

# Trainer Essentials: Active Learning

## What is Active Learning?

Active learning is “the attainment of knowledge by participating or contributing” (Collins & O'Brien, 2011). It involves keeping students mentally and often physically active in their learning through activities that require critical thinking, problem solving and information gathering (2011). Active learning is contrasted with passive or traditional learning, where participants simply listen to a lecture or watch a PowerPoint, and are not required to interact with the ideas or information.

According to research conducted by Bonwell and Eison (1991), passive learning or listening to presentations is not enough for learners. Students must read, write, discuss and be engaged in problem solving activities for meaningful and lasting learning to occur. This observation is validated in multiple studies that compare classrooms that use active learning techniques (such as participatory activities) with those which rely on more traditional or passive delivery (such as lectures and presentations). The studies show that learners have improved educational outcomes and are less likely to quit learning when taught with active learning strategies (Freeman, et al., 2014; President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), 2012).

In contrast to passive learning that involves a one way transmission of information from the trainer to the participants, active learning encourages knowledge sharing amongst all participants. In active learning everyone is a teacher and everyone, including the trainer, is a learner. There is a recognition that participants bring their own ideas, attitudes and experiences to any training sessions, and have as much to share as to they do to learn. This sharing promotes the collective creation of knowledge, an important component of active learning.

By using active learning techniques we can engage participants in two ways: (1) to do things, and (2) to think about the things they are doing (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). These skills are particularly important when we are teaching about water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) because we want participants to apply what they learn.

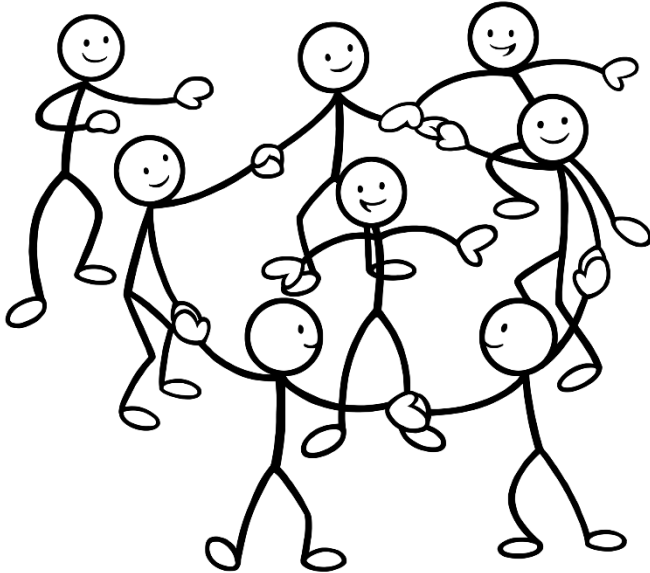
## Active Learning in Training

Active learning techniques can be used in any training workshop. The approach is participatory and learner-centered. Techniques are used where participants are encouraged to think for themselves while actively contributing to their own training and learning.

For participants used to traditional teaching methods, this training style can be a mismatch with their previous experience and expectations (Zhenhui, 2001). It is therefore important to communicate the participatory nature of your training early in a session. This will help participants to understand and become more comfortable with your expectations. You may also want to gradually increase the number of participatory techniques as you progress through the

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workshop to help ease participants into active learning.

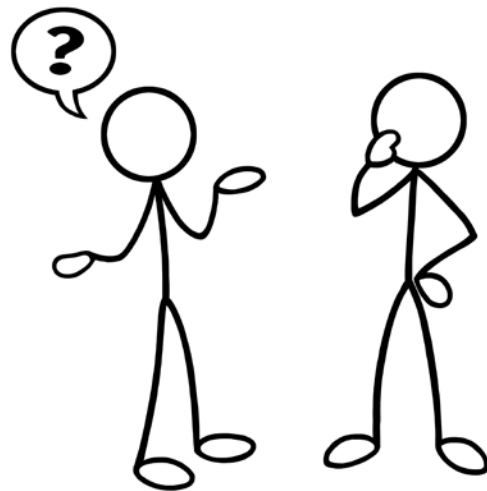


### Techniques to Integrate Active Learning in Training

Many active learning techniques can be found within CAWST's workshops. These techniques can be pulled out and used regardless of the topic you are delivering. Many of the activities are hands-on, cooperative group activities where participants work together to solve a common problem. Participants are able to share and challenge ideas while having the chance to practice with the new information – something we know learners need.

