lists with the rest of the groups until all groups have shared. For each response they have that is the same as another group, they must mark it off. For each letter response that is UNIQUE, they earn a point. The group at the end with the most points wins bragging rights or a small prize, if you choose. This activity is a great introduction to a new topic, a checkpoint to see where students are in the middle of a unit or a great closing review activity when a unit is completed. It lends itself well to any topic in any subject area. It allows students to work as a group to build community, provides a fun competitive atmosphere and enables students to think outside the box as questionable responses can be challenged and justified. This is an activity that works extremely well in face-to-face environments but can also be used in a virtual setting by assigning students to breakout rooms where the instructor can pop into each room to observe at any time, coming back together in a larger group for presentation and discussion.

### ***RAFT Writing***

More often than not, students do not see themselves as writers and often struggle with lengthy written tasks. Additionally, at times, it can be difficult to inspire students to dive deep and activate their critical thinking when and if they feel intimidated by the task. Fisher et al. (2008) described RAFT writing as “writing to learn” which “involves getting students to think about and to find the words to explain what they are learning, how they understand that learning, and what their own process of learning involve” (Mitchell, 1996; Fisher et. al., 2007).

RAFT Writing is a strategy that forces students to focus on four key aspects when writing: their role - Are they an artist? Are they a teacher? Are they a journalist?; their audience - are they writing to a newspaper? Are they writing to a friend?; their format - will it be a speech? Will it be a letter? Will it be a

newspaper article?; their topic - What is the subject or topic of their piece? The strategy allows “learners [to] have positive attitudes, a high motivation for learning as well as active participation in learning to recount text writing skills through the technique” (Kabigting, 2020).

Take for instance this example for a higher ed education classroom. The pre-service teachers would take on the role of the teacher. Their audience could be their middle-school self. Their format could be a letter, and they could be offering support and advice they needed when they were that age (topic). The purpose of the assignment was to reflect on their experiences during their young adolescent years and apply them to the developmental stages discussed in class and the text. They would be directed to think about what they needed as a middle-level student. In the letter, they would portray themselves as the teacher they needed. They would focus on what struggles they faced during that time of their life. What did they need someone to do for them? How did they need to be treated and understood? They would need to be specific, be thorough and be thoughtful as they addressed their own struggling young adolescent self. This specific writing task expects students to look at and apply materials by considering the topic from a different perspective (Santa & Havens, 1995). An activity like this forces students to think critically about their task and materials then requires them to apply that thinking to a specific issue or issues.

### ***VoiceThread***

The University of Wisconsin in Whitewater (n.d.) describes VoiceThread (VT) as “a collaborative, multimedia slide show that holds images, documents, and videos and allows people to navigate slides and leave comments in five ways - using voice (with a mic or telephone), text, an audio file, or video (via a webcam).” Ed.VoiceThread (2005) reports VT as “a platform where students develop critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity skills”.

This type of activity strongly connects to 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills that our students need. It also empowers dyslexic students as it enables them to voice their ideas and reactions rather than focus on the struggles they face with the written word (Pacansky-Brock, n.d.). The purpose of this higher ed VoiceThread assignment would be to have students analyze a publication of the National Middle School Association’s *This We Believe* and apply it to their developing philosophy of education; particularly their philosophy of working with middle-level students. Students would be asked to approach the “presentation” as if they were being interviewed by a campus. They could be asked to focus on specific elements such as: how would they convey their belief of the concepts to a potential employer? How would they sell themselves to a prospective principal using four of the sixteen characteristics discussed in class?

Veering away from the common written essay and choosing a digital format such as VoiceThread enables students to apply their philosophies and understanding to a real-world, relatable scenario and engages the learner in a critical synthesis of the characteristics discussed in the book. This particular strategy or platform can be implemented in any course with a variety of content. Additionally, VoiceThread “makes a powerful replacement for traditional, text-based discussion boards. While flat text scrolls and pushes the topic of conversation off the screen, VoiceThread allows for richer, more dynamic conversations that take place around the topic rather than below it” (VoiceThread, 2013).

## ***Book Clubs***

Promoting student empowerment can easily thread literacy instruction into all content areas. For example, student self-selected book clubs can lead to positive learning outcomes not only in reading skill refinement including reading comprehension, it can also lead to student skill building in oral communication, relationship building, and practice with productive struggle through intellectual discourse in the form of constructive dialogues (Allen, 2021).

In order to conduct a student self-selected book club, first have students choose a book from a previously established, instructionally congruent list of book choices. Then, instruct students that they have a certain timeline in which to read the book and ask for volunteers to serve as the book club leader. Next, have a book club leader meeting where you will inform leaders that they will conduct a book club meeting in their own way during class time. Some groups may choose to conduct a Socratic-seminar style dialogue in which the leader brings questions about the text and book club members interact based on their feelings and opinions using evidence from the text to support their arguments. Other groups may choose to use technology for their book club meeting and use a running Google document as a way for participants to interact with each other as they post responses in a running, threaded dialogue during book club time. Finally, students will reflect on the book club experience. The students should discuss how their feelings about the text changed and stayed the same as they reflect on their book club meeting. Students should elaborate on why their feelings changed or stayed the same as they provide text-based evidence for their claims.

This kind of interactive learning not only supports cross-curricular learning, it also enhances student understanding of content, allows for practice in communication, and reinforces the critical thinking skills needed to become an informed citizen.

## **Conclusion**

Active engagement in the classroom creates an environment where students of all ages are more inclined to be involved in learning. Students who interact with content are thoroughly engaged in their own learning. Those students are better equipped and empowered to retain the knowledge educators are attempting to impart resulting in long-term content attainment, application, and most importantly, more meaningful learning experiences. By teaching students and pre-service teachers to do this, we are opening up opportunities for broader, more enriched learning. Through modeling these active learning strategies we hope to empower our students, to spark something (Godwin, et al., 2021), that love of critical thinking, and a love of active learning for them to practice in their future classrooms.

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