Classroom Management: Active Learning Classrooms (ALCs)

Active Learning Classrooms (ALCs) are designed to promote interactive and collaborative student learning experiences. While ALCs provide many opportunities for innovative teaching and engaged learning, these classrooms can also pose specific teaching classroom management challenges, especially for instructors teaching in an ALC for the first time. On this sheet you will find some tips for managing some of those challenges and keeping learning on track.

Challenge		Tips
Time	Active learning activities may run too long and take the class off track	• communicate learning outcomes for the activity so students know what to focus on • give students clear oral and visual instructions and emphasize time on task (e.g. tell them how much time they have, use a visual timer for students to monitor their own time, and signal when the activity is coming to a close) • check in during the activity to see if there are any questions • smaller groups (twos, threes, fours) will take less time than larger groups (greater than four)
Technology	Advanced audio-visual technology in some ALCs can be intimidating	• book a practice session to learn the room features before your first class • if the room is a University of Toronto Academic and Campus Events (ACE) room, reach out to ACE for tech support • start small - design learning around the features that will have the greatest impact and the ones you're most comfortable with (e.g. white boards) • if possible, enlist TAs to help manage classroom technology

Layout	ALCs may lack a single central focus point and students may have their back to you	• pick a point in the room (e.g. whiteboard, main screen, podium) and use a consistent cue to get students to focus there when necessary to come together as a large group
		• use a 'stage blocking' technique to select a strategic point where most students can see you. For more information on 'stage blocking' in the classroom, refer to the following resources from the University of Iowa:
		  ○ Video: The Extraordinary Teaching Project: Stage Blocking - Movement in the Classroom
		  ○ Brief web article: Snapshot: A Staging Strategy to Improve Engagement
		• leverage the room layout to circulate among groups of students, especially during activities
		• consider various room layouts that meet your pedagogical goals, as most ALCs offer flexible options for room configurations

Size	Engaging learners in high enrolment classes through active learning requires a combination of individual and group activities	• use polls (e.g. iClickers) to get all students to participate individually and/or in small groups • design group work around problem-solving and decision-making rather than writing and presenting • allow some time for individual work • use classroom technology to allow students to share their ideas with the larger group – not all groups need to share so utilize various sampling techniques

Challenge		Tips

Engagement	Students used to a lecture format may be reluctant to participate in active learning activities	• use your syllabus to communicate expectations and model active learning from the very first class
		• share research findings with students that highlight the benefits of active and collaborative learning. Example research articles are included below:
		  ○ **STEM courses**: Freeman, S., Eddy, S. L., McDonough, M., Smith, M. K., Okoroafor, N., Jordt, H., & Wenderoth, M. P. (2014). Active learning increases student performance in science, engineering, and mathematics. *PNAS Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 111(23)*, 8410-8415. https://www.pnas.org/content/111/23/8410
		  ○ **Arts & Science courses**: Mello, David and Less, & Colleen A. (2013). Effectiveness of active learning in the arts and sciences. *Humanities Department Faculty Publications & Research*. Paper 45. https://scholarsarchive.jwu.edu/humanities_fac/45/
		• involve students in the process of setting course expectations (e.g., group norms, signal for attention, etc.)
		• make students responsible for some output (e.g. in group work, assign roles to encourage participation)
		• have clear learning outcomes and activities that are meaningful, challenging, and consequential/connected to what they are learning in class and to the real world
		• if you have TAs supporting your course, provide information and training regarding their role in classroom management and engagement

Distractions	Digital devices, noise from activities, and visual cues from classroom technology can lead to distractions	• communicate clear policies on use of digital devices (e.g. for class activities only or only during designated times). For more information on managing the use of digital devices in the classroom, refer to the following resources:
		  ○ CTSI Video: Managing Digital Distractions
		  ○ Neiterman, E., & Zaza, C. (2019). A Mixed Blessing? Students' and Instructors' Perspectives about Off-Task Technology Use in the Academic Classroom. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *10(1)*. https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2019.1.8002
		  ○ Ehrlick, S. (2014). Managing Digital Distraction: A Pedagogical Approach for Dealing with Wireless Devices in the Classroom. *Journal of teaching and Education, 03 (03)*. http://www.universitypublications.net/jte/0303/html/T4N289.xml
		  ○ Lang, James M. (2017, March 13). The Distracted Classroom. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from https://chronicle.com
		• establish a visual (e.g. raise hand) or auditory cue (e.g. key word, sound) to cue a transition from students talking and refocusing as a large group back to the instructor. Practice this cue from day one, reinforcing with students its importance in quick transitions and efficient use of time.

