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Enhancing Critical Thinking and Active Learning in Online Courses

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Abstract

Distance education has become a reality in our field, with many programs, courses, and professional development opportunities proliferating every year. This panel of distance faculty provides examples for participants to understand the many ways that active learning, critical thinking, decision making, and self-assessment are effectively incorporated into online learning environments. Participants will also be invited to analyze their own classroom activities to fit online possibilities.

Introduction

Distance education has become a reality in higher education in every field. In our field of interpreter education, programs, courses, and professional development opportunities are proliferating every year. Many wonder at the possibilities of sparking active learning and critical thinking in any classroom, let alone accomplishing it effectively at a distance. Questions are raised about the ability to encourage critical thinking and active learning for online students. Nowadays these questions need to shift from concerns about whether this can be accomplished to

how it can be facilitated. Just as traditional face-to-face approaches can be highly motivating for students or deathly suffocating to active learning, so, too, can every form of distance learning, from old-fashioned correspondence courses, to simple asynchronous online discussions and interactions, to full-blown synchronous computer-animated dog-and-pony shows. It is not the format or delivery method of the lesson or activity that is important; it is the design that teachers use in development and the expectations, goals, and interest of students participating in the learning that result in, or hamper, active learning. The most exciting activities designed to stimulate learning will fail if students are not interested in learning, if they expect simply to be taught "at." The most lifeless bit of fact can open a new world of experience and learning if it sparks a fire in the learner's mind. This is not news. To quote Plutarch, *The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.* The fire can be kindled in any environment and educational setting.

The broader field of adult education is experiencing a paradigm shift. More than ever, faculty are recognizing that effective practices in education require a focus on learning rather than on teaching, on critical thinking rather than on rote memorization. Daniels and Bizar (1998) list the characteristics of educational practices that are considered effective. Their summary includes a broad spectrum of projects that have investigated and outlined standards for effective practices and reflects broad consensus. Effective practices in education are those that focus on learning, that encourage reflection, that are authentic and constructive--that encourage learners to build from experience on what they already know. Recommendations from various organizations have called for active learning rather than passive absorption of information; for reflection rather than memorization. The table below summarizes some of these changes.

Less	**More**
Whole-class-directed instruction, e.g., lecturing	Student responsibility for own learning
Student passivity: sitting, listening, receiving and absorbing information	Active learning through talking, collaboration and experience
Prizing and rewarding silence in the classroom	Participation in the classroom
Class time spent on reading texts	Experiential, inductive learning
Superficial coverage of broad content	Deep coverage of fewer topics
Rote memorizing of facts	Critical focus on thinking skills
Emphasis on competition for grades	Collaboration in learning

Adapted from Daniels and Bizar, 1998. (p. 3)

Although Daniels and his colleagues focus on K-12 education, the expectations for adult learning are similar. Bloom and colleagues (1956) were some of the earlier pioneers in discussing learning rather than teaching. Many faculty in higher education have developed some familiarity with and beyond Bloom's taxonomy, and have seen learning being targeted at least in the objectives listed in many courses. Since Bloom, various educators have offered revisions, and other perspectives, on developing critical thinking. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), Marzano (2001), Wiggins and McTighe (2005), and Angelo and Cross (1993) all offer valuable perspectives on approaches to developing critical thinking and stimulating active learning. Winston (2005) provides a discussion of these perspectives in relation to teaching and learning interpreting. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) discuss these same characteristics for adult learning. Their discussion of "coverage" and "uncoverage" is one that sheds valuable light on teaching and learning in higher education. They define coverage as:

> A teaching approach that superficially teaches and tests content knowledge irrespective of student understanding or engagement. The term generally has a negative connotation: It implies that the goal is to march through a body of material (often a textbook) within a specified time frame. (Ironically, one meaning of the term *to cover* is "to obscure.") Teachers often couple the term with an excuse linked to demands of curriculum frameworks ("I would have liked to go into greater depth, but we *have* to cover the content") or external testing (but the students will be tested on… and the results are published in the paper"). (p. 340)

Covering topics, then, is to ignore, or place as a secondary priority, what students learn, and to place as primary, the passing of words, print, facts, and figures by the eyes and ears of students.

