A WORKSHOP AS A LEVER FOR PEDAGOGICAL CHANGE?

The case of Active Learning: from Practice to Theory, and Back

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Focus and structure

This chapter provides a description and critical analysis of a workshop titled Active Learning: From Practice to Theory, and Back. Our main focus is to use this workshop as an opportunity to reflect on how pedagogical changes toward student-centered learning are actualized in two specific contexts: St. George’s, University of London, and the National University of Singapore. This, then, leads us to wider considerations on the challenges of moving institutions of higher education (HE) from an “instructionist,” monologic, teacher-centered paradigm, and toward a dialogic, student-centered view of learning as a process of knowledge co-creation through encounters between students and teachers (Nygaard & Holtham 2008).

The workshop has developed iteratively over a period of 14 years through being offered in a number of universities in England. It has also been well received internationally in countries as diverse as France, Spain, Italy, Ukraine, Vietnam and Singapore. In the latter, it was run on a number of occasions as part of an overall program of educational development. Because of this, the two authors – the first of whom designed and currently leads the workshop, with the second being its advocate at the National University of Singapore – have joined forces to discuss possibilities and challenges faced by current HE cultures, as these relate to student-centered pedagogies.

As will become apparent in the course of the chapter, while the workshop fulfills the function of providing participants with ideas for practice, principally it aims to create an arena for reflecting on the meanings and purposes of learning and teaching from a number of perspectives: philosophical, psychological, and sociological. While doing so, at the same time it invites participants to link generic principles to their own practice. Because of this careful integration of practice and theory, the workshop has been regularly hailed as a positive experience for the formation and transformation of educational practice, both by new and veteran teachers alike. For this reason, Active Learning: From Practice to Theory, and Back has lent itself to being strategically used as a lever for cultural and institutional changes toward student-centeredness.

The chapter starts with a rapid conceptual and historical overview of Active Learning. It subsequently unfolds with some reflections on how, while the rhetoric of student-centered learning increasingly predominates globally, nevertheless its tenets may be difficult to realize in
current HE systems. We argue that the role of institutional contexts is key to change and innovation, and conclude that only systemic forms of policy making and governance that are not only operational and managed but also grassroots and transformative (Leišyte & Wilkesmann 2016) can unlock the real power of a workshop such as the one we are considering in this chapter. Otherwise, single interventions, however well thought out and structured, may remain epiphenomenal. We argue for conceptualizing the organizational learning necessary for transformation in terms of Active Learning, in the form of what we term Active Organizational Learning. That is, we propose to extend the tenets of Active Learning to organizational learning, so these can become truly transformative when transferred to organizational policy, strategy, and governance.

Active learning within the student-centered paradigm

Active Learning is central to current pedagogical discourses in HE worldwide, whether it is actually named as such or evoked through a series of commonly associated attributes, which include student engagement and participation in knowledge discovery, construction, and sharing; interconnectedness between ideas, perspectives and theories; conceptual and professional relevance; learning through doing and reflecting; the centrality of feedback; and students’ ontological shifts as they not only acquire new knowledge but progressively become more central in specific, discipline-based epistemological and professional communities of practice (Bowden & Marton 1998; Di Napoli 2004; Illeris 2013; Ambrose et al. 2010).

