Professionals Against Improperly Labeling Active Learners

PAILAL Newsletter

What does your classroom look like?
Timothy C. Clapper

Take a minute and think about how you learn best. If you had to learn something that really mattered how would you go about learning it? Would you look it up on the Internet? Would you find pictures that enabled you to gain a visual image of what you had to learn? Would you have somebody explain it to you? Or, would you gather the materials involved in learning that 'meaningful something' and practice it until you understood it?

Many of us might use all of the above. This is because while we may have dominant learning styles, let's face it, we often learn best when we can see it, hear, and do it. So then, why do so many educators choose to avoid the latter? Is it good enough for them to become physically involved in learning, but not for their learners? Now let us take it a step farther. What does a classroom look like that is student-centered, and what are some authentic activities that would allow for greater understanding? This issue shares some tips to help educators create that sort of environment.

Sand tables for learning: Bringing learning to life

Timothy C. Clapper

Walking into a classroom years ago, as part of a tour of a United States Army Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) classroom at Francis Lewis high school in Queens, New York, I was surprised to find that the classrooms were in a horseshoe pattern rather than in the traditional row pattern. Out of curiosity and, more because I would begin working with this program shortly after the tour, I asked the Senior Army Instructor, Retired First Sergeant Richard Gogarty, why the classroom was arranged in this fashion. He explained that the arrangement offered many advantages including better


Special points of interest:

- Recognize all learning styles including tactile / kinesthetic needs.

- Engage learners in activities that allow them to be physically engaged in the lesson..

- Allow for movement through such activities as project-based learning..

- Move off the stage and guide learners in the construction of their knowledge.

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classroom management because the teacher and learner gained an unobstructed view of one another.

After teaching classes in one of these classrooms for several years, I learned of the many other advantages of this horseshoe design including its ability to be rearranged into several small groups for cooperative based learning. In addition, one of the main features of this model was its advantages to the traditional classroom arrangement in creating the positive learning environment. We might have heard that the 'smart kids' sit in the front in many traditional classrooms, while the struggling learners and the ones that might 'act out' might sit toward the back. Whether that is true or not, the horseshoe shape classroom arrangement allows for all the learners to be considered 'smart' as it should be, by placing them all in the front rows. Throughout the last few years, I have facilitated numerous professional development sessions and workshops for educators and, when the opportunity allows, I share this valuable technique for enhancing the learning environment.

The horseshoe pattern can easily be configured for group work as part of cooperative learning.
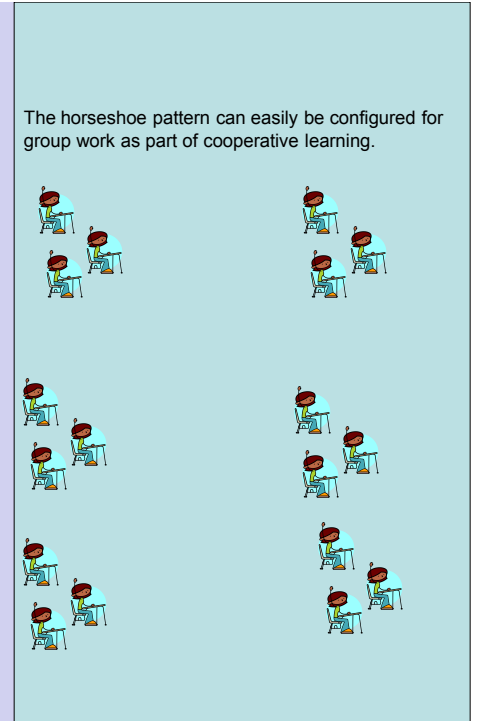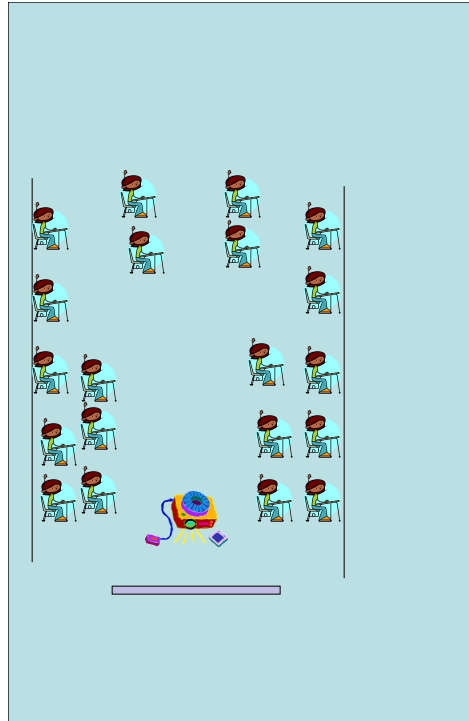
While Gogarty possessed very few teacher education courses in his portfolio, his pragmatic style would have him become known for doing whatever it took to increase understanding. One strategy he used in the classroom was the sand table, which is a simulation or replica of a portion of a piece of terrain being studied, or the events on that terrain that are being rehearsed or reenacted. In the military, they often represent an actual piece of terrain that the leaders will plan a battle with because they can include realistic details that many topographic maps cannot. Since leadership instruction is a foundation of JROTC, the learners in Gogarty's classroom do not learn passively about a major historical event. Instead, they research the events and reconstruct the event using a sand table. While the groups of learners use the power of reciprocal teaching to brief the event they have selected, they must also include the leadership principles that were employed or neglected, as well as the consequences of both.