Contrast their definition of "uncoverage," which they contend is essential for active learning:

> A teaching approach that is required for all matters of understanding. To "uncover" a subject is to the opposite of "covering" it. Three types of content typically demand such uncoverage. The content may be *principles, laws, theories,* or *concepts* that are likely to have meaning for a student only if they are seen as sensible and plausible; verify, induce, or justify the content through inquiry and construction. The content may be counterintuitive, nuanced, subtle, or otherwise

> easily misunderstood ideas, such as gravity, evolution, imaginary numbers, irony, texts, formulas, theories, or concepts. The content may be the conceptual or strategic element of any skill (e.g., persuasion in writing or "creating space" in soccer). Such uncoverage involves clarifying effective and efficient means, given the ends of skill, leading to greater purposefulness and less mindless use of techniques. (p. 353)

There is very little that we need to teach in interpreting education programs that requires coverage; our focus necessarily needs to be on "uncoverage" as we help students learn to think, to analyze, to make informed decisions, and to reflect on the impact and effectiveness of those decisions.

Not all educators have shifted to and embraced this paradigm, and certainly not all institutions and communities. Many educators still focus on the basic levels of learning-rote memorization without application, spewing facts, laws, and ethics without an understanding of why these are important. In our field, ASL teachers require students to remember vocabulary because the list of vocabulary is in the current week's lesson. Interpreting teachers focus on students needing to remember parallel vocabulary in two languages and matching them up. Some still count the number of seconds of processing time an interpreter has, rather than looking at why the interpreter has it. Educators need to move away from the perspective that teaching means transferring information and facts, and from the belief that the best teachers "cover" the most content. Educators need to focus on guiding students toward developing critical thinking, decision making, and self-assessment as a primary goal, with every activity, workshop, course and curriculum aimed at actively learning those processes. The broader field of adult education has been growing toward a philosophy of student centered, active learning, to Wiggins and McTighe's concept of "uncoverage." The literature about adult education and effective approaches to education provides exciting information for interpreting educators. There is a growing wealth of literature about learning-based education that can inform our own education practices. Winston (2005) describes a small part of this literature, and encourages interpreting educators to incorporate these approaches into interpreting education. The *Domains and Competencies for Interpreting Educators* (Project TIEM.Online, 2005) reflects the emphasis on critical thinking and active learning embraced by this paradigm shift in higher education.

Active learning requires that people participate in their own learning process, reading, discussing, applying, and integrating what they are learning into their own knowledge and practices. They need to be able to critically analyze information, make justifiable decisions about their actions, and assess their own progress and growth throughout the learning process. Online activities can be an excellent format for encouraging all of these learning processes, contributing to the growth of skills and knowledge for students. Unfortunately, teaching practices, whether aimed at critical thinking and active learning or not, are often transferred to the online environment with little consideration for the learning needs of students. Faculty simply transpose activities and assignments intended for face-to-face classrooms directly to a distance environment, without regard for the exciting opportunities and novel constraints that distance, and especially online environments can offer. Students often join distance courses or programs believing that the work will be easy, and that active participation will be at a minimum. Faculty efforts often result in poorly designed learning experiences, and students have limited opportunities to actually learn.

Activities that incorporate and encourage critical thinking and active learning need to be specifically designed to achieve those learning goals. Educators need to approach their own activity design by explicitly stating these goals, then reflecting on authentic, holistic approaches to achieving them, and only after this should they begin structuring specific activities so that learners are able to build on their existing knowledge, expand their experiences, explore and critically analyze options. Learners need to create their own work, making decisions about their work, and finally they need to assess the effectiveness of their own work. Taking this even further, they need to be able to assess the work of others, and guide them in the same reflective and analytical thinking process they have benefited from. Educators need to instill this in interpreting students.

Essential Skills for Faculty

An essential factor in encouraging life-long learning is having faculty skilled in facilitating this kind of learning, faculty who are comfortable resisting the pressures of students and peers who want, even demand, to be told what to know, memorize, and spew back to the teacher on a test. Even the most effectively designed online learning activity needs a skilled and practiced educator to implement it. Faculty need to experience this kind of learning themselves,

observe skilled facilitators managing discussion, online dynamics, and activity design, and then themselves be mentored in managing activities that encourage learning and exploration.