For all its theoretical and conceptual complexity, Active Learning can be considered a fairly loose “conceptual bundle” that is strictly associated with other student-centered theoretical constructs such as transformative learning (Mezirow 1991; Taylor et al. 2012), problem-based learning (Savin-Baden & Major 2004), and team based-learning (Michaelson et al. 2009). Epistemologically, it lies at the boundaries between psychology, philosophy, sociology and, more recently, the neurosciences. Its roots can be found as far back as the Socratic method of learning through questioning (Blackburn 2016; Seeskin 1987), Rousseau’s concept of *perfectibilité* (the ability of the human mind to learn through encounters with other minds), von Humboldt’s *Bildung* (formability, the human capacity to form and be formed), Herbart’s *Bildsamkheit* (educability, the human capacity for cultivation) and Dewey’s *perfectibility* (the dynamic interplay between self and the world through which learning occurs) (English 2013). Closer to our times, Active Learning has been strongly associated with the notions of Transformative Learning (Mezirow & Taylor 2009), Communities of Practice (Wenger 2000), and the work of such theoreticians as Piaget (2001) and Bruner (2006) on the role of readiness for learning, and learning as thinking. Increasingly, Active Learning is being embedded and legitimized by research in neuroscience, where mechanisms of transformation and integration are seen as central to learning (Jensen 2008; Zull 2011). All these theoretical frameworks put the learners, with their abilities, capabilities, attitudes and emotional needs, at the center of pedagogical practice.

We take Active Learning to be a conceptual filter through which pedagogical practices can be interpreted and enacted; we do not conceive of it simply as a set of techniques for student involvement. Active Learning is not a toolbox, nor does it simply mean having students involved in activities that may seem participative, but turn out to be merely cosmetic as they do not really effect change in ways that engage students, cognitively and emotionally, in the learning process.

Institutional drivers

The last decades have witnessed wide-ranging changes that have positively affected the importance of learning and teaching in HE, making them more central in institutional priorities and
practices. Universities have pioneered forms of management, policy making and governance that emphasize the quality of teaching, accountability and the importance of student satisfaction and the student voice. A number of factors underlie these recent developments in HE internationally.

First, the growing massification of HE has meant higher numbers of students than ever before. One consequence is that teaching runs the risk of turning (or returning) to an “instructionist” paradigm, in spite of the psychological, philosophical, sociological and neuroscientific advances in our understanding of how learning works (Sawyer 2014). This growing body of research strongly suggests the value of active, student-centered learning that moves beyond traditional, didactic classroom practices. Instead, it argues for a student-centered view of learning that sees teacher expertise not as a set of decontextualized “best practices” but instead as creating and sustaining contextually sensitive learning opportunities that are productive of positive student outcomes (Stigler & Miller 2018). This requires teachers to enact a complex pedagogical cycle which starts by assessing students’ current knowledge prior to, as well as during, teaching; formulating learning goals; and selecting and implementing appropriate Active Learning strategies and routines. The challenge is how to create student-centered conditions for a larger and increasingly diverse body of students.

A second factor that continues to drive changes in HE is technological development. Where massification tends to reinforce instructionism, because of increased student numbers and the pressure of performativity on academics, new IT systems have the potential to alter the teaching situation through, for example, learning analytics. These systems promise to enable Active Learning through computer-assisted tutoring and adaptive teaching based on students’ specific needs, thereby bringing the possibility of greater personalization of learning. Although technological innovation has a checkered history marked as much by hype as substance (Cuban 2001), nevertheless, alongside advances in the learning sciences, technological developments are a significant force in driving Active Learning within the context of massification and marketization.

These drivers are of course articulated differently in different institutional contexts. In the case of the UK, the increasing marketization of HE is evinced by such key developments as the institutionalization of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), as a parallel to the existing Research Excellence Framework (REF); pressures to professionalize HE teaching through, for example, the Advance HE Fellowship scheme; and the more recent creation of the Office for Students. In the wake of the introduction of fees, the National Student Survey (NSS) has taken on increased importance as students and their parents shop for the best value for money based on student satisfaction, which is key for university rankings in the UK (Brown & Carasso 2013). All of these initiatives, in different but interrelated ways, seek to provide students with greater agency in the processes of learning and teaching. Consequently, they are marked both by the rhetoric of student-centered learning and genuine efforts to achieve it through a number of measures (workshops, seminars, program-based initiatives, observation schemes, action-research projects, and the use of technology, to mention a few) which are meant to effect a cultural shift in educational practice. The question of how to realize a paradigm shift in educational practice is therefore very much alive and dominates debates in and on HE (Dee 2016), especially as the literature highlights the complexity of achieving pedagogical change and innovation in environments culturally saturated by the idea of professional autonomy and the importance traditionally given to research over teaching (Musselin 2017; Paradeise et al. 2009; Kezar 2018).

