



Active learning puts students at the heart of the learning experience. It enables them to become much more engaged with their own learning.

By becoming active participants in the classroom, students build knowledge through their own experiences. Research* shows that active learning can help students achieve a far deeper understanding of a topic than by simply listening to lectures or reading textbooks.

For teachers, active learning provides more opportunities to interact with students. For example, it can give you more ways to get continual feedback to evaluate your teaching.

Active learning

What active learning means

Active learning is an approach, rather than a fixed set of activities. It can include any activity that encourages students to take an active, engaged part in the learning process within the classroom, such as:

- group discussions
- student presentations
- experiments
- quizzes
- problem-solving
- roleplay

Active learning is about teachers providing the environment and opportunities for students to build knowledge and understanding of a subject for themselves.

This is in contrast to more traditional methods of teaching, such as a lecturer seeking to 'transmit' knowledge to students as they sit and listen.

Read about the limitations of the traditional lecture in these [20 terrible reasons for lecturing](#).

Putting it into practice

Make lectures more interactive

There are many ways to introduce an active learning style into your teaching sessions – both with large groups and small groups.

Top tip:

Try introducing a few active learning elements into your teaching to begin with. If students respond positively, add more.

You don't necessarily have to make entire sessions 'active'. Consider breaking up a lecture with other activities to make it more interactive.

Classroom response systems, also known as 'clickers' (hand-held devices allowing students to select answers to multiple-choice questions that you ask in class) are an easy and effective way to get students actively involved.

Clickers are installed in UCL's larger lecture theatres. There are also several free apps, such as **Socrative**, that allow students to record their answers using their own smartphone or tablet.

In large classes, try dividing the students into small groups so that they can get involved in active discussions.

Putting it into practice

Use 'flipped' learning

Get students to prepare for a classroom session in advance, for example by watching a video and answering questions about it. The session could then be based around small-group activities that you facilitate.

You could use a 'flipped' session midway through a module as a revision session or for working on an assignment that you've previously set.

Flipped learning works best when all the students have done the preparation work beforehand.

See the Digital education toolkit for more about clickers and flipped learning.

Get students to present their work

Ask your students to show some of their assignments and coursework to fellow students or people outside UCL.

Knowing there's an audience for their work besides the tutor can encourage students to become more actively engaged with a topic.

Top tip:

Don't just think about what you want to teach. More importantly, think about how the students will learn.

Putting it into practice

Encourage students to work together

Get your students to work with their peers to solve a challenging problem or complete a task. This can help students to develop their communication and negotiation skills, as well as helping them gain a deeper understanding of a subject.

See the small-group teaching toolkit for more ideas about how to get students to work together.

Get students to learn by doing research

The [UCL Connected Curriculum](#) aims to ensure that all UCL students learn through participating in research and active, critical enquiry.

Think about how you can get students to engage in the subject by doing their own research. See the [Connected Curriculum case studies](#) for examples of how UCL colleagues have given students the opportunity to carry out research as part of their modules.

More information

For more ideas about how to include active learning in your sessions:

- speak to your teaching lead
- attend a [UCL Arena event](#), such as an Exchange seminar or Essentials session
- see this Digital Education Team blog post about [active learning classrooms](#)

You can also get your students more actively engaged in their learning by asking them if they'd like to do a [UCL ChangeMakers project](#). ChangeMakers projects are intended to innovate or enhance the learning experience at UCL.

Top tip:

When running small-group discussions, choose which students are in which groups rather than allowing them to choose their groups. This will lead to a more diverse learning environment and will encourage all students to take an active part.

* The benefits of active learning are widely acclaimed. According to Guthrie and Carlin (2004), modern students are primarily active learners, and lecture courses may be increasingly out of touch with how students engage with their world. As early as 1987, Chickering and Gamson designated “encourage active learning” as one of seven principles of good practice in higher education.