A fundamental skill is the ability to pose guiding questions rather than provide answers, to kindle active, analytical thinking and reflection rather than to assuage the impatience of those wanting the right answer. There are many avenues for developing these skills. Programs that help people become mentors, coaches, and facilitators abound. A Google search will find dozens of options for the interested teacher. Starcevich (2003) provides one such example on his website for coaching and mentoring, the *Art of Questioning*. Faculty and students alike have found it useful as they learn how to stimulate critical thinking in their students and in their own reflections about their work. This approach to questioning has been adapted to focus on interpreting, and interpreting education (Winston, 2004) and is included here to provide context for the online activity examples provided at the end of this paper.

8 Categories of Questions that can lead to analytical thinking

1. Purpose: *asking about the goal, expectations, or objectives of the interpreter*
   What do you want to happen as a result of our mentoring sessions?
   Why did you choose to accept that assignment?

   My Example:_____

2. Problem: *asking about a specific problem raised in the mentoring*
   What was the problem that occurred when you chose to sit instead of stand?
   Why have you decided that fingerspelling is the cause of your problem?

   My Example:_____

3. Assumptions: *asking about underlying, implicit assumptions being made*
   Why do you assume that fingerspelling is important for this setting?
   What assumptions are you making about learning English when you invent new signs?

   My Example:_____

4. Implications/Consequences: *asking about possible results of choices*
   What is the result of an interpreted class if a student does not know sign language?
   What would happen if you stopped the presenter for clarification at that moment?

   My Example:_____

5. Information: *asking about actual facts or data that support a belief or comment*
   How do you know that the consumer doe not understand use of space in ASL?
   How do you know that no one understood your interpreting?

   My Example:_____

6. Concepts: *asking about what is meant about specific concepts*
   What is your idea of an "effective" interpretation?
   How do you understand the idea of "collaborative" learning?

   My Example:_____

7. Conclusions/Interpretations: *asking about the perspective the person has taken*
   When you see 2 Deaf people signing to each other while you are interpreting, why do you conclude that they don't like you?
   Why do you interpret the teacher's fast pace as a dislike of having an interpreter in the class?

   My Example:_____

8. Point of View: *asking about different possible point of view on a similar topic*
   What do you think is the teacher's role in working with a Deaf student?
   How might the Deaf student want to respond in that situation?

   My Example:_____

Adapted from: Mentoring: The Art of Questioning. Matt M. Starcevich, Ph.D.,©2003
Center for Coaching and Mentoring, Inc. Retrieved from http://coachingandmentoring.com

Encouraging Active Learning Online

The panel discussion and activity to be conducted during the CIT conference will be an opportunity for participants to actively explore the many ways that active learning, critical thinking, decision making, and self-assessment are effectively incorporated into online learning environments. Distance faculty with experience in teaching interpreting, mentoring, and pedagogy will share their approaches to enhancing active learning online. Panel members will analyze a variety of online activities that encourage learners to meet these goals. Participants will be invited to share, in small groups, teaching activities that they would like to analyze and possibly re-structure for online learning, and in fact, to foster active learning in any activity, be it online or on-ground.

Active learning can happen in many types of activities. The activities can be individual and independent, or group-based collaborations; they can foster analysis, decision-making, assessment, self-assessment, or interaction; they can include all of those goals, or any one or two. They are integrated into the whole course or program, and rarely stand alone within the context of learning. The remainder of this paper offers two specific examples of online activities that spark active learning, and that have been designed with just that goal in mind. These activities, in various permutations, have been incorporated into online interpreting education courses by the author, and have resulted in exciting learning and growth in both students and the instructor.

