Introduction

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What is this book?

This is a practical handbook which intends to inspire innovative teaching and provide support for readers seeking to apply active learning tools and strategies in a variety of teaching and learning contexts. Although many of the contributing authors work in higher education, this is not intended to be a traditional academic publication, but more of a practical reference book which could be used to inform the design of adult learning in any context (e.g. higher education, further education, work-based learning and development, etc), but also in other phases of education (e.g. secondary, primary, etc).

Aim of the book

The aim of this book is to provide a resource for making active learning approaches to teaching, learning and assessment more prevalent in higher education. The chapters of this book emphasise the importance of active learning activities for creating deep and meaningful learning. This stems from the notion that effective learning happens in situated contexts, which combine physical, mental, emotional and social processes. The learning activities we expect our students to engage in should consider all those domains and use them to deepen learning further.

The chapters in this book express a passion for education and its potential to improve the lives of those involved in it. The ideas build from the premise that education can empower learners, allow
them to reach their potential despite their personal circumstances and can be “linked up with projects such as democracy, solidarity, inclusion, tolerance, social justice and peace” (Biesta & Säfström, 2011, p. 540). But the book also recognises that current models of education need to make radical changes to deliver this, starting with developing a curriculum that supports active approaches to learning. The chapters in this volume provide a plethora of ideas for educators wanting to take active learning approaches in their own teaching and learning practice.

This book represents the perspectives of many people from across the global learning community. In the following chapters, we share our experience of applying active learning to practical situations and offer ideas to educators to adapt these for their own contexts, whether they are teachers, lecturers, academic developers, learning technologists or education managers. We would like to see the ideas discussed, evaluated and applied throughout diverse international institutions and across disciplines. The intention of this publication is to make the ideas and approaches to active learning as easy as possible for educators to apply within their own contexts and in their own practices.

How to use the book

This book is intended to be a choose-your-own-adventure. It functions as a reference resource, so there is no need to read it cover to cover, but feel free to go from start to finish if you prefer; the choice is yours. The intention is that you can dip in and out of the chapters to find an idea to meet your needs. For that reason, a structure of themes was developed to help you find chapters relevant to your specific requirements. However, as with so much of active learning, the ideas in this book do not fit neatly into sections or headings and often overlap or span a number of themes, so you might want to take a look at a few different sections of the book.
when looking for ideas. One of the strengths of the book is that each idea is short and succinct, so they are quick and easy to read. Each chapter aims to provide inspiration for how the idea can be adapted for different contexts, but these are only suggestions and most of the ideas could be a spark or a starting point to generate new ideas for active learning in your own context.

It is also worth noting that this is a practical handbook, rather than a strictly academic publication. Authors have tried to provide relevant research to support their idea, but the ideas themselves may not have been subjected to rigorous testing or longitudinal studies of effectiveness. They are meant as tools to add to your teaching and learning tool box.

What is active learning?

When describing active learning we tend to refer back to Chickering and Gamson (1987). Putting it succinctly, they claim,

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves. (p. 3)

So how do we do it? Good practice active learning strategies aim to engage students in a series of activities which require them to produce observable evidence of their learning. Where possible, these individual, pair and group tasks aim to develop higher order thinking skills, emotional connection with content and tactile or physical engagement with the environment. Importantly, active learning is not a singular event. At its very least it requires the provision of a framework for understanding something, a problem task in which they could use that framework and an opportunity for
reflection on the process. In this way the tasks become memorable and meaningful experiences through which students can relate the knowledge to and have a personal connection with them.

So does it work? Assessing the efficacy of different teaching strategies is challenging, therefore much of the evidence for the effectiveness of active learning is theoretical or anecdotal. However, although with some limitations, there is a growing evidence base for the effectiveness of active learning (Deslauriers et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2014) and in particular how active learning can narrow the attainment gap for underrepresented groups (Ballen et al., 2017; Theobald et al., 2020). These studies often use assessment outcomes as their quantifier but success of active learning goes beyond content material. Indeed when you dig deeper and look at specific types of active learning, for instance if you look at team based learning, improvements in the development of communication skills, interprofessional learning and self-directed learning have been documented (Alberti et al., 2021) as just one example of skills development. Some of these skills are not directly assessed on courses but provide important graduate competencies for future employment. You will find many of the ideas within this book are recommended because they enhance a range of skills and not just subject specific knowledge.

What is the Active Learning Network?

The Active Learning Network is a global community for revolutionising learning. The network is a collaborative, community-led initiative for academics, educational developers, learning technologists and students, with satellite groups at universities around the world. It is a community that aims to provide a collaborative platform to share ideas, produce openly available resources, showcase active learning projects, pedagogic
scholarship/research and international discussions around active learning.

The network's approach is distinctive because it aims to challenge and disrupt existing paradigms in HE and operates in the spirit of sharing and open education. This provides an antidote to top-down, siloed approaches prevalent in HE and means that those involved in learning and teaching can benefit from reciprocal sharing of practice, rather than having to constantly reinvent the wheel and fight isolated struggles for change in their own institutions.

Since 2017, the network has grown from a small group at one university, to a large-scale network with 363 members, 30 satellite groups (including groups from the UK, Greece, Germany, Ireland, Romania, India, China, and Cambodia), a website with engagement from over 100 countries, 5 annual conferences with a combined 920 attendees, sponsorship from companies such as Sony, Sage, Talis and InteDashboard, the world’s first Global Festival of Active Learning, with 1852 sign-ups, 20 online masterclasses with a combined 1053 attendees, multiple award-winning projects, such as The Padlet Project, which was published as an HEA Case Study (Garnham, Betts & Hole, 2018) and in the Compass Journal of Learning and Teaching (Garnham & Betts, 2018), three collaboratively-produced open access books, including this volume, Disrupting Traditional Pedagogy: Active Learning in Practice (Active Learning Network, 2019) and Innovations in Active Learning in Higher Education (Active Learning Network, 2020).

