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Using Active Learning in Criminal Justice: Twenty-Five Examples

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ABSTRACT

Active learning strategies may overcome the weaknesses of the traditional lecture approach. This paper outlines some of the main strengths and weaknesses of the lecture approach and reports research which illustrates why active learning strategies should be used in the classroom. The paper concludes with a presentation of twenty-five active learning strategies to be used in the criminal justice classroom, along with a discussion of how these strategies meet the goals of higher education.

ARTICLE

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While traditional classroom teaching uses lecturing, educational research clearly indicates that the attention span of the typical undergraduate student lasts about 10-15 minutes, after which time boredom and fatigue sets in (Bonwell and Sutherland 1996; Browne et al. 1995; Watson et al. 1996). More importantly, student retention of knowledge and student performance declines significantly after this period (Bonwell and Sutherland 1996; Misale et al. 1996; Nance and Nance 1990; Poppenhagen et al. 1982). Active learning strategies increase student retention of knowledge, and student attention and interest (Bonwell and Sutherland 1996; Curry and Makoul 1996; Perry et al. 1996; Watson et al. 1986). At the same time, strategies which actively engage students make class more fun (Lawson 1995). This paper outlines some of the main strengths and weaknesses of the lecture approach and then reports research which illustrates why active learning strategies should be used in the classroom. Since criminal justice is a discipline focused on complex and controversial issues, it is ideal for numerous active learning strategies. The paper

concludes with a presentation of twenty-five active learning strategies to be used in the criminal justice classroom, along with a discussion of how these strategies meet the goals of higher education.

STRENGTHS OF LECTURING

Lecture does have a legitimate place in the college and university classroom (e.g., see Bligh 1972; Brookfield 1990; Eble 1988; Lowman 1984; McKeachie 1986; Newble and Cannon 1989; Osterman 1982; Stunkel 1998). Its strengths are numerous. For example, the lecture approach allows the teacher to perform enthusiastically; meaning that, if the instructor is a good performer, he or she can "put on a good show" to capture student attention. Lecturing also allows the teacher to present large amounts of information in a relatively short period of time, important to introductory classes which attempt to lay a foundation for beginning students. Lecturing permits the instructor to deviate from the textbooks) to present the most up-to-date information from other sources. For example, instructors can access The Bureau of Justice Statistic's "Key Crime & Justice Facts at a Glance" (located at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance.htm) over the web inclass (e.g., projecting it onto a screen via an LCD-projector). Such activities simultaneously expose students to the most recent criminal justice statistics available and capture student attention through visual stimulation.

Another strength of the lecture approach is that it gives the instructor maximum control of the audience, which can at times become rowdy and disrespectful if given the freedom to talk, discuss, debate, or pair up with others to work in group activities. Belatedly, the lecturing approach poses a minimum threat to students because they do not have to take an active role in the learning process in class.

Finally, lecturing gives the instructor great influence over many people at one time. Many instructors have struggled with classes of hundreds of students. The lecture can become a platform for an influential speech to a large audience. Class size may dictate how instructors teach, at least to a degree. Lecturing is more necessary for large classes than for smaller classes, but it does not need to be used exclusively (e.g., see Benjamin 1991; Mestre et al. 1997; Modell and Carroll 1993; Nierenberg 1998; Persell 1993). For example, many active learning activities work very well in larger classes (e.g., see Benjamin 1991; Hamil and Janssen 1987; Nanda 1985).

Clearly, the strengths of lecturing explain why it is the preferred method of instruction in colleges and universities across the country, even in graduate classes which are commonly assumed to promote active participation by graduate students (Browne et al. 1995). However, educational research suggests that the weaknesses of lecturing may outweigh its strengths.

WEAKNESSES OF LECTURING: WHY ACTIVE LEARNING IS NECESSARY

Since the purpose of lecture is to deliver course information to students, the instructor has maximum control of the audience. In this setting, the student is not charged with being an active participant in the learning process; thus, the student is not in control of his or her learning and is passive. This is counter to the goals of higher education which center around students acquiring knowledge (Bonwell and Sutherland 1996).

