

Topic 2: Active Learning

Purpose of this segment: Participants will discuss how active participation benefits learning and will learn strategies to increase active participation in workshops and classes.

1. Benefits of Active Participation**Notes**

- opportunity for participants to process: increases rate and degree of learning, retention
- opportunity for interaction: advantageous for social learners, promotes networking, and acknowledges participant expertise
- opportunity for hands-on activities: advantageous for kinesthetic learners and those who learn best by doing
- motivation to learn: adds interest
- opportunity for presenter to check participants' understanding

2. Forms of Active Participation

- Essential characteristic: all involve actively processing the information presented.
- Many different forms:
 - individually or in small groups
 - with or without props
 - hands-on or verbal or mental

3. Strategies for active participation to introduce a session or topic

- Ask participants to do something that will cause them to access prior learning or experience related to the topic you are going to cover. Learning is enhanced if new information is connected to something the person already knows.
- Examples:
 - Ask each person to think of one question they hope will be answered. List these on the board or flip chart so you can refer back to it to be sure the questions have been answered. This information will help you focus the session and shows that you want to know participants' needs and interests.

- Ask people to talk in threes for 3-4 minutes about what they already know about the topic and what problems they have related to it. Ask for some examples to be shared with the whole group. Link these to what you are going to discuss.
- Ask people to bring back to mind some information taught earlier that is relevant to what you want to discuss next. For example: *“At the beginning of this session we talked about 3 garden waste products that would be considered “browns” in the compost pile. Take 2 minutes to check with the person next to you to see if you agree on those 3 waste products.”* After they have talked, review the information; and then explain how it is related to what will be discussed in the current class, e.g. *“Now we are going to talk about other easily obtainable materials you can use when you don’t have a source of browns in your garden.”*
- Ask people to imagine a neighbor asking them a question related to the current composting topic and write how they would answer it. Without having them report out, tell them that they will have a chance to look at their answer later, to see if the discussion changes anything they wrote.

4. Strategies for active participation during a session or topic

- Facilitate reprocessing by asking people to answer a question, write a summary of what was said, use the information to complete a task, apply it to a new situation, etc. Actively reprocessing information enhances how quickly and how well a person learns, and how well s/he retains the learning.
- Do this in a way that involves every person.
- Do this as often as you can during the session.

- Examples:
 - *“We just discussed a number of benefits that compost has as an amendment for clay soil. Talk to the person across the aisle to be sure you agree on those benefits.”*
 - *“We’ve talked about hot/fast compost, cold/slow compost and worm compost, and the pro’s and con’s of each. Review those quickly in your mind. Decide which method is best for you and your garden, and be ready to tell someone why.”*
 - Give the class “problem pile” situations and ask them to decide in small groups how they would deal with each. Go over the ideas when everyone is ready.
- Hands-on activities take effort to set up, but they are a particularly effective way to enhance learning. Use them whenever possible. Some things to remember:
 - Hands-on activities may include working with materials, models, specimens, and tools that help illustrate what is being discussed.
 - Activities can be as simple as examining something up close (“Look at these three samples of finished compost; what differences do you see?”) or as complicated as using tools or equipment to answer questions (“How many different kinds of macro-organisms do you see in this sample of worm compost? Can you identify them?”)
 - When teaching a skill, have the person practice the skill whenever possible. Examples: shredding material for the pile, determining proper moisture level in a pile, sifting compost, turning a pile, using a hand lens etc.

5. Strategies for active participation at the end of a session or topic

- Give participants an opportunity to summarize what was covered. Retention and rate and degree of learning are greater if the

participant has an opportunity to summarize/reprocess what was learned and consolidate it in his/her mind. Allowing time for students to summarize the information and then taking questions allows you to correct misconceptions and misunderstandings before ending the class.

- Example:
 - *“Tonight we went over the steps to create a hot pile that will compost rapidly. We covered what materials were appropriate, how to prepare and layer them, how to achieve the right level of moisture, and how to maintain the pile. Take a few minutes now to review those key ideas and to be sure they are clear. You can use your notes or ask someone near you to confirm something you aren’t sure of, or call me over. I’ll take questions during the last few minutes.”*

Tips For Successful Activities

- Activities enhance learning when they are relevant and well planned. Don’t do them just to have activities.
- Always practice your activity to get an accurate sense of time, materials, and equipment needed.
- Give clear instructions, including:
 - How to do the activity
 - Be sure your instructions for the activity are clear, so that when you release people they will know what to do.
 - Provide written instructions or put them on a slide or flip chart.
 - Whom they will work with or how they will decide on this
 - Options include working individually, with a partner, or in small groups.
 - Groups can be self-selected or formed by counting off, table groups, etc.
 - What they are supposed to produce: If the product is very specific or complicated, provide a written description.
 - Time limits and when you will warn them of time passing
 - Tell them what time the activity will end.
 - Make people aware when the end time is approaching. When to do this depends upon the length of the activity. If it is 5 minutes, a one-minute warning is enough. If it is 30 minutes, announce the halfway point and give a warning when 2-3 minutes remain.
 - What clean up involves
 - Give brief clean-up instructions before the activity
 - Give detailed clean-up instructions when you give the “time’s almost up” warning.
 - What will happen when the group reconvenes after the activity

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- If there will be reporting out to the whole group, instruct the group to identify a reporter before they begin the activity, so that s/he can record information as the group works.
- Even if the class will end shortly after the activity is over, it is best to reconvene the group for questions, closing comments, and a civilized goodbye!
- If the group is larger than 20, have a signal you can use to get attention when the room is full of the noise of people working. Tell them what it will be.
- Circulate during the activity time to answer questions and make sure groups aren't stuck. If things are going well, don't interrupt!