

# Conducting participatory learning activities

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## Description

Participatory learning activities (PLAs) provide practice opportunities for learners to develop the skills and competences defined in the learning objectives. All learners are actively engaged in carrying out a specific step in the learning process. The instructors' role is to guide learners through this process so that learning becomes effective and efficient.

## Purpose

From a constructivist perspective, learning requires the integration of new information with existing knowledge structures (see Elmgren & Henriksson, 2010). Learning is thus best supported when learners are required to actively process information to integrate knowledge. The provision of such opportunities is the main purpose of participatory learning activities. During PLAs, learners explore, exploit or create information (see Beauchamp & Kennewell, 2010). PLAs thus foster a different kind of learning compared to taking in information conveyed by the teacher.

The following table presents different categories of interaction, amongst which PLAs can be placed at the “synergistic” level.

Category of interaction	Whole-class interaction: teacher-student	Group interaction: working independently of the teacher	Individual interaction
None	Lecture/demonstration by teacher	Watching or copying	Watching
Authoritative	Funnelling questioning by teacher	Disputational talk	Doing, using
Dialectic	Probing questioning by teacher	Challenging talk	Constructing, finding
Dialogic	Focussing dialogue and uptake questioning by teacher	Cumulative talk to exploratory talk	Creating, exploring
Synergistic	Questioning and critical responses by teacher and students	Contributory talk	Exploiting

Table 1: Categories of interaction (Beauchamp & Kennewell, 2010)

On the one hand PLAs represent effective learning opportunities for students. On the other hand, they reveal to instructors what learners can already do and which learning steps they encounter difficulties and/ or require support with.

## Preparation

When designing participatory learning activities that (1) develop knowledge and skills and which (2) proceed effectively and efficiently, instructors need to make the following considerations.

1. Goal: Do you want to provide a learning opportunity for a learning step that you consider challenging for students or do you want to gain insights into how students are doing in their learning?
2. Purpose: What particular step towards reaching the learning objectives do you want to conduct a PLA for? Define the specific objective of the activity to make sure the level of challenge for practice is appropriate (see Ambrose et al., 2010).
3. Information: What information will students require for the learning activity? Where will it be come from? Can they draw on prior knowledge, information conveyed in an earlier lesson, or will they access new information by reading, watching, listening,...

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4. Results: How will you collect student-generated results? You can reduce the variety of answers you need to deal with by clustering (e.g. similarities + differences, pros and cons), ordering (e.g. chronology, distance) or according to other criteria. Provide feedback on students' contributions by maintaining a clear focus on the intended learning objective of the activity.
  5. Take home message: What is the take home message that you consolidate the learning step with? Boil down the essence of the learning activity to one particular sentence that relates back to the activity's learning objective. Indicate the relevance of students' contributions towards it to enhance the value created from sharing results.

### Step- by – step implementation

When conducting a participatory learning activity in the classroom, instructors can follow the steps below.

1. Give instructions. Define the purpose of the PLA in relation to the course learning objective(s), the steps you would like students to take, the way students work together, materials needed, and specify the outcomes you expect students to produce. State the time you allocate for each step. Check if students are clear about what you are asking them to do in the activity.
2. Monitor learners' activity: During the learning activity, students will most probably not require constant teacher support. Instructors' interventions will be helpful when students are unable to use time well due to doubts about the task or difficulties with the learning step itself. When instructors notice such difficulties, they can support students so that they become able to take the next step.
6. Work with student-generated results: Instructors collect students' results using a structure developed ahead of time. In addition to providing feedback on students' contributions with regard to the learning objective(s), it will be interesting for instructors to deal with unexpected or faulty answers. Inquiring how students arrived at their result or asking students to challenge each other's results may represent fruitful opportunities to reveal and resolve students' misconceptions.
7. Consolidate learning from this activity: state the take-home message for this activity to relate its outcomes to the overall course learning objectives.

### References:

- Ambrose, S., Bridges, M., Lovett, M., DiPietro, M., & Norman, M. (2010). *How learning works: 7 research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Beauchamp, G. & S. Kennewell. "Interactivity in the classroom and its impact on learning". *Computers & Education* 54 (2010) 759–766.
- Elmgren, M. & A. S. Henriksson (2014). *Academic teaching*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

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## Appendix : Useful methods to foster student participation<sup>1</sup>

Please find below short descriptions of five very useful methods for planning interactive sequences with your students. You already experienced these methods (or a variation of them) as participants in the *Learning to Teach* course 😊.

### 1) Think – pair – share

*How can I use this method?*

The instructor asks a question – or sets a task – at one of the higher complexity levels (see learning objectives handout). First, students work individually for a designated period of time to come up with possible answers themselves. Second, students pair up to compare and discuss their individual responses. Third, students share their results with the entire class. It is helpful if the instructor announces the mode of sharing students' responses beforehand (e.g. How many responses will you collect? How will you collect responses (sorting, clustering, sequencing)?)

### 2) Jigsaw

*How can I use this method?*

The instructor asks a question – or sets a task – at one of the higher complexity levels (see learning objectives handout). First, the class is divided into several small groups consisting of 3-4 persons. Each of them is responsible for one element of the group task (please note: the overall number of groups needs to equal the number of elements to be completed in the group task). Then, each group member branches out into « expert groups » to meet those members of other groups who are working on the same element. These « experts » work on the element together and consolidate results. Finally, the individual experts return to their initial groups and share the consolidated knowledge from their expert groups. The initial groups develop a team result to answer the question posed in the task. It is helpful if the instructor announces the expected outcome of the group work and the mode of sharing group results beforehand. Also see <https://www.jigsaw.org> for details.

### 3) Snowball

*How can I use this method?*

The instructor asks a question – or sets a task – at one of the higher complexity levels (see learning objectives handout). Students start working on the task in pairs. In the next step, each pair looks for another pair to share assumptions, compare and contrast ideas, and identify points of agreement and disagreement. It is helpful if the instructor announces the mode of sharing students' responses beforehand (e.g. How many responses will you collect? How will you collect responses (sorting, clustering, sequencing) ?)

### 4) Method 66

*How can I use this method?*

The instructor asks a question – or sets a task – at one of the higher complexity levels (see learning objectives handout). Students work in groups of 6 for 6(+) minutes. Each group nominates a speaker to report back on group results after the end of the 6(+) minutes. Please note that you can also turn the method into a « method 48 » (groups of 4 working for 8 mins.), « method 39 » (groups of 3 working for 9 mins.), etc. to account for different levels of task complexity. It is helpful if the instructor announces the mode of sharing students' responses beforehand (e.g. How many responses will you collect? How will you collect responses (sorting, clustering, sequencing)?)

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<sup>1</sup> These short descriptions (except Method 66) are based on:  
[http://www.learningdomain.com/Module\\_3.Collaborative.pdf](http://www.learningdomain.com/Module_3.Collaborative.pdf)