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Three Active Learning Strategies That Push Students Beyond Memorization

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Those who teach in the health disciplines expect their students to retain and apply every iota of learned material. However, many students come to us having achieved academic success by memorizing the content, regurgitating that information onto an exam, and promptly forgetting a good portion of it. In health, as well as other disciplines where new material builds upon the material from the previous semesters, it is critical for students to retain what they learn throughout their coursework and as they begin their careers as a nurse, engineer, elementary teacher, etc.

So, how do we get students to retain this knowledge? Here are three active learning strategies for pushing students beyond simple memorization.

1. Case Studies and Simulations – Forsgren, Christensen, and Hedemalm (2014) found that case studies stimulate the student's own thinking and reflection, both individually and in groups. Through reflection, the student gains a broader view, increased understanding, knowledge, and deeper learning. Case studies are a form of problem-based learning that encourage the student to think critically and apply "book knowledge" to everyday practice and problems that will occur in the workplace. A literature review reveals very little research on using case studies in fields other than health, law, and business. However, case studies could certainly be written for any field of study.

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Many other methods of assisting with knowledge retention come from healthcare fields but can easily be adapted to other majors. Simulation—whether high-tech as in mannequins or low-tech as in role play—is a good method to help the student apply knowledge to real world scenarios.

2. Concept Maps – Concept maps are graphical tools for organizing and representing knowledge and can be used to help students visualize connections between words and concepts. The first step is defining a focus question or problem which the student then internalizes a strategy for defining and clarifying (Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, 2014). Concept maps using real world situations can help reinforce key ideas by encouraging students to think both creatively and analytically about previously learned information and apply it to new scenarios.

3. One-Minute Papers – A classic among active learning techniques, the one-minute paper remains a simple yet effective way to gauge student learning. I use these papers as an assessment of my own teaching efficacy but more importantly to get students to reflect on what went on in the classroom that day. My questions are all open-ended so as to encourage reflection and feedback on the subject matter. Possible prompts for a one-minute paper, include:

- The clearest point of today's class was:
- The muddiest point of today's class (or something that confused me or I want clarified) was:
- How I prepared for class today:
- What I liked best that helped me learn:
- What I wish had been discussed during today's class:

In summary, we all know that lecturing is not the most effective manner of teaching, any more than cramming is an effective form of learning. Active learning strategies such as these move students from passive to active participation in their learning; boosting retention in the process. As an added bonus, these methods fit well in the flipped learning environment that many instructors are using today.

References:

Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence. *Whys and hows of assessment*. Carnegie Mellon. Retrieved May 14, 2014, from <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/howto/assesslearning/conceptmaps.html>

Forsgren, S., Christensen, T., & Hedemalm, A. (2014). Evaluation of the case method in nursing education. *Nurse Education in Practice*. 14, 164-169.

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