

Resource Guide

Active Learning while Social Distancing

Many instructors are being tasked with redesigning their courses to accommodate new social distancing (or physical distancing) guidelines. This time of pedagogical revision can be used to reevaluate each instructional method instructors are currently using, from high stakes assessments, content delivery methods and formative in-class activities. While at first glance, guidelines of social distancing appear to conflict with active learning techniques, further consideration reveals that active learning can be accomplished in socially distanced classrooms with some planning.

The first thing instructors should remember is that the “active” in active learning refers to the student actively integrating new information with their existing knowledge, it does not imply students being physically active or in close proximity. While some instructors typically think of active learning as students participating in discussion with their peers, there are many alternative active learning methods that can help students achieve our course goals. Below are a few commonly sought outcomes of actively learning with several examples of how they can still be achieved in a socially distanced classroom. If instructors typically use small-group discussion to meet the course goals or objectives, consider using an alternative method listed below.

Low-stakes formative assessment

Small-group discussion and other active learning techniques have demonstrated their effectiveness as low-stakes formative assessment (or in-class assessment techniques that allow students to assess their own understanding). However, small-group discussions are not the only active learning technique that accomplishes this goal. First, instructors could consider using classroom response systems (i.e. Clickers and Poll Everywhere) to reinforce content delivery and as a means of formative assessment. Classroom response systems can be effective at allowing both students and instructors to assess student understanding in real time. Furthermore, information derived from these systems can stimulate fruitful class discussions that can be done with social distancing. More detailed information on classroom response systems can be found [here](#). Next, intermittent problem sets completed individually and shared with the class can allow students to assess their own understanding of the content or competency. Instructors could consider assigning sample questions/tasks that allow students to practice the skills they will need on future assessments and allow students to ask questions for clarity.

Integrating new information

Active learning techniques such as small-group discussion can be very effective at allowing students to integrate new information with their existing understanding by working with the information, asking questions and providing explanations to their peers. Instructors could consider several alternative activities that have proven to be as effective as small-group discussions. Short individual reflections followed by classroom sharing/discussion

(following social distancing guidelines) can allow students to connect the new information with their existing understanding. Another common technique is to have students summarize their understanding of a topic/concept in a short essay. Instructors could give students 3-5 minutes to summarize a topic in their own words which can be shared with the whole group or exchanged electronically to stimulate further discussion. This tends to reveal misconceptions or gaps in understanding to both the student and the instructor.

Informal exchange of information between students

Informal exchange of information or experiences is usually best achieved by small-group discussion and may pose the greatest challenge to finding alternatives. Instructors could consider having students participate in collaborative work via shared documents (such as GoogleDocs), or live group chats. Students are posed a scenario or prompt in class and must respond on a shared Googledoc. Following the exchange, the instructor could ask for volunteers to summarize the discussion that occurred in the small group to stimulate a full class discussion, if necessary. This technique allows for participation of students who are in the classroom as well as students who are distance learning synchronously. For large enrollment classes, consider having a teaching assistant or learning assistant manage the shared documents.

In sum, instructors could use this experience to evaluate whether their current instructional methods are the most effective way to allow students to achieve their course goals. While small-group discussion has been one of the most commonly used instructional activities in the past, that does not mean they are the only, or even the best way, for students to meet our course goals.

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by [email](#).