



Amy McLellan, J.D., LL.M.

Graduate Tax Program

Moving from Traditional Teaching to Active Learning in Law and Graduate School Settings

The Challenge

I found teaching tax in the graduate setting to be difficult. The myriad of tax regulations I had to cover made the class lectures tedious. It was difficult for the students to figure out how to organize what they were learning and apply it in a meaningful way. I noticed that there were many students who put a tremendous effort into studying for the exams, but only a few were able to do well.

The Approach

I completely revised my teaching approach. I reduced my lecture time and created in-class exercises that are interactive and help the students engage with the materials and each other. I added practical assignments that require deeper thinking and an ability to synthesize the material and apply it to real life situations. I also used maps and charts to help them gain an understanding of how all the material fits together.

I broke down the assessment process so students could demonstrate a mastery of particular subjects and of the course content as a whole. I have gradually shifted away from final exams to a combination of quizzes, papers, presentations, and long-term projects. These assignments proved to be a better criteria to determine a grade, one that more accurately reflects students' progress, their effort, and their command of the material.

How it Went

The shift in focus in my classroom helped foster a more engaging learning community - both in class and online. Students formed study groups and made connections with peers which made the program a more enjoyable experience. Online students felt connected to the class and in-class students could see the results of their efforts in real time. The classroom, traditionally a passive learning environment, came to life with enthusiastic learners.

The most astounding aspect of this transformation is the depth of learning. My students palpably learned more and could apply the material in a much more constructive way than I saw in the past. Test scores went up, their analysis was much more complex, and they were happier with their experience. Students who normally struggle with the material excelled.

The only caveat is that one or two students in each class were recalcitrant. They wanted to stay embedded in the traditional model of lecture and exam. I wanted to respect those students' learning process, so I let those students choose to weigh their scores differently. Their final exam was worth more of their grade than the class projects. I was extremely surprised to see that those students consistently did significantly worse on the final exam than my students who put a tremendous effort into the projects. My formerly reluctant students all retrospectively admit that they learn more with this active learning approach than they did with the traditional classroom model.

It seems that the projects helped students stay on top of the material and develop a positive and effective learning mindset. Those who actively engaged in the major project, were easily able to master the other materials that I covered in class. Moreover, they enjoyed the learning process in ways I never imagined.

Advice for Others

Connect the activities that you are doing with specific learning objectives, so the students know why they are doing what might appear to be extra work. Explain that they will learn much more using an active learning approach. This will help to sell your agenda to the students. I often explain, "Studies show that if you..., you will learn more." Students like to know you are thinking about their learning and you are providing this opportunity to be part of an active learning environment in order to help them succeed in the class. It is also important to be flexible and enthusiastic. The goal is to foster an exciting learning environment.

I am still working on forward-looking assessments. I now require students to do a reflection on their work mid-way through an assignment. This gives them the opportunity to think about how they can improve their grade and work more effectively.



UNIVERSITY of
DENVER

OFFICE OF
TEACHING & LEARNING