

I'd Like to Use Active Learning... But What Can I Do?

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To experience an important psychological phenomenon, carefully follow these instructions:

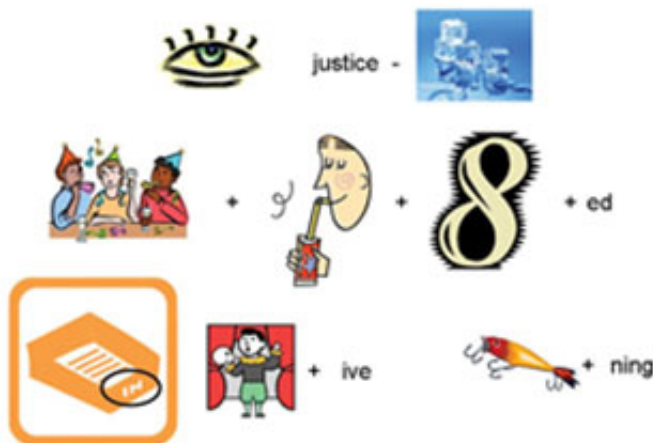
Pick a number between 1 and 50 and write it on a piece of paper

Fold the paper in half so that you cannot see the number

Hold the paper at eye level about 2 feet out from your face

Tilt your head to the right at a 45 degree angle and while concentrating on the number hum the national anthem

Solve the rebus below (answer at end of article).



O.K., so I could have started this article off by simply talking about obedience research (i.e., how readily people obey commands or, if you didn't follow the instructions, the conditions under which people defy "authority") or divergent thinking (i.e., solving the rebus). Instead, these simple demonstrations got *you* involved *with* the material (it's okay to stop tilting your head and humming the national anthem now).

Demonstrations like these are more than just gimmicks for capturing students' attention and introducing material — each provides an opportunity for active learning. According to Bonwell and Eison (1991), active learning entails involving students beyond passively absorbing information and focuses on engaging them in critical thinking, skill acquisition, and the examination of their belief system. Miserandino (1999) also points out that active learning can be fun for students and instructors. The varied content within and across psychology courses provides multiple opportunities for instructors to involve students with hands-on experiences both inside and outside of class. Here are some ideas for activities that share the common goal of getting students actively involved with their learning.

Introduction to Psychology

Because you told us to... This idea is similar to the demonstration at the beginning of this article. Walk into class on the first day and without introducing yourself immediately tell the students to stand up. Follow this directive with a few silly commands (e.g., face the back wall, point to the wall with your right hand, rotate your right arm in a clockwise direction while singing the theme song from *Gilligan's Island*). After the class does this, ask them why they behaved as they did. They will likely respond, "Because you told us to." Point out that for all they know you could be a student, an office worker, a custodian, or a member of the community who just walked into class and decided to pull a prank (if you're feeling particularly devious you can sit in the class posing as a student and have a graduate assistant or office worker come into the class to give the commands as if they were the instructor). Emphasize how easily they obeyed your instructions despite not really knowing who you were. Ask them if they would have obeyed the commands if a fellow student had given them, or if you had told them to do something potentially harmful to the student next to them. You can also ask what effect it might have had if one or two students refused to obey. This is a good opportunity to generate interest about the portion of the course in which you address obedience and conformity and you will later be able to remind the class how easily they obeyed.

There's a library on campus?! Construct a list of citations for journal articles that are available in your campus library. Put these citations into a fishbowl and have students select as many as you want them to find. Their job is to locate the article, make a copy of it, and answer a few questions about it (e.g., title, authors, results). Because many articles are available through full-text searches another option is to incorporate articles that can be found online. This activity can be modified in many ways. For example, if an instructor wants to emphasize how researchers might use references in one article to locate other key articles, students could be required to find at least one other article by using the reference section of the original article. This activity can help familiarize students with the campus library, the psychology resources available there, and the process of using citations to locate articles. It also introduces the diversity of content areas in psychology.

Personality Theories

Give me a dozen healthy infants... This activity can highlight the tenets and criticisms of radical behaviorism and the nature-nurture debate. After reviewing operant conditioning or Skinner's radical behaviorism, present the class with Watson's (1924/1930) quote as a prompt:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select — doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief, and yes, even beggar man and thief — regardless of his (sic) talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities...(p. 104)

Divide the class into small groups and inform the groups that they are about to discover a baby left in a basket on their doorstep. Distribute handouts to each group that include a picture of the baby along with a set of instructions from the parents informing the group of what they would like their child to become (e.g., "Please raise Samantha to become an anxiety-prone mail carrier who is a good writer"). Inform students that they are only to use operant conditioning principles in raising the baby. After giving the groups 10-15 minutes to work on this, have each report back to the class as to how they used operant

conditioning and manipulated the environment to “engineer” the infant’s personality. Pose questions to the class regarding the degree to which they think these principles alone can shape personality and what problems they might expect with this approach. Mixing up “negative” and “positive” personality characteristics provides an opportunity to discuss the notion that Skinner and Watson would say that both are developed in the same way — through reinforcement and modification of the environment.