Collaborative Activities: Active learning activities can be undertaken collaboratively. Learners collaborate with group members to accomplish projects and goals, and participate and contribute actively as a group member. They are expected to meet responsibilities as a group member, and to provide feedback about their own and others' work in both small and large groups. Some examples of collaborative activities are:

- Group assessment of skills, either language or interpreting: Prior to working independently on many new skills, learners can work collaboratively to learn how to prepare assessments of language skills, interpreting skills, and interaction skills.
- Mentoring practice online: While many doubt the possibility for mentoring online, practice in this environment offers some interesting and valuable opportunities. In the same way that the time-constraints of translation and consecutive interpreting practice strengthen and hone an interpreter's ability to transfer meaning effectively, so does the time constraint of mentoring via chatroom or text messaging hone mentoring skills. Learners are able to reflect before reacting, to think of alternatives before jumping in to answer, and to experience the value of waiting time in mentoring settings.
- Materials preparation: Learners can cooperate to identify criteria for effective materials creation, then create the materials, share them with classmates, and receive analytical, reflective input about their work. Likewise, they can prepare reflective feedback on others' work.
- Discourse mapping: Students can progress through the entire discourse mapping process, preparing some aspects, such as individual maps of texts, independently, while participating within groups to compare, discuss, assess, and reflect on the text structures that each brings to the discussion. Discourse mapping, itself a series of active learning challenges, sparks learning whether it is offered online or face-to-face.[1]

Individual Activities: Active learning activities can also be designed to be undertaken individually. These require that learners take the initiative to search out answers, create study time, prepare for discussions and assignments, and add value to course discussions. Individual

[1] Winston and Monikowski (2000, 2005) have adapted their discourse mapping approach for both online and face-to-face courses.

activities are often valuable after learners have practiced a skill together in a group. However, they can also be scheduled prior to group work, with learners exploring resources to bring to group activities. Examples of such independent activities include:

- Guided reading: Faculty provide guidance and suggestions about how to read and organize their understandings of the course text, and about types of questions learners can pose for themselves about the readings; using these guides, learners then study the texts in order to learn through them.
- Preparation of weekly discussion postings: Learners reflect individually upon what they have learned, and on questions they have, and prepare their reflections as postings to the course. They might use any number of resources to contribute to their reflections, including other's input and postings.
- Assessment of skills: Learners can practice independently assessing the language and/or interpreting skills of themselves, and/or of others.
- Feedback and input to others: Learners can independently craft reflective commentary and feedback to others in the course

At first glance, many of these might seem to be the same activities used in any course. And that is the point, they are. They are activities that encourage analysis, decisions about relevant (and irrelevant information), and reflection on the value of their decisions. The difference, when adequately prepared for online learning, is that students must take the extra step of preparing statements to be shared. While the occasional student will post work without thinking, most find that the impact of seeing their work in public, for all to analyze, encourages them to deeper analysis and reflection than spur-of-the-moment comments made in class might require.

There is one place where online active learning activities usually differ significantly from their counterparts in on-ground courses, however. When preparing activities specifically as online activities, care must be taken to craft the instructions, the interactions, and the requirements to accommodate turn-around times, various schedules, and time zone differences. The design, and the designer, must take into account the distance in both time and space that learners have from the instructor and from each other. Instructions must include step-by-step, explicit information about many aspects of the activity, including due dates, acceptable and unacceptable formats, clear turn-around times, and submission requirements. Many students and

teachers have years of experience with this on the ground; online courses present a sometimes steep learning curve of unexpected challenges: how to format fonts, how to attach information, how to explore resources via e-libraries and so on. Thus, perhaps one of the biggest barriers to effective online activities is neither the active learning hoped for nor the online environment itself. It is the shift from giving directions with a few words, a smile and a nod, to explicit and complete information that is available to everyone at all times.

Below, I share two examples of activities designed to encourage active learning that have been structured specifically for online learning. The first is a complex, yet, effective approach for online discussions. As learners and faculty become habituated to the patterns of the online format, discussions shift from stilted, self-conscious essays to flowing, deeply reflective discussions about important issues. The topics and concepts are no longer simply "covered" in the discussions. They are uncovered, as Wiggins and McTighe would say.

The second example is a skills assessment and mentoring activity. It is in fact a series of activities that build from one assignment to the next. First, learners practice assessing samples of interpreting in small groups. Following discussion and input from the class, they practice again individually. They then again post their work to the class for input and discussion. Finally, they begin to practice mentoring, incorporating learning-centered questioning techniques in an online format.