One can see many principles of social cognitive learning theory being explored here, especially when we look at the value of reciprocal teaching. Learning occurs both actively and vicariously as the cadets construct their own knowledge, but also gain from the experience of others as classmates brief their topics. This is also active learning in its finest hour as learners have to research and construct their own knowledge individually and socially (Ormrod, 2004), working through and changing any preexisting schemas or frames of references, and developing a product that is accurate and evidenced-based. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development is also in effect as learners are assisted by the facilitator or other learners with moving beyond their comfort zone in the area being studied. Each learner is able to compare, reflect, and apply the choices they are
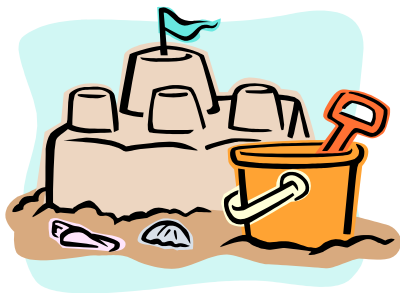
considering with the ideas of others.

One of the best parts of this useful and active learning strategy is the assessment tool. Learning is assessed through the explanation of the event generated by each group of learners as they brief. It becomes very clear whether the learner knows their topic or not and allows the facilitator to assess both depth and detail. The same cannot always be said for many standardized examinations that some teachers may administer and rely upon too heavily. However, even if the learner were administered a test of the event, it is likely the learner will perform as well or better than those who learned from passive means of learning because these learners may reach a much higher level of understanding of the topic. Of course, the key to this assessment under this strategy is a well constructed rubric that guides the learner to the objectives for the lesson, while also letting the learner know what criteria demonstrates the awarding of a certain number of points. As a result, learning is then guided by the facilitator; yet ownership is shifted to the learner.

Anxiety and failure among students interferes with learning (Schunk, 2008, p. 226) and it is not hard to understand how a facilitator's own failure to create understanding in the classroom can be very stressful for their learners. Teachers can take the road often traveled and look at a classroom subject as a series of stimuli and responses that assist the learner with rote information acquisition, or they can become facilitators of learning who prepare their learners to excel on future tasks and examinations. Likewise, teachers can teach definitions and events, but this does not guarantee that concepts are being learned (Schunk, 2008, p. 192) or that higher-order thinking skills are being used.

Only when learners use the information or become involved actively with the experience in some way, and reflect upon it can we say that learning is occurring. This is the framework of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. With sand tables, learners can model the learning that leads to the objectives by way of the learners constructing the information and making it their own. If we are going to create better understanding, we have to move away from teaching that is not effective even if we have used the same strategies for a long period of time (Clapper, 2010, e12). To do so requires an approach similar to the one Gogarty might use. This includes using strategies that create real understanding including, sand tables, classroom arrangement, modeling, or as he is often known to say, "whatever it takes."

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