I’ve heard of the id, ego, and superego, but I always forget which is which. Have three groups of volunteers come to the front of the classroom and assign each group the role of the instructor’s id, ego, or superego. Present them with a situation that involves intra-psychic conflict (e.g., the instructor is hungry and is walking down the snack food aisle at the grocery store). Give them a few minutes to strategize what their group — as the id, ego, or superego — would “say” in this situation (e.g., id: “Who cares if you haven’t paid, I want that chocolate NOW!!!”; superego: “You should be ashamed of yourself for even thinking of eating that chocolate without paying for it first! Besides it’s not good for you!”; ego: “Eat the chocolate now, but keep the package in the cart and we’ll pay on the way out”) and have them perform the role play for the class. Modifications include having the students place the groups at varying distances from the instructor to reflect how conscious Freud thought each component was. Also, the class can vote on which group was the “loudest” and discuss what this says about the instructor’s personality. For example, if the id group is the most vocal, this may suggest that the instructor is rash and self-indulgent. Another option is to involve everyone in role plays by dividing the class into triads and presenting each triad with a conflict scenario. Additionally, students could take turns enacting each role.

So what you’re saying is... Carl Rogers’ conceptualization of empathy entails non-judgmentally listening to another person and showing an understanding of the corresponding emotions. Although a show of hands will likely indicate that many students consider themselves empathic listeners, this activity demonstrates that what they consider good listening may not be consistent with Rogers’ notion of empathic listening. Divide the class into groups and have them discuss an issue that involves strong opinions (e.g., gun control). After a few minutes stop the discussion and ask how many students felt that others in the group were *really* listening to them. Follow up by asking what verbal and non-verbal behaviors made them feel they were not being heard. Ask students what was going through their minds as their fellow students talked. Chances are they will admit that they were formulating rebuttals — and not listening closely — while others were talking. After describing Rogers’ view of empathy, have students re-engage in their discussions (or pick a new topic) with the following guideline (Rogers, 1961): *each person can talk only after summarizing the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately and to that speaker’s satisfaction*. Allow this discussion to go on for a few minutes. Then debrief with the class about how this discussion differed from the first one and what makes true empathic listening challenging.

What’s factor analysis? Where do trait theories of personality come from? Fill a fishbowl with hypothetical questionnaire items (e.g., *I am easily bored*) or items from an established factor-analyzed personality measure. Pass the bowl around the room and have each student select one item. Then have students move around the room forming groups with other students they feel have items related to their own. Once groups have formed, have each group come to a consensus on an appropriate label for their group — one they feel reflects the theme of their items. While students are still in groups, discuss the process of factor analysis. Emphasize how the number of items in the fishbowl has now been reduced to a smaller number of “factors.” Include some reverse-keyed items so that students experience the idea

that items can be negatively related to the others in a particular factor. I have used this activity in Theories of Personality when I cover the development of trait theories. It could also be relevant in a Tests and Measurements class. If you use items from an established scale, you can compare the class' factor solution to that of the original scale.

You put your left foot in... In my Personality Theories course, I cover social learning theory immediately after covering trait theories. When covering trait theories I have students complete the IPIP web version of the NEO-PI-R and print out their results. I ask them to keep these results with them for the next few classes. After coverage of trait theories, but before introducing social learning theory, I invite students to the front of the class to dance the Hokey Pokey with me (so far no one has taken me up on it). I play the song and dance the Hokey Pokey in front of the class. Afterwards, I ask them to look at their NEO results and raise their hands if their Extraversion score was high — typically a significant portion of the class. I ask them why they did not join me in the front of the class to dance as their scores might suggest they would. They express a variety of reasons that usually involve being embarrassed in the situation. I point out to them that my NEO Extraversion score is low and would suggest that I would not dance the Hokey-Pokey in front of class. I use this as a way to introduce Mischel's criticisms of trait theories — chiefly that traits are not always predictive of behavior and that situational factors influence behavior and the expression of traits.