Challenge		Tips
Accessibility & Equity	Various barriers (circumstances or obstacles that can impede learning) and disabilities (visible and invisible) can prevent students from fully participating in learning	• explore the ALC space to identify potential barriers to learning and teaching • conduct an Access Check to identify barriers that may hinder or block learning and then take an active role in ensuring that alternative teaching and learning approaches, as well as possible accommodation solutions, are explored • be proactive rather than reactive by designing learning using Universal Design principles (embodied in models such as Universal Design for Learning) which allow you to optimize teaching and learning for diverse learners • co-create a Community Agreement – guidelines for what it means to be respectful, to clarify expectations about turn-taking and engaging in activities, or accessibility needs in the ALC space • facilitate for equity by paying attention to historic and contemporary experiences of marginalization and how they manifest in the classroom, and actively combat patterns where people from non-dominant groups are less likely to participate equitably because of the ways we have designed our class time, space and dynamics • be flexible and creative in curriculum delivery: reinforce key points using multiple formats (verbally, graphically, demonstration); use a variety of active learning strategies (e.g., think-pair-share, case studies, role-playing, jigsaw, etc.); and offer diverse forms of assessments and reflections to allow or encourage multiple ways of demonstrating learning

GETTING HELP AND FEEDBACK

As you prepare to teach in an ALC, take advantage of available support:

1. Talk to colleagues within your department or division who have experience teaching in ALCs. They may be able to suggest a specific activity or classroom management strategy that's worked well in their classes.
2. Request a consultation with the Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation for support with teaching in an Active Learning Classroom and with developing an active learning strategy for your courses.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Baepler, P., Walker, J. D., Brooks, D. C., Saichaie, K., & Petersen, C. (2016). Common teaching challenges in active learning classrooms. *A guide to teaching in the active learning classroom: History, research, and practice* (pp. 52-70). Sterling, VA: Stylus. [Permanent link to U of T Library listing: http://go.utlib.ca/cat/11265892]

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Classroom Management

Active Learning Classrooms (ALCs)

Challenges and Strategies

Time

Active learning activities may run too long and take the class off track

- write specific learning outcomes
- give students clear instructions and tell them how much time they have
- check in to see if there are any questions

Technology

Advanced audio-visual technology in some ALCs can be intimidating

- book a practice session to learn the room features before your first class
- start small-design learning around the features you're most comfortable with (e.g., white boards)

Layout

ALCs may lack a single central focus point and students may have their back to you

- pick a focal point in the room (whiteboard, main screen, or podium)
- use a consistent cue to get students to focus on that point when necessary

Engagement

Students used to a lecture format may be reluctant to participate in active learning activities

- share research showing the benefits of active and collaborative learning
- make students responsible for some output (e.g., in group work, assign roles to encourage participation)

Size

Engaging learners in high enrolment classes through active learning requires a combination of individual and group activities

- use polls (clickers) to get all students to participate
- design group work around problem-solving and decision-making rather than writing and presenting

Accessibility & Equity

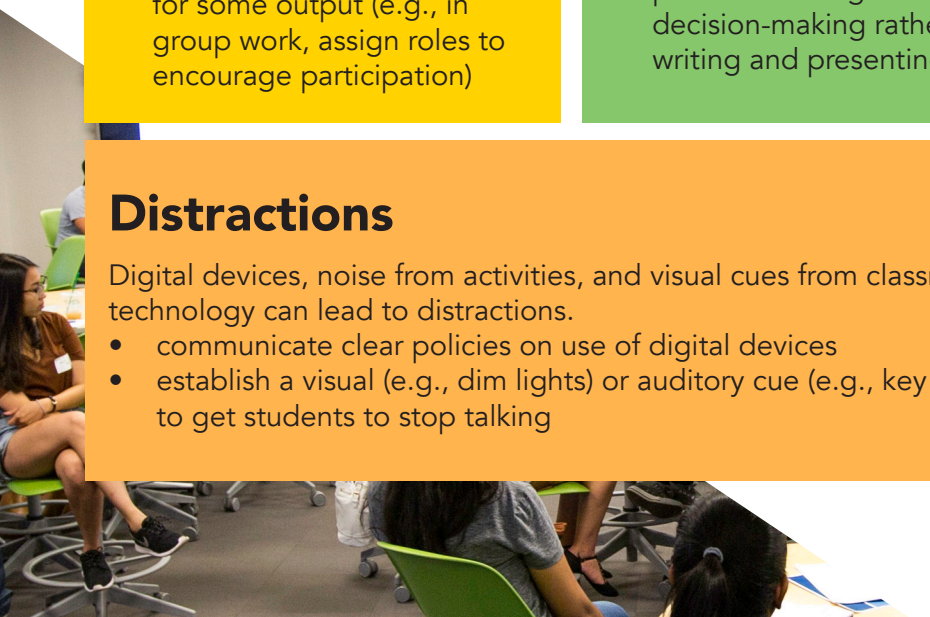
Various barriers (circumstances or obstacles that can impede learning) and disabilities (visible and invisible) can prevent students from fully participating in learning

- explore the ALC space to identify potential barriers to learning and teaching
- be flexible and creative in curriculum delivery: reinforce key points using multiple formats; use a variety of active learning strategies; and offer diverse forms of assessments and reflections to allow or encourage multiple ways of demonstrating learning

Distractions

Digital devices, noise from activities, and visual cues from classroom technology can lead to distractions.

- communicate clear policies on use of digital devices
- establish a visual (e.g., dim lights) or auditory cue (e.g., key word) to get students to stop talking



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