As you read through the examples, take note of the information that is explicit, specific and highly structured (e.g., due dates, format, quantities) and of the information that is left to the student to explore, mold, and experiment with (e.g., journals, individual appointments, specific topics for discussions). The two primary goals of the CIT presentation will be to analyze these for the ways that they encourage active learning and critical thinking, and for their similarities and differences to more traditional active learning activities that occur in face-to-face classes.

1. Course discussion: In many on-ground courses, discussion is hardly a factor. Faculty debate the value of grading it at all because it is difficult to manage and justify. They often give up trying to have discussions, because so often students, assigned to read materials prior to a class discussion, have not, or have not done so with any depth or analysis. Participation grades are often lumped into attendance, and the presence of a warm body is enough to satisfy the grading criteria for participation.

Discussions held online, when structured to encourage and support active learning, open a door to a wealth of new learning, exploration, and excitement in learners. The temptation to teach, to produce, to ***do*** something, can be very strong in on-ground classes, where the silence of students not participating can be overwhelming and intimidating.

Online discussions, especially in asynchronous formats, provide an excellent opportunity for teachers to allow silence, and the time for students to think, and can require that each student, not just the vocal few, participate with thoughtful commentaries that encourage reflective thought. Rather than being a small and inconvenient part of the overall assessment of the course, discussions can reflect the depth of student learning, and can become a major part of the assessment. Compared to on-ground discussions, assessing the quality and depth of posted discussion is easily documented and supported.

Structuring discussions online can be complex. It is essential that students have clear, explicit criteria for participating in such discussions, especially when they first experience online learning. Information about quality of content, depth of discussion, average lengths of postings, number and frequency of postings, all provide students with structure and knowledge about online interactions. A sample set of instructions is offered below, as one example of how online discussions can be structured to encourage critical thinking and active learning. During the CIT workshop, panelists and participants will be able to discuss the various options, requirements, and impact of these online activities for developing critical thinking. Discussion will center around the individual and group collaborations this activity includes, and the critical thinking, decision-making, and assessment encouraged through this activity.

Example 1

Instructions: Course Discussions = 40% of Final Grade

Purpose: To promote critical thinking and reflective analysis about the readings and course content and to help you synthesize your thinking on a variety of topics within the readings (and beyond!).

The course and group discussions are yours, and the goal is to foster collaborative learning with your peers. To get the most benefit you need to participate. When someone poses a question, you need to try to respond to it. Each of you has valuable insights and perceptions to bring to the group. The purpose is not a simple question and answer interchange; you are looking to explore the ideas and investigate new information. My role in these discussions is to facilitate, oversee, and guide; I will not

be responding to each of your comments and questions during these discussions.

Students will:

- Read ALL postings to the Bulletin Board and your assigned discussion group. You are responsible for all announcements, information, course changes, etc. that are posted here, as well as for the discussions about the topic.
- Demonstrate synthesis and integration of the information in the readings by responding to discussion questions.
- Discuss the information with others through comments and feedback to them in forums or assigned discussion groups as directed. These discussions need to occur in a frequent and regular manner.

Resources: Course readings, additional resources you have found from the Web, newspapers, personal experience, peer feedback.

Directions: You need to post a minimum of 4 postings per week during the course. The specific requirements for posting are described below, and are a bit complicated at first glance, but the intention is to encourage frequent and regular discussion. Once you get the sense of the pattern and flow of online discussions, these directions will seem less complex.

NOTE: The quality and correctness of your English grammar and writing are not graded in discussions. Although your postings must be clear and well-organized, the written English will not be graded. It is graded in all written assignments like the final paper.

Preparing and posting original comments

1. Compose 2 clear, organized, original comments each week. These should stay within a 3-4 paragraph limit for each comment.
2. The quality of your participation is essential. Make sure your participation adds to the growth of knowledge and discussion within your group!
3. At various times in the semester, you will be assigned an activity. Your discussion postings can focus on what you are learning from these activities.
4. You will be graded on the quality and appropriateness of your responses (see grading criteria explanation below).

