Active learning emphasizes the value of students participating in the process of their learning, by “doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). This is in contrast to experiences that consist solely of passively listening to information presentation.

Active learning experiences can benefit students beyond knowledge acquisition. Through sequences of knowledge acquisition, application practice, feedback, and reflection, students can grow academically by using and internalizing critical thinking practices applicable beyond a single course.

**Learning Process Model**
A simple model of the learning process* (Toohey, 1999) can help you plan a sequence of strategies for students to learn and apply knowledge. This model offers five stages a learner goes through in learning.

1. **Encounter or be introduced to the idea, concept, principle, or skill**
2. **Get to know more about it**
3. **Try it out for oneself**
4. **Get feedback**
5. **Reflect, adjust, and try again**

Stages 2-5 can be repeated multiple times to develop the ability to successfully apply the new knowledge.

Each of these stages will be looked at more closely below.

**Step 1: Encounter or be introduced to the idea, concept, principle, or skill**
The introduction to an idea can occur in the classroom, in the text, or online, through telling, demonstration, or example. An alternative is for students to discover the idea for themselves through attempting a problem, analyzing a case, or experiencing a simulation.

Students may already know something about the topic, or about related ideas. Eliciting students’ prior knowledge by asking them what they already know can give you a sense of students’ preparedness for the topic. Benefits for students include giving them a chance to access and recall related information, and ‘priming the pump’ to connect the new knowledge.

**Step 2: Get to know more**
Learners acquire more information, develop their understanding and sense of meaning about the information. Lectures or readings can be designed to have active elements in which students process and make sense of the information. One example that can be integrated into a lecture session is to stop the class for a few minutes, and encourage students to catch up on their notes, or put main concepts into their own words with a brief summary. Another example, in a reading assignment, is to create “Reading Guides.” These support students with difficult or unfamiliar texts by providing support such as disciplinary term definitions, background information, context, and guiding questions to consider while reading.

**Step 3: Try it out for oneself**
After students have developed some understanding of the idea, they can try ways to use what they’ve learned. This could include answering a question, attempting to use a new skill, locating examples that match a concept, or developing an interpretation. The experience of trying to use their new knowledge may make apparent to students what they have understood and where they have gaps.

**Step 4: Get feedback**
Feedback typically comes from the instructor or other students, and is in the form of comments on performance. The most useful kinds of feedback facilitate further learning by clearly identifying mistakes and misunderstandings and offering suggestions for improvement. Another type of feedback can be through self-assessment, in which students compares their work or process to a model example. In some cases, feedback may be intrinsic to a situation, such as a computer program crashing or providing incorrect output.

**Step 5: Reflect, adjust, and try again**
Finally, one looks back at their task, performance, and feedback, and considers whether they have satisfied the task goals or if they should go back to an earlier step in the learning process. This is usually a private step, but instructors can make a reflection process more explicit by assigning tasks such as process journals, self-evaluations or debriefing exercises.

*There are a number of other models of learning processes. This one was chosen for its simplicity and practical applicability*
Example Learning Experience

The following example illustrates a potential learning experience for students in a psychology class. The learning objectives are that students will understand how the mental illness classification schedules are used, be able to use them to classifying example individuals, and evaluate how useful the schedules are. (Example from Toohey, 1999, p 158)

“ Encounter/Get to know more
The lecturer introduced the topic by asking students what they know about classification schemes. The most commonly used schedule is introduced and explained with many examples. Further reading is provided in the handouts.

Try it out
Within the tutorial group of around 20 people, students work in groups of three or four, trying to apply the classification schedule to the people depicted in brief case studies.

Get feedback
Feedback is provided by other members of the small group. In the plenary session which follows, each group presents its conclusions for consideration and discussion. Further feedback is provided by class members and by the teacher.

Try it out
Assigned to new groups of three or four, students compare their experiences of using the schedule and the difficulties they experienced.

Get feedback/reflect, adjust
Again, feedback is provided by small group members and ultimately by the whole group as it comes together to finalize its conclusions about when and how the schedule might be used appropriately.

Try again
A second chance to try out some of the course material is provided through the written assignments.

Get feedback
Written assignments are initially evaluated by the tutor and two peers with formative comments only.

Reflect, adjust, and try again
Students reassess their own work, taking into account the feedback provided. A final version of the assignment is produced by each student and given a mark by the teacher.

References

