

Active Learning Revisited and Revied

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Ken IKEDA

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For a long time, I have derided the notion of active learning as a buzzword with a lot of skepticism, a concept without substance and merit. This past year, however, I've been persuaded to probe what constitutes active learning and the feasibility to bring it into being. Two diverse groups have driven my motivation to find out and disseminate my understanding. One was a class of secondary school Japanese teachers of English who were enrolled in a teaching license renewal course held at Otsuma and registered to take a module I taught on extending students' motivation on the 11th of August. The other has been my learners, namely through an Academic English 1 course which is aimed at 1st year students that I've taught this past year, the results which I reported on at a forum held by my research SIG at the 2019 JALT International Conference held in Nagoya (Ikeda 2019).

The search for understanding what active learning is and how it is implemented has been an odyssey of sorts. Many of the teachers who were enrolled in my license renewal course wrote their concerns about how to implement active learning, which has been imposed by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) since the inception of this teaching orientation in 2006 (Tahira, 2012).

Two years ago, MEXT dropped the slogan "active learning", substituting it with 主体的・対話的で深い学び, which seems most frequently translated as "proactive, interactive, deep learning" (2017). A Japanese professor who has served on English education advisory boards informed me that MEXT has no accurate definition of active learning. He went to explain that "active learning has many definitions and MEXT did not want to confuse people and also use the (term) with many different definitions" (Hattori, 26 June 2019, personal communication).

It is worth taking a closer scrutiny of the three terms MEXT uses to expound on active learning. I believe the term "proactive" is best expressed by Ito (2017, p.1) to mean "taking action through changes". It is not just enough to be active; one should have a focus toward a goal. "Interactive" appears to involve activity with two or more persons, but I prefer "dialogic" over "interactive", as advocated by the Mongaku group of educators at the Kindai University Attached High School (近畿大学附属高等学校). They argue that "interactive" does not readily translate into activity that involves dialogue (反転授業研究会, 2017). Dialogic activity would seem to align well with the sociocultural approach of having learners develop

understanding with mentors through the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which can be defined “as learners utilising the minimum amount of assistance required to perform at a level higher than which they could perform without assistance” (Carr and Wicking, 2019).

I have come across two differing explanations of active learning. The American view regards active learning as basically “anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (Bonwell and Eison, 1991, p. 19). Bonwell and Eison argue there are five characteristics that students are carrying out in active learning: (a) doing more than listening; (b) developing their skills by themselves; (c) carrying out higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation); (d) engaging in reading, discussing, writing activities; and (e) exploring their own attitudes and values (p. 19). The final characteristic is what I have been focusing in one university class I have taught this year, in hopes that the first four features would unfold from their exploration of their values.

The European University Association (2018) has published an advocacy paper on active learning in European universities. Active learning is explained as:

“... (consisting) of a broad range of pedagogical processes that emphasises the importance of student ownership and activation. It harnesses the benefits of curiosity-driven methods, research-based/problem-based learning and diverse assessment practices, thus stimulating the learner’s critical thinking skills. It is defined by a student-centred approach to learning and teaching, in which teachers are seen as facilitators of learning.” (EUA, 2018, p. 3)

Although critical thinking is referred in both the American and European explanations, the EUA places stress on “student ownership”, which is absent in the five characteristics described by Bonwell and Eison (1991). Indeed, the EUA explanation clearly puts learners in the driver’s seat in determining learning outcomes, while Bonwell and Eison actually do not address learners as co-participants in active learning as their perspective is all teacher-directed.

The EUA paper states that active learning is “also iterative, dialogical and mostly collaborative; it is about the doing of understanding and, hence, about the application of knowledge in new and authentic situations” (p. 3). “Dialogical” certainly resounds with the Mon-gaku’s interpretation of MEXT’s term 対話的 as “dialogic”; “dialogical and mostly collaborative” echo the sociocultural approach of learning.

What I take heart from the EUA paper is its framing the role of instructors and students as requiring a cultural revolution, as stated:

“Active learning casts the teacher in the role of facilitator and coach and invites the student to take responsibility for learning. Hence, they need to enter into a new contract and relationship and negotiate new ways of working and learning. There needs to be a cultural shift to accommodate an active learning stance and this shift is possible only in the context of nurturing and supporting learning communities for staff as well as stu-

dents.” (p. 3)

I concur with this re-defining of active learning. It is not just enabling students to engage in new forms of learning. It also requires the instructor to change one’s perspective of being the fount of knowledge and the one to determine learning outcomes, to being a “facilitator”, which is echoed by the EUA throughout its paper. I would argue that this shift of perspective from two disparate cultures of teachers and learners needs to be initiated by the instructor and shown to students by example and actions. If successful, students will realize that active learning is not limited to a class activity, a lesson, or a course in itself, but overlapping with immediate life concerns and beyond the classroom. It is through proactive and dialogic interaction that learning becomes its deepest.

This year, I have embarked on implementing active learning in a class to develop academic skills in English. I framed the class to focus on learners’ values development (Ikeda, in press). Bonwell and Eison (1991) identify the fifth feature of active learning occurring in classrooms, is “exploring their own attitudes and values” (p. 19).