Lecturing is a practice of one-way communication, where the teacher is the giver and the student is the taker, where the instructor is the provider and the student is the receiver (Bonwell and Eison 1991). This has led others to call the lecture approach the "banking model" where students merely make withdrawals of information from experts in the subject matter (Greek 1995; Karp and Yoels 1976).

In this type of atmosphere, students can be anonymous. Students may be sent the message that their participation is not important, and hence that they do not matter (Frederick 1987). Since students are allowed, and even encouraged, to be passive rather than active when instructors lecture, the risk is that students will not learn the material being presented (Vermette 1988). If the lecture is boring and monotone, it does not sustain student attention, meaning students are free to fade away even into sleep (Bonwell 1991; Middendorf and Kalish 1996). Students actually learn more when they create their own knowledge bases, with help from each other and with the assistance of the instructor (Bonwell and Eison 1991).

Lecturing is most appropriate for lower levels of the cognitive domain (McKeachie 1986). That is, it promotes short-term knowledge retention, rote memorization, and student regurgitation of dates, names, and other facts. It does not promote critical thinking skills such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bean 1996).

Much educational research demonstrates that the very nature of the lecture approach does not promote student learning (e.g., see Bonwell and Sutherland 1996; Browne et al. 1991; Curry and Makoul 1996; Lawson 1995; Misale et al. 1996; Nance and Nance 1990; Perry et al. 1996; Poppenhagen et al. 1982; Watson et al. 1996). For example, confusion and boredom may occur 10-20 minutes into lectures, students remember more information from the first 10 minutes of class than from the last 10 minutes, and students recall significantly more information immediately following a lecture than one week later (McKeachie 1986). In one study, students could only remember 5 percent of information presented via lecture on the same day it was presented (Nance and Nance 1990).

Creativity and critical thinking skills suffer at the hands of the lecture approach as well (Browne et al. 1995; Mayer 1989). Students apparently are aware of such results, because they report "perceived levels of diminished quality of learning" in passive lecture approaches (Poppenhagen et al. 1982). When students are more actively involved in class, valuable skills such as critical thinking and decision making increase (Misale et al. 1996). Although some research does not find measurable differences between groups of students exposed to active learning strategies and those using traditional lecture approaches, it still suggests other positive outcomes such as

increased participation and enjoyment of the in-class materials and texts) (Curry and Makoul 1996; Watson et al. 1996).

Despite the weaknesses of the lecture approach, Stunkel (1998) claims that proponents of active learning need to be reminded that "arduous years of preparation" give the instructor a "significant edge over the student" who, therefore, cannot be an equal partner in the creation of knowledge within the classroom. He reminds teachers of the "neglected phenomenon called `good lecturing"' and argues that a good lecture can be "a critical, structured, skillful, thoughtful discourse on questions and findings within a discipline, delivered by a person who knows what he or she is talking about."

Stunkel's argument is well taken, yet he incorrectly pits lecturing against active learning strategies. While proponents of alternatives to lecturing advocate using mechanisms in addition to lecturing, Stunkel views the supplemental activities as a replacement to lecturing. This is clearly not the case, in fact, many active learning strategies are specifically geared to enhance the lecture approach rather than replace it (examples are discussed later in the paper).

Stunkel concedes that "lecturing is not the only way to deliver learning, but it works well in the right hands." This is precisely what active learning proponents claim. Lecturing has a place in the classroom because it serves an important function. Lecturing can be most effective for instructors who have developed expertise in their academic discipline, a passion for learning and an ability to perform on stage.

Despite its legitimate place in the classroom, instructors must recognize the research which clearly demonstrates that student interest, attention, and performance decrease with time when instructors lecture. Instructors have two choices, then. One is to become a better lecturer by displaying "lucid exposition, cogent argument, and enthusiasm about the subject" (Stunkel 1998). The other is to provide opportunities for student involvement in the classroom - to get students involved by not relying exclusively on lecturing.

