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Making Online Learning Active

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We are often so fixated on online learning's shortcomings that we slight its unique advantages. Students can have anytime, anywhere access to class materials. We can make a wealth of primary sources and data readily available to students: textual, visual, aural, qualitative and quantitative. We can give all students -- not simply the most talkative and self-confident -- the opportunity to participate and contribute.

In addition, we can survey our students to probe their background knowledge, identify their interests and discover what they find interesting or confusing. We can poll our students and get their considered opinions about a variety of topics. We can monitor student engagement and understanding in real time.

Then, too, we can encourage our students to create multimedia-rich 21st-century projects. Students can also acquire communication and collaboration skills they'll need in life and in the workplace.

Online teaching cannot replicate every aspect of face-to-face teaching, but it can encourage us to radically reimagine our courses. We can focus on skills as well as content. For example, in a literature class, we might ask students to interpret a text through contrasting lenses -- feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic -- or prompt students to analyze the use of language, style and tone, or to read between the lines, identifying subtexts, allusions and symbolism, or ask what the text tells us about the human condition or examine a text's assumptions about femininity or masculinity, civilization, race or class.

A history class can emphasize inquiry, myth busting and problem solving. Students can uncover the history behind the headlines, the roots of everyday

create word clouds, while Google Ngrams allows students to analyze changes in word frequency in published books. Students can create visualizations of census data with http://www.census.gov/dataviz/ [3].

- **Etymology:** The Oxford English Dictionary and the Online Etymology Dictionary allow students to trace shifts in words' meaning and the introduction of popular terminology and concepts.
- **Exhibition creation:** Google Slides offers a simple platform on which to create virtual exhibitions.
- **Feedback:** Peer feedback offers a way for students to provide constructive feedback to classmates. You might consider asking students to participate collaboratively in the construction of rubrics.
- **Geomapping:** Use theclio.com to identify sites of historical or cultural significance. HistoryPin is a collaboration tool that allows users to share images history across time and space and place those memories on maps and timelines.
- **Global learning:** Examples of global learning include paired classrooms and virtual pen pals. Skype in the Classroom offers an easy way to create virtual field trips and conversations with content-area specialists.
- **Interactive lessons:** Students can respond to a video with edpuzzle.com and enhance a website with insertlearning.com. Instructors can build lessons around TED talks with ed.ted.com.
- **Portfolios and digital galleries:** Students can create portfolios and digital galleries with Showcaseedu.com and create and annotate a portfolio with seesaw.me.
- **Project-based learning:** Here are some 21st-century alternates to the classic research paper. You might ask students to create an infographic with Infogram, Picktochart or Venngage, or make an interactive poster with Glogster or Thinklink. They might make a presentation with PowerPoint or Google Slides, or a podcast with Anchor.fm or Audacity, or a digital story with Adobe Spark, iMovie, MS Photo Story 3 or MS Movie Maker, and virtual museum or exhibition with Google Slides.
- **Student response systems:** Polling and quizzing provide a simple way to monitor student understanding in near real time.
- **Survey tools:** Consider conducting a survey using Google Forms or Survey Monkey -- and then you can use anonymous survey data in class to explore attitudes, interests and opinions -- or even students' family background and experiences.
- **Text mining:** A simple tool for mining a text, which can offer insights into word choice, metaphors and imagery, is https://voyant-tools.org/ [4].
- **Timelines:** Timeline.js and Time Mapper allow students to quickly create a timeline from a spreadsheet.

Other active learning strategies include:

1. Brainstorming: Asking students to generating ideas collaboratively.
2. Breakout rooms: Dividing students into small discussion groups.
3. Debates: Staging formal discussions of a controversy, with students responsible for formulating opposing arguments debates over historical controversies.

4. History behind the headlines: Uncovering the backstory behind a current event.
5. Role playing: Having students assume the role or persona of particular actors or characters.
6. Scavenger hunts: Asking students to hunt for sources of information or answers to questions.

But of all the techniques that I have found useful, the easiest and most generative is simply to ask students to analyze and interpret a primary source, both textual and unconventional. These might include advertisements (including fugitive slave ads or slave sale ads, which provide many insights into the realities of slavery); architectural examples (which can reveal fascinating insights into color, space usage, privacy and vista into the outdoors); culturally significant artifacts; fashion; genealogical data; gravestones; or hairstyles.

Then there are historic maps (which not only reveal the growth of geographical knowledge, but into the politics of boundary construction); historic newspapers and magazines; movie clips; popular song; names (the social Security Administration lists popular names by year at http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames [5]); paintings; photographs; and propaganda posters.

We are repeatedly told that a paradigm shift is taking place in teaching: from instruction -- conveying content -- to active learning. Our goal as instructors should be to help students master and apply knowledge and skills, not simply transmit information.

If we are to do this, we must engage, motivate and challenge our students, tap in to their innate curiosity and challenge them with activities that they find authentically meaningful. Active learning in virtual environments is not a mission impossible. It's eminently doable.

The keys are to ask our students to interpret conventional and unconventional primary sources; invite them to experiment with new ways of organizing, visualizing, analyzing and presenting data; encourage them to undertake investigations, solve problems and engage in role playing, brainstorming and debates; and create their own multimedia projects and presentations.

Go for it!

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[5] http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames