

What Is Meant By "Active Learning?"

Dr. Ken Petress

The term: "active learning" is frequently read in education articles, heard in education speeches, and spoken by educators at school meetings. Just what does this term mean? Often, terms are best understood when we are told what they do not mean: a definition by negation. Active learning is the opposite of passive learning. The passive student is dependent on a teacher to impart what is to be learned. Passive learning requires little student work and it is not self reinforcing. Passive learning tends to get dull very quickly. Passive students are or soon become disinterested, non motivated, ineffectual learners. That which is learned passively is typically not well retained and is commonly not effectively applied.

The active learner, on the other hand, is not dependent on a teacher; active learning makes the student a partner in the learning process. Active learners use teachers as resource people, as guides to the learning process, and as motivators for further endeavors. Active learning, as the term implies, is a process where the learner takes a dynamic and energetic role in one's own education. Due to the learner's participation, such learning is self reinforcing. Such reinforcement adds to the retentive qualities of what is learned. Active learning usually is enjoyable, motivational, and effective in getting life's tasks done.

An active learner can be observed frequently performing the following behaviors:

1. Asking questions of clarification, example, category, nomenclature, status, reason, rationale, and kind. Such questions are to enhance learning, not to insult, intimidate, or embarrass anyone.
2. Challenging ideas, procedures, content relationships, priorities without attacking people or their character.
3. Following up learning sessions with personal extensions such as: added reading, group discussions about what was learned, experimentation, and applications of learning.
4. Connecting what was most recently learned with what was previously learned. This connection is best made through using what we learn.
5. Attaching what is learned with skill development.
6. Discussing with others what we know with others in order to validate our ability to clearly, thoroughly articulate what we think we know.
7. Keeping an enthusiastic attitude about learning.

These are not exclusive behaviors that signal an active learner; however, they are among the most frequent and telling signs we can readily observe.

The price of being a passive learner is that most of the time, effort, money, and sacrifice to learn is wasted as such learning is seldom retained, infrequently sharpened, and often incomplete. Active learning is not a guarantee of success; but it does enhance one's chances of doing well.