The next section of this paper illustrates why the criminal justice discipline is ideal for active learning activities. Then twenty-five active learning strategies are presented which can be utilized in criminal justice classes. They should serve primarily as models for criminal justice instructors who can adapt them to their unique classes each semester.

ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Criminal justice is an ideal discipline for active learning strategies, primarily for two reasons. First, the nature of the content is complicated and controversial. For example, to establish a complete understanding of criminal justice, students are required to build a foundation about main concepts such as the definition of crime. To do this, students are expected to learn the legal elements of a criminal offense, the main categories or types of crimes, and the harms associated with each type of act. This requires that students have a complete understanding of the sources of crime data, including the Uniform Crime Reports, the National Crime Victimization Survey, and

self report studies. To fully understand the similarities and differences of each source of data, and their strengths and weaknesses, students must first understand the criteria on which such sources are evaluated, including validity and reliability. As students complete exercises that further their understanding of our justice system, they see that criminal justice is complicated and controversial.

Active learning strategies (e.g., group activities) are well suited to enhance student participation in class so that students can discover their own "truths" about crime and justice. A definition of crime can be achieved through numerous group activities where students work together to come up with an acceptable definition. These group definitions can then be compared with legal definitions presented by the instructor to discuss dif ferences, similarities, and student conceptions about the nature and extent of crime.

Other controversial aspects of criminal justice can be addressed through active learning activities. Examples include the deterrent value of the death penalty, abortion, and police profiling of particular offenders. Active learning strategies permit instructors to engage their students in examinations of such issues. For example, students can engage in structured debates where they support a stance that they do not personally believe in. Alternatively, students can react in writing to all sides of an issue after watching a video focused on a controversial issue.

Such activities also address the second reason that active learning strategies are important in criminal justice. jobs obtained by criminal justice graduates require them to work well with others and to develop good communication skills. Active learning strategies assist in developing these needed skills. Active learning strategies encourage group work, as well as speaking and writing skills. For example, in a debate, students can be encouraged or required to argue one side and then to actively listen to other students; then they can fairly and accurately summarize the main points of the other side verbally or in writing.

Logically, such activities prepare students to use these skills in the real world upon graduation. This may make them better police officers, better attorneys, better probation officers, better counselors, and so forth. Criminal justice employment manuals stress the importance of such skills for criminal justice employees (e.g., see DeLucia and Doyle 1998; Harr and Hess 1996).

ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES: TWENTY-FIVE EXAMPLES

The active learning strategies presented here are grouped into five general categories, including enhanced lecturing, questioning and testing, pair/group discussion, controversial topics, and generating ideas. Each active learning strategy can be placed into a particular category based on the main purpose that is served by each. For example, enhanced lecturing techniques are used specifically to increase the effectiveness of the transmittal model of teaching where the instructor does most of the work and students are mostly passive. Questioning and testing techniques are used primarily to increase student questioning skills and performance on tests by increasing student involvement in the classroom. Pair/group discussion techniques allow students to work together to solve common problems. Controversial topic techniques are specifically designed for

potentially heated subjects and to increase student listening, speaking, and arguing skills. Finally, generating idea techniques allow students to be creative and are used to increase higher order knowledge skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

A list of these types of active learning strategies follows, along with brief discussions of each. The summaries of the active learning strategies below propose the best use of each active learning strategy, and identify the main benefit of each. Examples are provided to demonstrate how to use them in criminal justice classes.

Enhanced Lecturing:

1) Active Listening: What to do: Choose a student to present material relevant to a key concept and another to listen. Then have the listener paraphrase what he or she learned. Have the students switch roles so that the listener also gets a chance to be the presenter. Main Benefit: increases student listening and speaking skills. Example: Pair students into groups of two and have one student list types of violent crimes and define them, and the other repeat what he or she heard. Then have the second student list and define types of property crimes.

2) Guided Lecture:

What to do: Give students learning objectives for a lecture before you begin. Ask students to take notes during the lecture only on key points relevant to the main learning objectives. Call on students during the last 10-20 minutes of class to identify correct answers to each learning objective. Main Benefit: gives students examples of how your lectures relate to the learning objectives, which is the most important material being presented, thereby increasing student performance.

3) Lecture Summaries:

What to do: After a brief lecture of about 10-20 minutes, stop and give your students 10 minutes to summarize the material in writing without notes. Collect the summaries and begin the next class by identifying the main strengths and weaknesses of students' notes. Review the main points most often missed by students. Main Benefit: teaches students how to take better notes, thereby increasing student learning and performance.

4) Minute Papers:

What to do: Toward the end of a class, or at the beginning of the next class, ask students to recall in writing one thing that they learned from the day's class and one thing that remains unclear. Clarify the material that is still not being grasped. Main Benefit: gives students the opportunity to learn something that remains unclear.

5) Attack the Text:

What to do: Ask students to find an image or passage in their text(s) which they feel accurately represents or misrepresents a key fact or concept; then have them explain why they chose that image or passage. Main Benefit: encourages students to speak in class and develops critical analyzation of the book rather than passive reading. Example: A student in one class found a picture meant to represent a mugging or rape which featured a black man's hand covering a terrified white woman's mouth; he accurately pointed out that most crime is intra-racial in nature and suggested that the image reinforced a common stereotype about crime that most crime is inter-racial.

The above enhanced lecturing techniques are used specifically to increase the effectiveness of lecturing. They serve not only to increase student participation in class but also to increase student performance, interest, and knowledge retention.

Questioning and Testing:

6) Discussions to Tests:

What to do: Divide the class into groups and then assign each group to answer questions from readings. Have each group discuss and record its answers. Reconvene the class and ask a group spokesperson to verbally provide the question to the class. Encourage other group members to comment while another student from the group writes down the information on an overhead transparency. Generate examination questions similar to the questions from the readings and tell students to prepare by studying information from the transparencies that the class itself created. Main Benefit: increases the likelihood that students will read the assigned readings and increases student performance.

7) First Day Interviews:

What to do: On the very first day that a class meets, divide the class into groups of four. Have each student interview one other student from the group. Require that responses be written down. Then require interviewers to share information about interviewees with the rest of the group. Main Benefit: establishes communication between classmates which can benefit classroom discussion throughout the semester.

8) Student Written Questions/Test Questions:

What to do: After a brief lecture, video, or discussion, stop and give students five minutes to write down a couple of questions regarding the material. Ask several students (volunteers at first) what their questions are and then answer them (or get other students to answer them). You can also pass the questions to the front of the class and then read each question to see who can answer them. Main Benefit: having students write the questions down gives them all a chance to acknowledge what they really do not know, and seeing the questions in writing helps them feel

authorized to ask them. Also, give students 10 minutes to write down a couple of exam questions related to presented material. They should follow the format of actual exams. Then select students to report their questions to the whole class. Write these questions on the board and ask other students to critique them. Collect all of the questions and use the best ones on the exam. Main Benefit: increases critical thinking skills in students and allows students the opportunity to contribute to the tests.

The above questioning and testing techniques increase student questioning skills and performance on tests by increasing student involvement in the classroom. Students commonly express anxiety about asking questions in class or how to best study for tests. These strategies encourage student involvement in questioning and demonstrate to students how an instructor's tests will assess what they have learned.

Pair/Group Discussion:

9) Buzz Groups:

What to do: Divide the class into small groups and have each group discuss a limited topic. Give one to three prepared questions to groups and have each group record its discussion and report it to the whole class. Help the class synthesize the groups' answers. Main Benefit: promotes creative thinking and allows students to work together to solve common problems. Example: assign the topic of "The Death Penalty" and have students discuss how the death penalty meets certain goals of the criminal justice system (e.g., doing justice, preventing crime), how the death penalty is just, and how the death penalty is unjust. Then combine answers from different groups into a master list on the board.