In the case of Singapore, the drive toward active, student-centered learning occurs within the very specific context of what has been termed the “Confucian Model” of HE (Marginson et al. 2011), which makes massification and technological developments particularly powerful forces. In East and Southeast Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Singapore, with their historically
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strong emphasis on the teacher as an authority figure and the tendency to require rote knowledge through high-stakes examinations, ministries of education are trying to promote entrepreneurship through critical thinking by propagating a shift from teacher- to student-focused approaches to teaching. However, through socialization at school and traditional expectations that derive from the Confucian Model, this drive toward student-centered Active Learning is complicated by students’ and their parents’ demand for and expectation of being provided with a teacher-focused, lecturing approach which allows students to know what to learn for examinations (Wilkesman 2016). The Confucian Model has resulted in close national supervision and control of HE systems, rapid growth of participation in HE beyond 50% of the population and toward universal levels, and accelerated development of research quantity and quality. Specifically, with regard to learning and teaching, the Confucian Model enables centralized enforcement of pedagogical approaches in schools, though not to the same extent at universities. In addition, given the high cultural value of learning, teaching and, increasingly, research, institutions are strongly oriented toward a learning-sciences oriented conceptualization of HE, with research and development institutes and centers rapidly being established (e.g., at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Centre for Learning Sciences and Technology; at the National University of Singapore, the Institute for Applied Learning Sciences and Educational Technology). These factors further strengthen receptiveness toward ideas of Active Learning.

In Singapore as elsewhere, current societal developments and work patterns, especially driven by technology, are resulting in increased emphasis on lifelong learning (Ong 2017). The capacity for lifelong learning is considered to be premised on students learning how to learn, and thus as requiring both cognitive and meta-cognitive engagement in self-directed learning. There is therefore a strongly institutionalized imperative to view teaching increasingly as needing to move beyond a transmission and acquisition metaphor of learning, and toward learning understood as also involving the metaphor of participation (Sfard 1998). It is within this context that universities in Singapore are framing the need for developing a more student-centered approach to teaching that creates conditions for Active Learning.

As much as in the UK and in Singapore, and often for similar reasons, efforts are being made elsewhere in the world to grow educational cultures and pedagogical practices that are inspired by the tenets of Active Learning. However, change of this kind and magnitude is difficult to achieve. Enacting the conceptual complexity of Active Learning requires sweeping changes of pedagogical cultures and mentalities that have been anchored in forms of teaching (such as the traditional lecture) that give relatively little space and time to conscious and purposeful development of students’ minds through a serious engagement in meaningful acts of understanding, sense making and knowledge construction (Schwartz & Bransford 1998). There are enormous variations across this space, with some universities effecting innovation more promptly than others. To us, a key point to recognize is that changing educational policies and structures will not automatically generate new forms of learning and teaching on the ground, as these require “joined-up policies, institutional architectures and enhancement cultures” (Trowler & Bamber 2005, p. 79). Changing university cultures is notoriously challenging because of powerful cultural forces and inveterate traditions that are difficult to overcome, in particular the relative importance attributed to research over teaching (Trowler 2008), even when learning is reconfigured as participation in research (Fung 2017). Effecting change requires being mindful of this complexity; there is a need to be systemic and systematic at the same time, and for change to be underpinned by resources that can help transform the overall habitus of an institution, with habitus being used here in the Bourdieuan sense of a system of durable dispositions which function as a matrix through which perceptions, evaluations and actions are filtered and enacted (Costa & Murphy 2015).
A workshop as a lever for change?

Seeking educational change at St. George’s, University of London

An educational habitus change is what St. George’s, University of London is trying to achieve. This is a small institution, entirely dedicated to teaching and research in medicine, biomedicine and healthcare sciences which, over the past few years, has been trying to shift its educational ethos and practices through an educational strategy that clearly foregrounds both student and institutional transformation. To achieve this, the college, in the same way as many other universities in the UK and beyond, has been taking a number of measures that highlight the importance of teaching and learning, and supports this through several initiatives such as a clear career pathway based on educational merits (up to professorial level) and the foundation of a Centre for Innovation and Development of Education (CIDE), which synergizes learning development (to support students in their studies) and educational development (to support the enhancement of teaching). While emphasizing the importance of understanding student learning as a basis for teaching, the center equally promotes the importance and value of teaching as a specific activity that underpins learning and that deserves attention, analysis and support. This is because conditions for learning are optimal when the relationship between learners and teachers is carefully conceived and informed by scholarship. In our times, when the trend is to (over-)emphasize the role of students (as customers) in pedagogic encounters, with teachers playing a supporting part, the university takes a strong view about the pivotal importance that teachers have, not only in student learning but in shaping HE. As Nel Noddings (2005, p. 8) puts it: “teachers should not be regarded as ‘instructional treatments.’ Who the teacher is, who the teachers are, what they are trying to accomplish separately and together all matter in designing instruction.” In fact, Biesta (2017) argues that teachers are pivotal figures in opening up both intellectual and moral avenues for students, thus helping them to become subjects in their own right. This is why the university strongly encourages collaboration between students and teachers (Cook-Sather et al. 2014).

The center and the university at large are clear that the “instructionist” paradigm of acquisition is not always sufficient to promote effective learning, and that deep, cultural innovation is needed in the way teaching and learning are both conceived and enacted. For this reason, the center has a role which goes well beyond that of “training” novice teachers and is involved in policy and governance activities that support and enhance pedagogical practice, including the design of effective quality strategies which clearly marry assurance with enhancement, career progression policies, and reward initiatives for excellence in teaching.

Among many other activities, the center runs the workshop Active Learning: From Practice to Theory, and Back. As the center considers it key to pedagogical innovation and change, the workshop is repeated numerous times every academic year in a number of different contexts: as the foundational event of the postgraduate certificate in healthcare and biomedical education; as part of a Continuous Educational Development program (called EduFocus); and for program teams where specific links between generic pedagogic principles and disciplinary forms of understanding the world are clearly highlighted and reflected upon. The workshop is also open to postgraduate and postdoctoral students and to research-focused scholars with teaching responsibilities. Finally, it is available to academic-related staff (administrators, learning technologists, managers and others) who wish to understand and discuss the principles of student-centeredness through the lens of Active Learning. Its multi-functional nature acts as the basis and glue for all other activities promoting pedagogical innovation. The workshop has evolved, over the last 15 years and across different institutional and international contexts, thus gaining in scope and depth.

The workshop has three main intertwined goals that participants should be able to achieve: articulate a critical understanding of the concept of Active Learning; apply it to practice in
reflective ways; and demonstrate an understanding of the theoretical frameworks underlying it. In relation to these outcomes, the workshop is built on a series of interconnected stages: (1) reflecting on and questioning personal epistemologies; (2) interrogating pedagogies through neuroscience research; (3) reflection as a tool for making sense of learning and teaching; (4) from educational theory to disciplinary practice; and (5) from practice to theory (and back again).

The learning gained during the workshop is used in subsequent workshops, which deal with topics such as large and small group teaching, assessment and feedback, supervision, and curriculum design. In fact, the workshop is foundational of all other activities offered by the center in support of an institutional change culture.

In the next section, we unpack each stage of the workshop to highlight its structure and purpose before reflecting, in the last part of the chapter, on its place within institutional strategies in the UK and beyond aimed at overall pedagogical cultural changes and innovation.