Some common active learning techniques include the following:

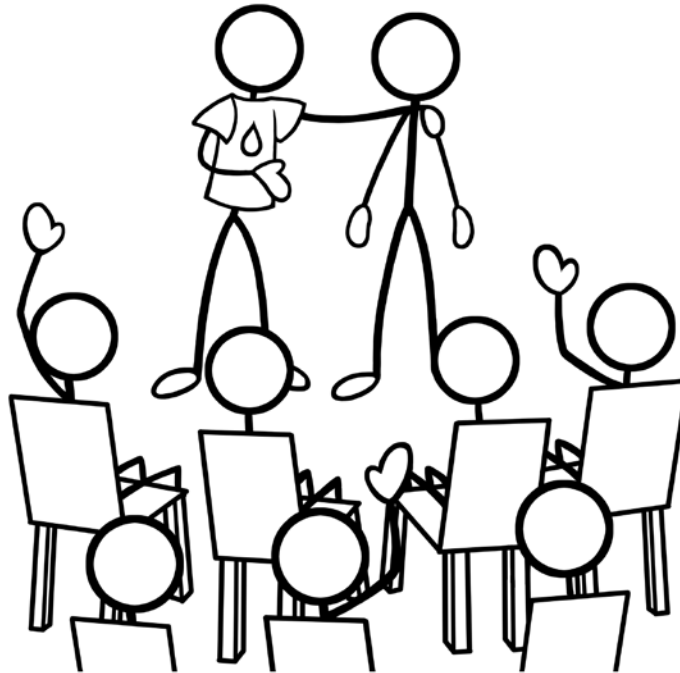
- **Think-Pair-Share:** Participants are given a few moments to think about a given topic, then work with a partner to discuss their ideas before sharing them with the large group. This is an excellent technique for building participants' confidence. It allows them to vet their ideas with a partner and get feedback before sharing them broadly.
- **Group Discussions:** The trainer organizes participants into small or large groups to discuss a topic or do a problem solving exercise. A variety of techniques can be used to divide participants into groups. The



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trainer can assign roles to each group member, such as note-taker and chair, ask groups members to delegate tasks or leave the discussion open. Large group discussions allow the trainer to guide the flow of the conversation and check for understanding.

- **Games:** Games can be designed to introduce, reinforce or summarize given topics. Games can add energy into learning, help participants feel at ease, and help to create a safe learning environment.
- **Presentations Led by Participants:** Presentations can be an effective active learning technique because they rely on participants learning through teaching others. Participants work together to share ideas or research a topic, then prepare the information to present to the larger group. Presentations do not need to be extensive, time-consuming activities. They can be short sessions where groups brainstorm, record ideas and then present their findings.



- **Role-Play:** Like games, role-play activities can be a good way to inject your lessons with some energy. Taken from the field of drama, participants assume given roles and react to situations.
- **Pictures:** Participants can either draw images related to a given topic, or they can examine existing images. The use of images allows for creativity and expression within a lesson, and can foster rich discussion based on varying interpretations.
- **Demonstrations:** Demonstrations by both the trainer and participants can be useful in modelling particular techniques or activities. It is a good technique for people who learn well

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by watching an activity. To make a demonstration even more effective, get all the participants to practice the activity they observe.

- **Station Activities:** Participants are divided into groups and given stations where they examine a particular component of a given topic. After a few minutes, groups can rotate and examine new topic areas, add to the work carried out by the previous groups, or present their station's findings to the large group.
- **Case Studies:** Participants are given a relevant example of the topic being discussed. They work together to examine and discuss the situation. Participants can then present their findings to the large group or record their ideas.

### Facilitating Active Learning Techniques

Trainers sometimes think that integrating active learning techniques into their lessons will take too much time or planning to be effective. This type of instructional style can take more time than a lecture, however effectively facilitated participatory activities will not consume disproportionate amounts of time. Most important to remember is that well-structured active learning techniques will achieve deeper, longer-lasting learning (President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), 2012). This can save both you and the participants time over the long-term.

The following list highlights a number of ways to help you effectively facilitate active learning techniques:

- Establish clear expectations of participant involvement early in the training and communicate these expectations to your participants.
- Be clear about what you want participants to learn from the activity. If you are unclear when selecting the activity, then it may not contribute to your lesson's goals and outcomes.
- Check that participants understand the purpose of the activity. These checks can be conducted after the activity itself, or after the overall lesson is completed.
- Before beginning an activity, clearly explain the instructions and check for participants' understanding.
- When using group activities, circulate between different groups to ensure that everyone understands the task and is on-topic.
- Be prepared to help guide participants who are experiencing difficulty by providing examples or suggestions.
- Be conscious of the time you have allocated for different activities and how much time you have in your training sessions. You may need to modify the timing to fit your activities into the schedule.

If you are new to active learning you may find it uncomfortable at the start, because it can require more planning and is more difficult to control than a lecture. However, it does get easier with practice and the benefits far outweigh the challenges of this initial learning curve.

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When participants engage in active learning, they learn to solve problems and build knowledge collectively. They gain self-confidence, increase their desire to learn, and most importantly, they remember and apply what they have been taught. These are essential skills when teaching about WASH because they enable people to take action and sustain behaviours that will improve their health and ultimately their standard of living.

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### Additional Resources

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[https://www.ydae.purdue.edu/lct/HBCU/documents/Active\\_Learning\\_Creating\\_Excitement\\_in\\_the\\_Classroom.pdf](https://www.ydae.purdue.edu/lct/HBCU/documents/Active_Learning_Creating_Excitement_in_the_Classroom.pdf)

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