10) Collapsing Categories:

What to do: Ask students to individually answer a question on paper. Call on students to write their answers on the board and then collapse their answers into fewer categories through class discussion. Main Benefit: teaches students how to meaningfully group common concepts, which makes learning key concepts easier. Example: ask students to make a list of different types or categories of crimes; then, have them re-classify those into fewer categories, making it easier to learn key categories of crime.

11) Jigsaw Class Discussion:

What to do: Divide lecture material on a specific topic into roughly equal parts. Put students into small "home groups" and ask each member of each "home group" to volunteer to be an expert for only one part of the material. Ask all experts of a given part of the assignment or material to work together to master their share of the material and to discover the best way to help others learn it. Reassemble students into their "home groups" so that experts can teach their share of the

material to the other members. Main Benefit: allows students to teach something they have learned to others, which reinforces the knowledge they have obtained. Example: assign groups of students to learn responsibilities associated with unique police roles, such as law enforcement, order maintenance, crime prevention, and civil rights protector. Then have each group teach the other groups what they have learned.

12) Pair Checking:

What to do: Put students into groups of two and ask one to summarize what has been presented in class and the other to listen and check for and correct errors. Main Benefit: gives students practice in listening and critical thinking.

13) Write-Pair-Share:

What to do: Pose a question and ask students to write on this question for five minutes; then have students turn to other students nearby to "grade- each other's work and compare ideas. Have the pairs of students share their ideas with even larger groups, perhaps the whole class. Main Benefit: gives students writing and evaluation practice and encourages students to work together for the benefit of both. Example: Ask students to list and define the goals of the criminal justice system.

The above pair/group discussion techniques allow students to work together to solve common problems, a valuable skill which they will need in the real world. They also help develop important speaking, writing, and thinking skills.

Controversial Topics: 14) Developing Rebuttals:

What to do: Present a lecture which summarizes both sides of an argument. Have students work individually to develop a rebuttal to one side of the argument. Then have the students put the rebuttal in writing and/or share with the class. Main Benefit: gives students practice in critical thinking.

15) Forced Debate:

What to do: Ask all students who agree with a proposition to sit on one side of the room and all opposed to sit on the other side. Hang up signs to indicate which side of the room is which. Have the students physically face each another. After the students have chosen a side, switch the signs and force them to argue for the position with which they disagree by having them develop five valid statements for the opposite side (or dedicate a class to where students can formulate the other side's argument, and debate the issue at the next class). Give them the opportunity to rebut and summarize. Main Benefit: promotes honest debate by forcing students to recognize valid points within a position that they disagree with.

16) Reaction Papers:

What to do: Begin class, end class, or break-up lectures by having students react to what they have learned through their texts or heard in class. Ask students to answer a brief question such as "What were the causes of . . . ?" Ask students to react to a guest speaker, field trip, or video: "What did you learn, what remains unclear, etc.P" Main Benefit: gives students the opportunity to share their opinions and to increase writing skills.

17) Structured Controversy:

What to do: Divide students into groups of two and assign responsibility for gaining knowledge about a different position on a controversial issue to each student. Require that each student research his or her position, and then have each student share his or her findings with the group. Main Benefit: puts the responsibility for teaching others on the shoulders of the students, which increases student retention of knowledge as students learn more by being active in teaching rather than by being passive in lecturing.

18) Truth Statements:

What to do: Before lecturing about or discussing a topic, ask students to write down at least one thing that they know to be true about some particular issue. Examine their assumptions and clarify their misconceptions about this issue by comparing them with the facts. Main Benefit: demonstrates to students that what they think they know can sometimes be untrue and allows the class the opportunity to learn why this is so.