**Stages: from personal epistemologies to scholarly definitions of active learning, and back to practice**

As already hinted, the workshop is eminently questioning and reflective in character since it has the aim of encouraging participants to make their own conjectures about pedagogical practice as they are gradually exposed to new ideas, concepts and teaching techniques. It is characterized by a cycle of interpretation and action (Rodgers & Pinnell 2002), of conceptualization and
reconceptualization (Cook-Sather et al. 2015), in line with the principles of reflective practice as highlighted by Schön (1983). This cyclical reflectivity is embedded within the title (Active Learning: From Practice to Theory, and Back) and is the object of an initial discussion with participants about the relationship between theory and practice in pedagogy, in terms of usefulness and reciprocal impact. The discussion helps with introducing participants, from the very beginning, to meta-cognitive awareness (Underwood 1997). The latter is reinforced through a discussion of the intended learning outcomes of the workshop. This activity has multiple aims: (1) to induce reflections on the pedagogical value of learning outcomes (as opposed to their possible perception as a mere bureaucratic exercise); (2) to show their role in giving coherence and consistency to the learning and teaching experience across tasks and activities; (3) to highlight their function in preparing and guiding learners in the learning process, not just in terms of content but how this is articulated around given skills, values and attitudes; and (4) to encourage participants to start reflecting on the connections between teaching and assessment, which is an important step toward understanding the value of a holistic and interconnected approach across a pedagogical cycle, an important feature of Active Learning.

This is followed by five distinctive, yet intertwined, stages.

**Stage A: reflecting on and questioning personal epistemologies**

The aim of this first part of the workshop is to unpack meanings, beliefs and perceptions that participants hold about learning and teaching, which can be defined, with Hofer and Pincher (2001), as personal epistemologies. These are theories that people hold about the nature of knowledge and knowing, and that of learning and teaching (Brownlee et al. 2013). Encouraging participants to create their own concepts around pedagogical practice is crucial in two ways: on the one hand, it helps them to start developing and framing their thinking about pedagogical practice in conscious ways, bringing tacit assumptions to the surface and revisiting them in the light of newly acquired knowledge (Eraut 1994); concurrently, it allows the facilitator to understand what the participants' assumptions about learning and teaching are as a basis to build on during the workshop (Zull 2011). Additionally, it gives them an initial insight into pedagogical approaches that are different from the instructionist paradigm, while providing an orientation toward the pedagogical assumptions underpinning the workshop (Brownlee et al. 2013).

This is achieved by a simple ice-breaker, in which participants have 1 minute to define learning and teaching with one word each (this can be an adjective, a noun, or a metaphor, among other possibilities), by writing their words on two separate sticky notes. This is followed by a second step in which participants get up and mingle with colleagues, trying to unpack their words for others, while listening to how the latter define their own words. A rule must be obeyed whereby each individual must interact with at least three people they do not already know in the classroom within 7 minutes. Time is strictly kept. At the end of the 7 minutes, participants are invited to place their sticky notes on a surface and then return to their seats. By this time, the atmosphere in the class is relaxed and participants are ready to share their thoughts on learning and teaching, when prompted to unpack their words in front of the rest of the group.

Obviously, there is not enough time to discuss all the words available in depth; however, even dealing with three to five is normally sufficient (1) to understand how participants conceptualize learning and teaching; (2) for the facilitator to probe further thinking into participants' tacit knowledge and pre-conceptions; (3) for participants to share their thinking about the topic and challenge each other; and (4) to inject philosophical thinking into pedagogical practice (Ansgar & Goddard 2017). Subliminally, the activity also performs another important function: indirectly signaling that effective teaching depends on immediately involving the students, and
on understanding what they already (think they) know as a platform for knowledge building. During the plenary, discussions usually cover issues such as the difference between knowledge and information and how to transform the latter into the former; the implications this has for a view of HE as a “critical business” (Barnett 1997); the role of the teacher and that of the students in pedagogical encounters; and the importance of personal and professional relevance in learning. At this stage, participants are usually ready for insights about learning and teaching, starting from research in the neurosciences (Blakemore & Frith 2005; Jensen 2008; Zull 2011).