Commenting on other's postings

1. Read the responses of others in your group and comment upon 2 of them. You need to demonstrate that you have considered the responses and integrated the comments of others.
2. Postings that say simply "I agree with Jane Doe!" do not demonstrate thought, integration, or synthesis and will not be counted for your grade. (Please feel free to make brief, supportive

comments during the discussion! Just understand that they won't count toward your grade.)

3. You may also post a web site review (a maximum of 4 during the course). If you find an interesting site related to the topic of the week, share it with the class. Let us know where to find it, why and how it is related to the course, and post your analytical review of the content of the site.

Grading Criteria for class discussion

1. Quality of participation: Your responses will be evaluated as acceptable (following the above criteria) or not acceptable (does not follow the above criteria).

AND

2. Quantity of participation: the total number of acceptable postings per each deadline.

You are welcome to post as many comments as you would like! Discussion is encouraged, and the "rules" are designed to keep discussion going, not stifle it. However, I have established some base-line criteria in order to foster ongoing discussion. A maximum of 4 postings per week will be counted (two originals and two responses to others). In order for all four to be counted, they must be posted at regular and frequent intervals. This is intended to avoid all discussion postings being done at the last minute, with no discussion in between due dates! If you post 4 early in the week they can be counted; if you post all on the last day or two occasionally, they might be; if you always post at the last minute, they will not be counted. Why? Discussion requires that YOU participate, not just take advantage of other people's insights and input.

The explicit, written nature of these instructions is what most often differentiates them from face-to-face instructions, and is one factor that makes designing online activities so difficult for many faculty.

2. Online Mentoring: Many contend that mentoring can only be effective in face-to-face interactions. That is an argument for another day. This activity is intended to help people practice mentoring, to get used to the time needed for waiting, for letting the mentee become engaged, and for reflection before commenting. The activity itself is taken from within a larger context of an entire mentoring program; some of the instructions are no longer as explicit as they might need to be in the beginning. Students have become acclimatized to online interactions, and have developed an understanding of many of the “how’s” of online interaction.

Example 2

Assessing Interpreting and Mentoring Interpreters

(3 week assignment = 15% of course grade)

Week 1: Prepare an individual assessment of your own interpreting sample. Post your assessment to the entire class by the final day of Wk. 1, by noon ET.

Week 2:

- Discuss and comment on the Interpreting Assessments posted by other people in the class. You should look at a minimum of 2.
- Using the input from the discussions, prepare an assessment of your assigned partner's interpreting sample. Post that assessment to the class by the final day of Wk. 2, by noon ET.

Week 3: Hold mentoring appointments with the interpreter whose work you assessed in Wk. 2.

You need to set up 2 appointments with each other. In one, you will act as mentor, working with the individual interpreting assessment that your partner posted. In the other, you will act as the mentee, using the interpreting assessment you prepared for your own sample.

NOTE: For this week, you are welcome to set up appointments as you wish. The appointment should last for 45-60 minutes in the course chat room. You may also use other means for meeting if you prefer: AOL chat room, videophone, etc. Use of telephone with voice-only communication is not an accepted medium. The only requirement is that the communication be directly accessible for Deaf people (chat rooms: written English; videophone: signing only). Even if you and your partner are both hearing, this is a good time to remember and practice inclusive approaches of communication. I strongly recommend that you do not do them back-to-back. You have all experienced the fatigue of these meetings.

Mentor Role: Your goal as mentor is to work with the mentee to find strengths and areas needing improvement in the posted assessment (not in the interpreting sample), and in her/his assessment skills. You should also work with your mentee to determine how she/he might present this information to the interpreter.

Mentee Role: Your goal as mentee is to work with the mentor on understanding your skills in assessing an interpreting sample, to discuss your strengths and areas of discomfort or areas you want direction or help. You should be prepared to contribute throughout this discussion with your ideas.

Journals: You will need to post a journal to your small group facilitator within 48 hours of each meeting. The requirements and criteria are the same as before, when you mentored each other for the Language Assessments.

The two activities described above, with instructions prepared for online participation, are examples provided to launch the CIT conference discussions. We will analyze the ways that these spark critical thinking, require decision-making, and then require assessment and self-assessment, reflective online interactions with peers. Panel members will share other activities and participants will be able to analyze an activity of their own for its potential as an effective online activity.

About the author

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