

100 Ideas for Active Learning

100 Ideas for Active Learning

ACTIVE LEARNING NETWORK

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Using fortune cookies to teach academic writing

DR NATHALIE TASLER



What is the idea?

This creative idea documents the benefits of making and using felt fortune cookies within academic writing as an active learning experience. I used this activity to help learners engage more in depth with academic texts, in particular, how paragraphs and arguments are constructed and supported. It offers an embodied learning experience in that the learners collaborate, move about the room, and physically engage with the fortune cookie artefacts and within the classroom space itself. As Danish et al. (2020) explain:

‘We have found that collective embodiment where students must all coordinate their actions are particularly fruitful for exploring this kind of phenomena as their efforts to coordinate their motions help to make features of the aggregate more salient’ (p. 82)

Why this idea?

The students I worked with as an effective learning adviser, had to learn reflective writing; contemplating their placement experiences. Based on students’ work and feedback one of the biggest problems they had was linking their experience to theory and research. Those writing issues sometimes placed the writing into the category ‘deliberations of a teenage-diary’. The students were not happy with their writing, and often expressed frustration that they sound corny, cheesy, and repetitive. Traditionally, students are expected to use the Gibbs reflective cycle (description, feeling, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, action plan); however, this just made the matter worse, as students often confuse evaluation and analysis. This model redefines those steps as follows. Analysis—as commonly defined—the establishing of ‘What is?’ should come before ‘evaluation’ the value-judgement of ‘What is?’. So besides the messy terminology, the six steps make the model very mechanistic and most students became stuck in the actualities of dealing with the model instead of focussing on their actual writing. While the exercise caused cognitive dissonance and a lot of debate amongst the students. It generated a barrage of questions we discussed in the second part of the session. The course evaluation showed that this was one of the favourite activities of the students.

How could others implement this idea?

Create fortune cookies from four different coloured felt pieces (instructions in the URL below).

Print excerpts from exemplar student work (range of grades) and journal articles and cut into sentences

Place sentences into colour coded fortune cookies as follows:

The first colour is text from a just pass mark,

The second colour holds C grade writing,

The third colour contains writing from a very strong student paper,

And the fourth colour contains writing from a journal article.

The fortune cookies of each colour hold one to two sentences that make a full paragraph from one of the original texts.

The students pick a cookie each and then have to speak to their peers, moving about the room trying to identify the students with the appropriate other sentences.

Once they consider the paragraph to be complete they judge the quality of the writing.

While the fortune cookies are colour coded, do not tell the students what the code is. They have to find out during the exercise. This is a group-work activity aims to address the issue of linking reflection and theorising, in students' reflective writing assessments. This embodied experiential activity relates to some of the elements Nicol (2020) mentions in his work about internal feedback. It encourages the learners to compare, reflect, and create both as a group, and before this individually making a decision which group to join and if they are in the right group.

Transferability to different contexts

This activity works incredibly well to help students experience text in a different way, and engage with writing more deeply. But it can work as a form of gamification in different contexts as well. For instance, if the students have to learn a complex system, with different parts, the fortune cookies could contain a mixture of images and text and the students could put these together on a whiteboard or poster into an infographic. There could be questions and answers in these and students have to find either the right question for their answer or if they have the question fortune cookie find the right answer(s) to their question. You could also ask your students to design content for these for an exam preparation session. There is an abundance of possibilities for utilising this activity. This is a generic activity that could be applied to a range of disciplines and contexts.

Links to tools and resources

These are the instructions on how to make the fortune cookies I used: [How to Make Felt Fortune Cookies – Curly Birds \(typepad.com\)](https://typepad.com/2015/04/how-to-make-felt-fortune-cookies-curly-birds/)

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