Good Ideas for Active Learning

A review of

Favorite Activities for the Teaching of Psychology

by Ludy T. Benjamin Jr. (Ed.)


Reviewed by

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Teachers know that it is nearly impossible to maintain students' interest simply by talking for 50 minutes. Creative use of the chalkboard or PowerPoint helps, but it is better to add spice by using activities that involve students—that is, active learning. Experienced teachers have developed a set of activities that have worked well over the years to accomplish their objectives, but the beginning teacher often wonders what to do in class today to get students excited. And any teacher should be looking for new ways to stimulate student interest.

There is no shortage of help for all these teachers. Books on teaching provide general advice on active learning; many of the instructors' manuals that accompany textbooks have excellent exercises; and there are numerous collections of activities for teaching introductory psychology, working in small groups, and developing critical thinking. Almost any one of
these sources would useful for the teacher who needs help right away, but the teacher who has time to be more planful can be overwhelmed.

The American Psychological Association (APA) has published four volumes of activities for the teaching of psychology, with the first of these appearing in 1981 (Benjamin & Lowman, 1981). Ludy Benjamin, a coeditor of the first volume, has selected 67 activities from these four collections as “favorites.” It is not clear how these special activities were selected. In his preface, Benjamin refers to “numerous testimonials from teachers” (p. xi) and graduate students who have used these books, and his years of experience working with teachers at all levels would certainly qualify him as a connoisseur of active learning.

Benjamin applied several criteria in making his judgments. The activity should require minimal preparation, have great likelihood of success, and involve the entire class regardless of class size. A few of the 67 activities do not meet all three criteria, but most fulfill them quite well. The activities have been updated, particularly by integrating applications of current technology, references to websites, and more recent citations in the brief bibliographies that follow each activity.

Favorite Activities for the Teaching of Psychology is organized to parallel the typical introductory psychology textbook from the first section on history and methods to the final section on diversity and culture. The distribution is uneven; learning and memory get eight activities, but motivation and emotion get only three. The format of the activities makes them immediately useful and will help instructors decide whether they want to use them. The concept being demonstrated is explained, then materials needed are listed; instructions tell the instructor what to do, and guidelines for discussion are provided. In some cases that discussion is the only thing that qualifies the activity as active learning. For example, Activity 6 is a demonstration of “psychic phenomena.” Students may be entertained but do no active learning until they take part in the recommended small group discussion with a writing assignment.

Without question, this is a useful book for introductory and advanced courses, and in his preface Benjamin gives it a hard sell. If you are a course coordinator, he says, give it to all the instructors. If you supervise graduate student teachers, give each of them a copy. If you are a department chair, give it to all new faculty. I suppose that would be helpful, but I hope these pedagogical gatekeepers would consider a wider range of resources because there are many activities that are just as good or better than the 67 presented here.

Unfortunately, Benjamin's sample was limited to APA books. Erlbaum published a series of collections of articles from the journal Teaching of Psychology (ToP) that included activities as well as more general articles on teaching. Volume 3 in that series (Griggs, 2002) has an emphasis on assessment. The format of the Benjamin collection provides greater ease of use, but the ToP articles typically include data on effectiveness. Instructor's manuals have the advantage over collections in that they are keyed to the particular organization of the textbook that the instructor is using. However, the variable quality of these manuals means
that the instructor may be stuck with a lemon and either must live with it or take time to review other manuals.

I disagree with Benjamin's pitch that this is the first, and perhaps the only, book that should be given to new instructors of the introductory course. That should be a general book on the teaching of psychology (e.g., Goss Lucas & Bernstein, 2005). Books on teaching will direct readers to active learning sources and provide general advice on using those sources. It's the issue of giving fish or teaching fishing.

Perhaps this collection of favorites will be a stimulus for a volume of “greatest hits in the psychology classroom” that would select from a larger sample of activities. Instead of handing out hard copies of these “hits,” the publisher, perhaps the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, would make these available on a website that also would allow comments on the effectiveness of the activities. Then we each could have our own favorites.

References

