



## Stop Giving Them Answers: Make Them Think!

David Adams, PhD, and Enoch Hale, PhD

HIGHER EDUCATION HAS recently changed in faster and more dynamic ways than anticipated. COVID-19 is an immediate factor, but the access to information is more prevalent now than 15 years ago. Many students' learning habits do not include long nights in the library reading through textbooks or searching through library stacks. Information is at students' fingertips, and the desire for immediate access to information is only growing. There is a real sense in which students want answers now, and as educators, we are tasked with cultivating the intellect, which is a laborious process. "Learning is deeper and more durable when it's effortful" (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014). In other words, deep learning is hard work. We know this, and we are faced with convincing students that deep learning is meaningful and rewarding.

Consequently, we are charged with developing and refining our students into professional learners who are efficient at thinking critically, completing tasks, and ready to enter the "real world." As Nagro et al. (2018) stated, accomplishing this means structuring our classrooms to emphasize student choice and allowing authentic learning through individual and group activities. If we, as faculty, want our students to critically think, we have to present opportunities that allow students to identify the structure of an argument, determine whether the claim comes from sound empirical research, and identify past literature that demonstrates an agreement or an opposing argument (Cottrell, 2017).

Vygotsky (1962) stated in order for an individual to go through the process of deep learning, they must first recognize the information presented, have multiple opportunities to apply the information, and be intellectually engaged in the learning task. Sound familiar? To illustrate this point, let's reflect on two classroom structures often seen in higher education.

### The Didactic Classroom

In the first classroom the instruction is largely didactic: the instructor controls the classroom, delivers information, and periodically calls on students at random to answer questions or respond to a prompt. In this scenario, students are not challenged to think, but rather must be ready to repeat information when called upon. In other words, we run the risk of positioning students to believe that learning is merely doing what the instructor says. In this scenario, an instructor runs the risk of believing everyone is learning, students are intellectually engaged, and the class was a success.

### The Group Classroom

In the second classroom, students enter, and they are immediately given a topic or problem to think through, placed into small groups, and provided time to discuss. During the discussion, group members write down their own answers, as well as their peers. The groups then select different members to report to the whole class and groups are given the opportunity to agree or ask for clarity. At the end of class, students turn in their answer sheets and walk away having contributed to their own personal learning and the whole class.

If we value Vygotsky's insights, the question becomes: How can we consistently create a classroom environment where students control their learning and we, as the instructor, truly become facilitators of that learning? The following three activities, if consistently implemented, may provide significant opportunities for students to develop deep learning skills, collaborate productively with group members, and improve the learning environment. The following examples assume that a safe learning environment where all student voices are empowered, respected, and heard has been established. These activities can be applied to any instructional modality (e.g., synchronous online; see the respective "Tech Tips").

### Strategy #1: Idea Dump

This activity can help students take ownership of their own learning and develop a deeper understanding of content by engaging in multiple representations and opportunities to consistently construct and share knowledge amongst group members.

How to do it:

- Step 1: Teacher provides students with a prompt prior to class (open ended question).
- Step 2: Students have one to two minutes to think and jot down answers individually.
- Step 3: Teacher places students in small groups and allows each student time to go over their answers with group members. During this time group members take notes and ask clarifying questions.
- Step 4: Groups are told to synthesize the groups' responses and be ready to share with the whole class.
- Step 5: Teacher resembles the whole class and allows groups to share and receive peer feedback and questions.

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Labor Day (no classes) - Sept 7

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**Tech Tip:** If your course has a synchronous component, consider using Zoom Breakout Rooms to partner students and assign groups. Use the Zoom chat feature or a web-based tool, like Padlet, to have students report and submit comments.

### Strategy #2: Traveling Thoughts

This activity can promote individual accountability, active listening, explicit processing of information, social and communication skills, and accountability to group members as they work as a team.

How to do it:

- Step 1: Teacher begins class by asking a question directly relating to the reading assignment.
- Step 2: Teacher splits the class up into Groups of A and B. Both groups need something to record their answers with.
- Step 3: A's and B's share their answers and then switch roles (during this time one partner is speaking and the other partner is recording answers).
- Step 4: A's and B's are placed into another small group. This time A's share their answers, as well as their previous partner's answer, while B's record. Roles are then switched. Teacher allows this rotation multiple times.
- Step 5: Teacher has students individually write down their new answers on a separate sheet for the same question provided in the beginning of class.
- Step 6: Teacher has students share how their answer was influenced throughout the small group interactions and any new takeaways.
- Step 7: All students submit their work prior to ending the class.

**Tech Tip:** If teaching an asynchronous course, consider having students respond throughout the week using discussion board, or web-based tools, such as voice thread or Flipgrid.

### Strategy #3: Idea Shuffle

This activity encourages individual accountability, knowledge sharing and its evaluation, procedural learning, team learning, group processing, communication skills, and whole-class community building.

- Step 1: Teacher prompts students with an open-ended question at the beginning of class
- Step 2: Students are provided two minutes to think of possible answers.

- Step 3: Teacher places the class into small groups.
- Step 4: Students are instructed to write answers down and pass the paper to their partner on the left when done.
- Step 5: Group continues this process for three mins or until everyone is done providing all possible answers.
- Step 6: Group members are instructed to pick the top answer given and be ready to expand or provide clarification.
- Step 7: Teacher brings all group members back to class for a whole group discussion.

**Tech Tip:** If teaching online, consider assigning discussion groups within your institution's learning management system (e.g. Blackboard or Canvas). One could also create groups that provide in-text comments and feedback using tools like Google Docs. Additionally, web-based tools like VoiceThread or Flipgrid can be used for the synthesis activities in steps 6 and 7.



For these strategies to be successful, attention to consistency or routine is important. Structuring discussions that take place in small groups or the whole class provides students with:

- an understanding of their role in the class as a learner and facilitator of knowledge,
- multiple opportunities for knowledge building through small and large group discussions, and
- an increase in student engagement across the class and course of the semesters

Remember, if our goal as faculty is to increase our students' passion for learning and prepare them for the "real world," then we have to make each learning opportunity meaningful and representative of their lives and the professional field for which our programs are designed to prepare them.

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### References

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