PLANNING ACTIVITIES: SOME GUIDELINES

Planning an efficient activity:

Activities are most effective when used with a learning objective in mind. Here are some questions to ask yourself when deciding whether and which activities to use (questions are formulated with Advanced Section planning objectives in mind).

1. What skills do you hope students will acquire in this section, and across section this semester?
2. What activities can help students acquire these skills?
3. How can you use activities sequentially over the course of the semester, to help students reinforce and build upon skills already acquired while also fostering the development of new skills?
4. Have you used a range of activities over the course of the semester, to keep students interested while appealing to the range of learning styles that your students bring to class?

Other issues to keep in mind when planning activities include the *Setting*….

- Will students work individually?
- Will they work in small groups?
- Will the class work as one large group?

…and the *Timing* of the activity.

- When, during the 50 minutes, will the activity be used?
- At the beginning?
- At the end? Can the activity be carried over as homework or be completed the next time the class meets?
- Timing also refers to thoughtful advanced planning of sequential activities over the course of the semester.

Effective Delivery of Activities:

- Explain objectives/cognitive goals of the task (In doing this I hope you will learn x, develop y skill, etc.)
- Provide specific instructions for the task
- Provide specific content: what 'tools are they supposed use?
- Give specific standards: what should they aim for? (fastest group, longest list, most original answer, etc.)
- Define specific time & structure
- Determine specific product: what are they supposed to produce?
- Monitor how groups/pairs are progressing

And finally, Miscellaneous helpful hints:

1) Give students a chance to reflect on question in advance and write down their ideas
2) Give instructions first, then the specific task (otherwise they'll start the task without instructions).
3) When the volume in the room decreases bring the class back together.
4) If a group finishes early, have them compare with another group who's finished too.

Examples of Active Learning Activities

Solo Drawing
Start the class with free writing (or even drawing). You might ask students to begin by drawing a picture or a diagram of a colonial plantation, then discuss what historians can learn about the past by studying things like architectural or spatial arrangements. (One might accomplish the same thing asking the students to illustrate what they think made the key moment in a text.)

Solo Writing / 1-Minute Paper
TF presents a discussion question. Or have them write a list of 5 words that describe the reading for that day. Or have them write questions they would ask the author if the author were there in the room Students take the first 2-3 minutes to respond to the question in writing. This activity allows time for students (especially the more deferential ones) to begin to articulate a position before the large-group interaction begins.

Personal Reflection
TF presents a discussion question that directs students to engage with the articles on a personal, emotional level. What is at stake for them personally – not just academically, but in their personal, everyday lives?

Props or visual aids
Let them spark discussion (or free-writing). In a history class, one might bring in objects or texts from the period if possible. One might also lead off writing courses by asking students to describe an image in postcards (dealt around the table like playing cards). One might also bring in several illustrations of the same scene in a novel, photos of an important site, or simply portraits of key figures.

Pass it On
One good way to build free-writing or brain-storming games is to have students add to index cards they keep passing in one direction. First they might each write a major theme from the day's reading, and then pass to the right. Next, they read the theme that has been passed to them, and write a question for an essay topic that addresses that theme, and pass again to the right. They might then write a thesis statement answering the next question.

Small Group Work
TF presents a discussion question or activity that is addressed within small groups (some studies suggest that four to five participants per group is optimal). For instance, groups are asked to brainstorm ten questions pertaining to the readings, and to formalize the best three for presentation to the whole class. These questions could be a basis for subsequent discussion.

Peer Instruction
Ask a conceptual question, not requiring computations, with multiple choice answers. Give students a minute to consider the problem and indicate a response using either colored flash cards or electric "clickers." If many students are wrong, revisit the underlying ideas; if there is a mix of responses, have students discuss the problem with their neighbor, and then change their answer if they like.

Think-Pair-Share
Pose a question and have students write down an answer; then have students discuss their answer with their neighbor. After discussion, ask pairs or individuals to tell you what they came up with. This works wonders with shy students, who may feel more comfortable speaking after first writing something down, then having it validated by their neighbor before sharing with the group.

Collaborative Problem Solving or Proving
Present students with a problem to be solved or a theorem to be proved. Ask leading questions when necessary, but never write anything on the board unless it comes from a student. If a student takes a step in the wrong direction, ask them to explain their thinking; if someone has a good idea but others seem not to see where it is going, ask the student to explain why they suggested what they did.

The Fish Bowl
Students write one question concerning clarification of course material they do not fully understand, depositing questions in a bowl. The instructor draws several questions from the bowl and answers them for the class or asks the class to answer them.

Reciprocal Peer Questioning
Students prepare questions on a lecture, reading, experiment, etc. that they share with a group and discuss to answer with supporting evidence. Each group chooses one question to share with the large group.