This sharing of scholarship and innovative learning practices has a huge impact, because all staff and students create bilateral communication channels between the wider network and their local networks where they pass the learning forward.
Where did the idea from the book come from?

This book started, like many great books throughout history, in a festival moshpit.

In 2021, when the global pandemic had forced the cancellation of all face-to-face events, the Active Learning Network (ALN) wanted to bring a bit of joy and connection into what were very difficult times. Many people had had their holidays, parties, festivals and other celebrations cancelled, as well as facing an array of other challenges. In response to this, we wanted to provide an opportunity for the teaching and learning community to have fun and celebrate what makes inclusive, participatory, collaborative learning so great, whilst also demonstrating creative solutions for developing active learning practice.

To this end, we decided to create the world’s first Online Global Festival of Active Learning. Rather than a traditional conference, we modelled the event on famous music festivals, such as Glastonbury Festival, with tents (instead of online meetings), fun collaborative activities (instead of conference presentations) and asynchronous crowdsourced resources (instead of the festival moshpit). The book was one of the resources which was created from these metaphorical ‘moshpit’ activities.

For something that turned out to be a very large-scale collaboration, the book started in a surprisingly spontaneous way. We set up a Google Document and invited people to share an idea for active learning in 100 words or less, which would later be developed into a chapter. Initially, it was just meant as a light-hearted opportunity to share practice. We thought that we might get 20-30 ideas, which would be a useful resource to share with colleagues. Much to our surprise, we ended up with over 100 chapters of 500-1000 words each and one of the most ambitious collaborative publishing projects that any of us had ever attempted.
Structure of the book

The book is divided into six main themes: Theory and Curriculum Design; Inclusive Communities; Transferable Skills; Assessment and Feedback; Teaching Strategies; and Digitally Enhanced Learning.

The first theme, Theory and Curriculum Design, challenges us to radically redesign our curriculum to embed active learning deep within our disciplines and within our institutions. It includes overarching institutional, programme-based and modular strategies for active learning. Within the theme there are ideas about how you should approach active learning strategies and how it can, and has, been adopted at a large scale.

The second theme, Inclusive Communities, recognises the importance of active learning to ensure inclusivity in teaching and assessment. The theme explores ideas around developing inclusive practice, building communities, empowering learners, promoting wellbeing and developing peer learning. None of these ideas are mutually exclusive. Building a sense of community and trust in one’s peers will enable students to learn from each other and feel supported both within and outside class.

The third theme, Transferable Skills, recognises the many elements of active learning that are transferable. Active learning often includes tasks that require the students to practise skills which we use outside of the educational setting and hence they are transferable to other contexts. Past experience tells us many students that graduate this year will end up doing a job that does not currently exist during their working lives. Even jobs that do exist now will look radically different in thirty years time. Therefore developing transferable skills can be more useful to students than the educational-based skills they are learning.

The fourth theme is Assessment and Feedback. For many teaching staff, there is deep frustration that students are strategic in their approach to assessment. Their focus is getting the best grade and they rarely consider the learning that is coming from assessment.
Active learning provides an opportunity to change this narrative through the use of active assessments that align our learning objectives for the students with their strategic endeavours to get better grades. This theme includes ideas to aid the introduction of active learning assessments.

The fifth theme is Teaching Strategies. Active learning is effective because it requires students to engage in thought processes, think about concepts in different contexts and be metacognitive with their own learning progress. If the right teaching strategies are used, active learning does not just introduce content knowledge but a wide range of skills preparing students to be resilient and persistent in their future careers. A wide range of active learning teaching strategy ideas are put forward here before focusing on playful learning strategies and co-creation.

The sixth and final theme is Digitally Enhanced Learning. Much of what we create and do is digital and many of our outputs manifest themselves in the digital rather than physical world. The chapters in this section introduce active learning tasks that specifically use digital technologies as an active environment for the collaborative production of knowledge.

Dive in and start playing with the ideas

We hope that you have fun playing with the ideas in this book and find the process of engaging with it as useful as we have found the process of creating it. Feel free to dive in at any point which takes your interest or randomly select a chapter to begin your adventure. If any aspect of this book inspires new ideas or serves as a catalyst for positive changes to your practice, or if you would like to get involved in the network or set up and lead your own local satellite group, please get in touch by sending us an email to activelearningnetwork@gmail.com, contacting @ActiveLearnNTW
with the hashtag #activelearningnetwork on Twitter, or by visiting our website at www.activelearningnetwork.com.

References


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Throughout Dr Isobel Gowers’ teaching career, she has been interested in active learning. Initially using techniques such as
problem based learning in her teaching but gradually increasing her repertoire of active learning methods. After 10 years as a lecturer Isobel shifted to educational management and currently works to promote active learning at ARU.

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Dr Paolo Oprandi is a Doctor in Education with an academic background which at different times has spanned the sciences, humanities and social sciences. He has worked in the area of learning technologies for 20 years and is currently a Senior Learning Technologist in the Technology Enhanced Learning team at the University of Sussex. His research has focussed on curriculum development that welcomes diversity into the academic disciplines, using the appropriate teaching, learning and assessment technologies.

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Tab Betts is a Lecturer in Higher Education Pedagogy at the University of Sussex. He is co-founder and institutional co-lead for the Active Learning Network (ALN). For many years, he has been promoting evidence-based approaches to active learning in
higher education and the use of learning technologies to create inclusive blended learning environments and facilitate large-scale collaboration. He has won a number of awards, including six awards for Outstanding or Innovative Teaching and a 2021 Global Academic Development Good Practice Award with the ALN.