Values are rooted in personal beliefs, which are often reflected in statements that show what people strongly believe the world should be. Lemke (2008) explicitly states that “values and ambitions ... are clearly grounded in fear and desire” (p.27). Lemke (2008) proposes three positions on how identity should be recast (p. 18):

1. Relational identity: This positioning considers identity as multiple and acted out through “diverse relational identities in interaction with diverse others across the significant social divisions within our community”. Here identity is considered hybrid in the sense that we try to maintain our selves when “we participate in multiple institutions, each of which has its own ideas about who we should be” (p. 33).
2. Scale-differentiated identity: Studies on identity need to incorporate the notion of “identity-in-practice” being acted out on “short timescales of situated small-group(s)”, to those “appropriate to larger institutional scales and lifespan development”.
3. Body-centered identity: This positioning gives more centrality to the human body, expressed with its pains, fears, and desires, which affect actions and motives. As Lemke puts it, “(the) phenomenological experience of unique selfhood overflows social semiotic categories, both structural and agentive, as we create feeling as well as meaning for ourselves and others across the multiple timescales of our lives”.

These proposals by Lemke on a reformulated sense of identity upend the notion of identity as invariant, unified, impervious to physical frailties. It makes sense then how Lemke argues that identity is more like “a loose collection of different elements: norms, values, discourses, institutions, identities, roles, artefacts, settings, each of which does not have to be joined with all the others in a consistent and stereotypical pattern” (p. 36). Likening the commitment of identity to a set notion which would be meaningless to a consumer who buys only what she wants, Lemke states emphatically these elements do not “reinforce one another”. It would be

more prudent to view identities as “packages” (p. 36).

This year I have taught this values-based approach to two 1-semester Academic English class which has averaged eight students, most of them 1st years, with one in her 3rd year and another in her 4th year. I regard the mix of different years as an advantage to teaching the classes because these older students’ experiences help inform their younger classmates about the present socio-economic environment. Students first read a list of statements on various topics (manners, education, technology, refugees etc.) and indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement on an 8-point scale. Then they polled each other to find out their respective degrees of agreement/disagreement, asking for their reasons as well. They reviewed and analyzed their poll responses, then found students who had the same degree of agreement/disagreement on one or more value statements, which happily have resulted in three groups, two of them having one older student each.

Not only is it illuminating for students to know their own and others’ values, but awareness of personal and shared values leads to concerted action. Trainor (2008) states that if people become clearly aware of their values, “the easier it is to put them into practice. Values provide the framework for decision-making”. The way I channeled students’ awareness of their values has been to have them create manifestos for their respective groups. The word “manifesto” is defined by Cambridge Dictionary as “a written statement of beliefs, aims, and policies of an organization”. These student group manifestos are based on their shared values, which are comprised of their own group name, logo, slogan, and platform of shared values.

I have used public forums as a way and incentive to spur these students group manifestos to present beyond the classroom. In one of the classes, students presented their manifestos in an open lesson which several of my colleagues from the Department of English Language and Literature attended, as well as a member of my research group who is also teaching part-time at Otsuma. The visiting professors commented on the quality of thinking expressed by the students as well as the rapport between them and me. This course ended with the students creating their own proposals and presenting rebuttals against objections, in a lesson open to visiting students from Otsuma’s affiliated high schools. For the second semester, student groups of this Academic English class presented their manifestos at a research and teaching conference in December 2019 organized by my research group called Creating Community: Learning Together (CCLT 5) which featured professors and students from various universities.

Students answered a questionnaire I prepared about the class, particularly about barriers they initially had about the class, to what extent these were reduced or eliminated, and any bridges formed. Later, I interviewed three of the seven students who answered the questionnaire.

In general, these three students have come away with positive feelings about what they learned by themselves. All three students have taken this course for two semesters, but only one for course credit; the other two audited of their own free will and time. Let me describe each student.

The first is a student who was in her third year of college. The two main barriers she expressed was her anxiety of speaking in English and the age gap between her and the other 1st-year students. But she played a pivotal role to get the students speak only in English the first third of lessons. When I asked her how the class could be improved in the second semester, she answered she wanted more focus on peace-related issues. I am not sure I have satisfied her wishes but she continued to participate actively in the class.

Another student was in her first year. She wrote on the questionnaire that she feared if she would do well in my class because she didn't know anyone in the class and due to her lower-than-expected section level which was tied to her score on the CASEC placement test at the beginning of the year. This student excelled in this class, having made a very close friend in the first semester and remained being one of the most influential motivators. Her group manifesto presentation showed many graphs with professional-level citations and polls she conducted on Instagram asking about Japanese people's awareness of the refugee issue in this country. I learned that both of her parents graduated from the same university in the U.S., which has fueled her desire to study abroad. She was accepted to Deakin University in Australia for a long-term study abroad next year.

The third student was also a freshman. She expressed her worries on the questionnaire of her fear of public speaking, particularly, asking and answering questions in presentations. Although she only registered for the first semester, she is auditing the second semester and comes every week to actively participate in the lessons. She still tells me that she has not overcome her nervousness of speaking but she presented her manifesto group presentation at my research group's December conference.

I believe this Academic English class has served as a catalyst for these three students to be motivated, discern their values-laden identities and be empowered to develop themselves as active learners and participants in society. Active learning is self-driven, initially dependent on needs and purposes. I do not believe it is ever intrinsically motivated. One can have needs and purposes, but a threshold of desire is required to pass in order for autonomy to be generated. Once a person has the desire to be autonomous, then that individual will invest in strategies and ideals to equip oneself, as well cultivate the desire to be perpetually self-driven.

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