Careers in Psychology

You be the judge. As an activity in a Careers in Psychology course, collect resumes from students and randomly distribute them to the class. Have students anonymously review a few resumes and fill out a review sheet that asks them to critique each resume as if they were a personnel director making a decision — based only on the resume — about whether or not to interview the student. Among other things, students can rate how well organized and written the resume is, note formatting problems, and indicate what they like best about the resume as well as what could improve it. If you're teaching a class with advanced students who are applying to graduate programs, you can tailor the activity to that process.

Child Development

What's in a game? To get students thinking about the cognitive abilities that characterize various stages of child development, bring in an assortment of children's puzzles and games with the age ranges obscured. If the game is unfamiliar to the class describe the format and objectives of the game. Ask the class what the appropriate age-range is for the game and why they think that is the appropriate range. Additionally, ask them to indicate what skills the game requires of the child (e.g., reading, logical problem solving, cooperation). To make the activity more fun, you can solicit volunteers to demonstrate some of the games in front of class.

Abnormal Psychology

Imagine you have been diagnosed... One of my goals in teaching abnormal psychology is to have students reflect on the personal experience of mental illness. An early activity I use involves randomly distributing papers that indicate that each student has just been diagnosed with a particular disorder (e.g., schizophrenia, major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, anorexia, antisocial personality disorder).

Each student responds in writing to a series of questions about what types of symptoms they think they might experience, what they think it would be like to have this disorder, and how friends and family members might react to them once they have been diagnosed. In the next class, students find the other students “diagnosed” with the same disorder and discuss their answers (with the caveat that they not self-disclose information they are not comfortable sharing). Groups then report to the class what types of symptoms they think the disorder entails and how this disorder might impact a person’s life. This can also serve to dispel misconceptions, provide information about disorders, and preview material that will be covered in the course.

Gender Identity Disorder. Using small groups to discuss topics can be particularly useful when covering topics that spark strong opinions. For example, an activity I have used when discussing gender issues involves presenting small groups with prompts similar to the following:

Your 5-year-old niece likes to dress up in Daddy’s clothes and act like Daddy. Is this a problem? Why or why not?

Your 5-year-old nephew likes to dress up in Mommy’s clothes and act like Mommy. Is this a problem? Why or why not?

You can create additional prompts varying the ages of the children. After groups briefly discuss their prompt engage the entire class in discussion. It is likely that scenarios involving the “nephew” are likely to be seen by students more problematic than those involving the “niece.” Asking students to explain specifically why they see the behavior as problematic encourages them to think critically about the social construction of gender as well as their own biases and assumptions about gender. It also provides the opportunity to clarify misconceptions. For example, students often confound sexual orientation with gender identity (e.g., the nephew must be gay) and this activity facilitates the clarification that sexual orientation and gender identity are two distinct concepts.

Physiological Psychology

The Oscar for best neurotransmitter in a dramatic role goes to...In teaching students about neurotransmitters, develop short skits that involve students enacting the roles of neurotransmitters, enzymes, and psychotropic medications. Using hokey, scripted dialogue can make this more fun. For example, a student on one side of the room can be the sending neuron while a student on the other side acts as the receiving neuron. A student acting as the action potential delivers an urgent message (e.g., an envelope) which the sending neuron reads aloud. The message states that it is time for his or her neurotransmitters to leave home and go out into the synapse (Sending neuron: “Oh my. I can hardly believe it’s time to release my neurotransmitters out into the synapse. It seems like only yesterday they were amino acids.”). A handful of students acting as neurotransmitters (e.g., serotonin) walk out into the “synapse” — the space between the volunteer neurons — and find the receiving neuron (e.g. a student on the other side of the room). Each neurotransmitter gives the sending neuron a message (e.g., a handout with the word “FIRE!” on it). Eventually, the sending neuron calls the neurotransmitters home (e.g., Sending neuron: “Sara! Toni! Time to come home!”), and they come back (i.e., reuptake). These skits can also be used to demonstrate how psychotropic medications work. For example, students playing the role of Lexapro could block serotonin reuptake, holding up STOP signs and insisting that the serotonin “neurotransmitters” not come back until they have introduced themselves to the receiving neuron (e.g.,

shake hands with the “receiving neuron” volunteer). To involve all students in the plays, the instructor could divide the class into groups and turn this into a contest allowing the class to vote on which group gets the Oscar for the best re-enactment.

These are only a handful of active learning activities — there are countless ways to incorporate active learning into psychology classes. A willingness to experiment, a fishbowl, and a little fun can go a long way in engaging students actively in their learning, making information memorable, helping students make meaningful connections, and exciting them about the field of psychology. In any case...

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First rebus answer: *I just participated in active learning.* ?