The above controversial topic techniques work well with potentially heated subjects and increase student listening, speaking, and arguing skills. Since students are actively engaged and involved in building their own knowledge bases, these strategies are often appreciated and enjoyed by students. Generating Ideas:

19) Brainstorming:

What to do: Present the students with an issue or problem and ask them to contribute as many ideas or solutions as they can in 5-10 minutes. Accept all contributions without comment or judgment as to their merits and write them on the blackboard or overhead transparency for class discussion. Main Benefit: stimulates interest in the topic to be discussed, which ultimately keeps students involved in classroom material and thereby increases the likelihood that students learn. Example: ask students to come up with some crime prevention initiatives that they feel will work. Then assess these as a class by comparing them to crime prevention initiatives which have been attempted.

20) Case Studies:

What to do: Ask students to act out a scenario that illustrates a concept. Have students play a key authority in a discussion about a particular topic at hand. Encourage students to be active and animated, allowing them to offer ideas, raise questions, build on each other's statements,

construct a collective analysis, re-frame the discussion, and challenge the instructor. Main Benefit: gets students actively involved in the class and promotes higher order knowledge skills since students are analyzing and evaluating what other students are discussing.

21) Concrete Images:

What to do: Ask each student to state a concrete image, scene, or event that stands out from their texts, media coverage of crime, etc. List them on the board and follow up by having the students find themes or patterns, missing points, etc. Then open discussion to an analysis with a common collection of facts. Main Benefit: encourages critical review of crime information rather than passive reading or listening. Example: have students discuss the pictures in the text. Do they accurately depict what crime really is or do they create some bias against a particular group?

22) Generating Examples:

What to do: After providing students with an example of a concept from class, have them individually or in groups of two, generate a new example for a concept that was presented in class. Main Benefit: encourages creative thinking in students and requires students to apply material from class to something real. Example: after discussing strain theory, have students give personal examples of their own goals and the available means to achieve their goals; then discuss how the students experience strain and how they go about alleviating it.

23) Mind Pictures:

What to do: Ask students to close their eyes and to picture something in their minds; then give them the opportunity to write to it down on paper. After each student has done this, have students write down on the board what they pictured to open up class discussion. Main Benefit: can be used to demonstrate what students typically think about when they hear a concept or word and to correct common misconceptions about crime and criminal justice. Example: ask students, "What do you see when I say the word criminal?' Then use their images to compare what they see versus what a "criminal" typically looks like.

24) Prediction:

What to do: Give students information about certain topics or provide them with certain principles, and ask them to write down predictions of what might happen in specific situations. Main Benefit: encourages higher order knowledge skills and requires students to apply classroom material to something real. Example: provide students with key facts about crime and justice. Then describe a city or a place within a city and ask them to make predictions about that city's or place's crime rates or justice system.

25) Role Playing:

What to do: Ask each student (or perhaps a group of students) to research the opinions of well-known people in the discipline regarding some issue. Have the students play this person's role in a discussion on the particular issue at hand. Main Benefit: gets students actively involved in class and forces students to become familiar with a major figure's position.

The above generating idea techniques allow students to be creative and are used to increase higher order knowledge skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Students are actively engaged through writing, thinking, and discussion skills, which encourage more than rote memorization.

CONCLUSION

This paper illustrated the problems associated with lecturing as a means of teaching criminal justice students. For example, the attention span of the typical undergraduate student lasts about 10-15 minutes, after which time boredom and fatigue sets in, and student retention of knowledge and student performance declines significantly. Active learning strategies increase student retention of knowledge and student attention and interest.

This paper outlined some of the main strengths and weaknesses of the lecture approach and argued that lecture does have a legitimate place in the classroom but that alternatives are available which are better suited than lecturing for promoting student learning. Some of the suggested active learning strategies are designed specifically to enhance the traditional lecture approach rather than to replace it.

This paper also explained why active learning strategies should be used in the criminal justice classroom and presented twenty-five active learning strategies that could be used in criminal justice classes. With active learning, the classroom becomes a learning community whereby students are just as responsible for their own learning as the instructor.

[Footnote]
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