Car, Boat, Plane
Put three (or more) concepts on the board and students say which "doesn't belong" in the set and why. The instructor might also isolate text passages that seem to be in conflict and ask the students how they can be reconciled.

Debate
Students are assigned to teams, given a position to defend, and asked to present arguments supporting their position, and then the opposing team has an opportunity to rebut.

Jigsaw
Divide students up into groups and have them become experts in a particular topic. Give each group a different topic to explore. After 5-10 minutes, divide up the groups so that each new group has 1 representative from each earlier group. Then each member of the new group becomes responsible for teaching their new group about the topic that they are now experts in.

Design a Follow-Up Research Project
TF presents a discussion activity that focuses on the use of evidence in the article(s), the stated goal of which is to design a follow-up research project that will advance or refute the claims in the article(s), or that will investigate some point of disagreement between the articles.

Abstract Presentations
TF assigns responsibility for a supplementary article to a particular student, whose job is to produce a one-paragraph abstract. The abstract can be incorporated in section in various ways. Most simply, the student might be asked to read and distribute her abstract in section, followed by a five-minute

Q&A from her classmates. Or the abstract could be introduced at a strategic point in some larger discussion activity as a way of refocusing, redirecting, or complicating the conversation.

Believer and Doubter (Elbow, *Embracing Contraries,* 1986)
Students or groups of students are assigned the position of "believer" or "doubter" with respect to the article(s). This activity "teaches students the double role of being simultaneously open to texts and skeptical of them." (Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 142)

Evaluation of Another Student's Work
Students complete an individual assignment or short paper, submitting one copy to the instructor and one copy to a partner. Each student gives feedback on their partner's work, assesses arguments, corrects mistakes, etc.

Rubric and Grading Exercise
Students are directed to grade a sample of student writing, or perhaps one of the assigned readings, according to the rubric that will be used to grade the students' own writing. Then, students share in groups the rationale for the grades they assigned.

Concept Mapping
A concept map is a way of illustrating the connections that exist between terms or concepts covered in course material; students construct concept maps by connecting individual terms by lines which indicate the relationship between each set of connected terms. Most of the terms in a concept map have multiple connections. Developing a concept map requires the students to identify and organize information and to establish meaningful relationships between the pieces of information.

Generating Truth Statements
This exercise develops critical skills and generates a good deal of friendly rivalry among groups. The instructions to each group are to decide upon three statements known to be true about some particular issue. "It is true about slavery that..." "We have agreed that it is true about the welfare system that..." "It is true about international politics in the l950s that...", etc. The complexity and ambiguity of knowledge is clearly revealed as students present their truth statements and other students raise questions about or refute them. The purpose of the exercise is to develop some true statements, perhaps, but mostly to generate a list of questions and of issues demanding further study. This provides an agenda for the unit. Sending students to the library is the usual next step, and they are quite charged up for research after the process of trying to generate truth statements.[1]

Role Playing
This is a powerful learning strategy, guaranteed to motivate and animate most students and to confuse and make nervous many. Role-playing is tricky. It can be as simple (deceptively so) as asking two members of the class to volunteer to adopt the roles of two characters from a novel at a crucial point in their relationship, discussing how they feel about it, or what they should do next. Give students time to prepare for their roles before they act out a debate, discussion, town hall meeting, or conversation.[2]

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[1] http://www.indiana.edu/~tchsotl/part%201/part1%20materials/The_Dreaded_Discussion.pdf
[2] Ibid.

Non-structured Scene Setting

Most of the ways of starting a discussion described thus far involve a great deal of structure and direction. But inevitably, when teachers suspect that they have been dominating too much ("I blew it again ,talked most of the hour!"), it is clearly time to give students an opportunity to take a discussion in their directions, and to do most, if not all, of the talking. The teacher, however, has a responsibility for setting the scene and getting class started. There are a variety of ways to do this, some more directive than others. Put some slides on a carousel and, without a word, show them at the beginning of class. Or, as the students walk into the classroom, the teacher plays a piece of music or a speech on a tape recorder. Or, on the board before class the teacher writes a quotation or two, or two or three questions, or a list of words or phrases or names, or even an agenda of issues to be explored. The only necessary verbal instructions are to make it clear to the students that until a defined time (perhaps the last five minutes) you, the teacher, intend to stay out of the discussion entirely. Even having said that, I have still found that I am capable of breaking my own contract and intervening or, more likely, affecting the class by non-verbal signals. I tell my students that I find it extremely difficult to stay uninvolved, and that I need their help in making sure I stay out of the discussion. They are usually happy to oblige. If possible, adopt an utterly non-evaluative observer role and take descriptive notes on the course of the discussion. To read your notes back to the students may be the most helpful feedback you can give them.[3]

[3] Ibid.