

## BETTER COURSES THROUGH ACTIVE LEARNING

### Great results from active learning

There was an interesting article in *Science* magazine in May 2011. It's about an experiment in teaching done by Louis Deslauriers and colleagues at the University of British Columbia. Although the subjects were undergraduate physics students, we think the results have a lot to say about how to do corporate training as well.

Deslauriers divided the class into two groups. Top-rated teachers taught one group using conventional lecture methods. Less-experienced teachers taught the other group using something called the deliberate practice method. In deliberate practice, students use class time for problem-solving exercises and discussion. They learn the facts and methods they need from reading assignments done as homework.

Deliberate practice turned out to be a very effective way to teach. After a week, both groups took the same test. Results for the deliberate practice group were nearly twice as good as those for the conventional group.

### Active learning for finance professionals

We think this style of teaching works just as well in a corporate setting, if not better. Business professionals respond well to the challenges of problem solving, they're used to being active rather than passive throughout the day, and they're good at self-directed research and study.

What does this mean for you, if you're managing training for professionals in finance? Whether the subject is corporate finance, credit risk, or debt structuring, design the course for active learning. Here are some guidelines based on our experience.

#### Minimize lecture time

For entry-level programs, roughly no more than 50% of the training time should be spent on lecture. For intermediate level programs, no more than 40% of the training time; for advanced level programs, no more than 20%.

#### Maximize team exercises

Group the class into teams of four to six people. Give the teams tasks to work on, like analyzing the trend in a ratio or structuring a deal. Have them report their results to the entire class, using flip charts, document cameras, or computer projections.

#### Discuss, discuss, discuss

Expect each team member to contribute to the team exercise. When the teams present their results, use that as an opportunity for questions and comments from

the entire class. When there is a lecture, make it part of the after-exercise discussion.

### **Make instructors coaches**

Instructors aren't in class to deliver material; they're there to provoke learning. They need to move among the teams, helping them with their exercises. And they need to lead the class-wide discussion in a way that brings out the key learning points for the course.

### **Rely on self-study**

Give the participants the tools and concepts they'll need in class in the form of readings, online courses, and other learning materials. Resist the temptation to use class time to cover the basics. But if there is a lot of prep work to do, it may be worth making time for it at the start of class.

## **What to look for in an instructor**

The instructor plays a crucial role no matter what teaching method you use. The instructor's subject matter expertise, design capabilities, and delivery skills can make all the difference between success and failure. Here is what to look for when you're working with an instructor to develop an active learning course.

### **Exercise driven**

The instructor needs to be able to create activities that suit the participants and the subject. Activities can range from briefings to simulations to games, but they have to bring out the course's key learning objectives. And they have to appeal to the experience level and learning style of the participants.

### **Discussion friendly**

The instructor has to be willing to give up some of the comfort of lecturing for the challenge of leading discussions instead. That means keeping the teams engaged and on task. It also means integrating each team's views into a general, class-wide discussion of the course's key concepts.

### **Materials based**

An effective active-learning instructor has to support the learning in class with good self-study materials. Whether the instructor writes them or gets them from another source, they need to be relevant in form and content. The materials should look and feel like the kinds of information sources the participants use at work, and they should cover the skills and concepts the participants will use in class.

## **What to look for in materials**

Materials play an especially important role in active learning. The success of the in-class exercises and discussions depends on how well prepared the participants are. Good learning materials can make all the difference. These are the characteristics of good learning materials.

### **Suitable for self-study**

Effective self-study materials can take many forms, including case memos, readings, and on-line tutorials; but they have three things in common. They are engaging: they encourage the participants to prepare for the course. They are flexible: they are easy for busy participants to fit into their demanding schedules. They are succinct: they don't take more than about two hours of self-study time for each day of an entry-level program or one hour for a professional-level course.

### **Useful in class**

The materials have to be available to help in class, either in print or on a tablet or laptop computer. When teams are working on exercises, they have to have the information they need to complete the task. At a minimum, that means case materials. But it also could include reference guides and even summaries of on-line courses.

### **Useful on the job**

Good materials are the key to carrying learning beyond the classroom. They should be designed not just for the course but also for the participants to use afterwards to make their work more effective and productive.

### **Not the only way**

Active learning works well for a broad range of audiences and topics, but it's not a panacea. There are many ways to teach and learn effectively. Well-designed self-study courses can be a good way to teach technical skills and basic concepts. And well-led discussions can be as engaging as group work, especially if the instructor is good at getting the participants to apply their real-life experiences to the topic being discussed.

### **More information**

For more on Deslaurier's research see "Improved Learning in a Large-Enrollment Physics Class" by Louis Deslauriers, Ellen Schelew, and Carl Wieman. It's in the [May 13, 2011 issue of Science](#)

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