**Stage B: interrogating pedagogies through neuroscience research**

Understanding how the brain works, as it learns, has proved to be an attractive part of the workshop and acts as an effective point of entry into the links between theory and practice. Participants are divided into groups, each with the task of brainstorming ideas about one or two of the following concepts as derived from neuroscience research on learning: meaning and structure; relevance; connections; the role of errors; reinforcement; readiness; and the role of time and emotions on learning. Once each group has finished its initial discussions, a plenary brings ideas together, with a discussion about the practical implications of findings in neuroscience for learning and teaching (e.g., the importance of variety in relation to humans’ attention span, or the idea of creating meaning maps to help students see connections between concepts, and past, current and future learning).

The plenary is followed by a quick, interactive mini-lecture on the seminal ideas of scholars such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, Bruner, Damasio and Wenger, which leads to interesting reflections on the relationship between psychological and social factors in pedagogical interactions. Having already discussed a number of fundamental principles in the previous activities, participants are ready to start engaging with theoretical thinking and jargon. The facilitator especially helps them to see how those concepts that had been defined by them in lay language are expressed by educational theoreticians, thus encouraging participants to start using the appropriate educational language, familiarization with which is paramount as participants start becoming part of a new community of practice of scholar-educators.

This brings the second part of the workshop to an end, with a quick recap by the participants of what has been learned.

**Stage C: reflection as a tool for making sense of learning and teaching**

The aim of this part of the workshop is to introduce the notions of reflection and reflective practice (Ashwin et al. 2015) as a means to further understanding pedagogical action. As a way to preliminarily illustrate what is meant by reflective practice, participants are asked to go over the stages of the initial activity on personal epistemologies. They are subsequently encouraged to discuss, in pairs, the rationale, aims and purpose of that activity in terms of learning and teaching: What did the teacher want to achieve? Why? How did he achieve it? Could he have done it differently? How? Why? These questions give space to interesting debates on a number of issues, including the role of affect in the learning-teaching nexus; the importance of prior knowledge for effective learning (Hattie & Yates 2013); the notion of alignment as a heuristic device to encourage meaningful interaction in the classroom (Biggs & Tang 2011); and the crucial role played by feedback and feedforward (Boud & Molloy 2013).

This paves the way to the fourth stage of the workshop, in which participants are encouraged to apply the principles they have learned to their own disciplinary teaching.
**Stage D: from theory to disciplinary practice**

To achieve the aforementioned aim, the main features of Active Learning are identified and discussed through a brainstorming exercise. These are agreed on and written on the board for reference. Individuals are subsequently asked to either review a teaching session they already run in relation to these Active Learning principles, or think of a new one altogether. As they prepare, they are asked to think of a specific audience (level of the students and disciplinary field of study) and justify their choices in relation to both that specific context and the principles of Active Learning. At the end of the exercise, people are put in pairs to critique each other’s activities in relation to the agreed principles. The session ends with a plenary discussion of the practices which emerged during the task.

This part of the workshop is crucial for a number of reasons: first, it highlights the connectedness of task design to core aspects of communication not just in terms of audience composition (gender, age, ethnicity) but, crucially, in relation to previous and projected knowledge acquisition, learning needs and student expectations; second, it signals the importance of reflecting on and engaging with learner readiness to tackle given content and skills; third, it encourages reflections on the paramount role played by disciplinary structures and norms in task design; and, fourth, it assists with focused thinking on the importance of capturing all of the above in crisp, well-structured intended learning outcomes that can genuinely act as support and guidance in the learning process.

This stage is completed by the facilitator briefly illustrating a number of active learning techniques, including the role of pictures and videos in learning, buzz groups, reciprocal teaching and the use of personal narrative to motivate students.

**Stage E: from practice to theory and back again**

In this final stage, participants are asked to organize themselves again into groups and attempt their own group definitions of Active Learning. These are compared with each other and with canonical definitions, with a view to helping people to see how professional educationalists express themselves. This is an important step for participants to go through as they start their journey into the community of practice of scholar-educators, in addition to their own disciplinary one.

The workshop ends with feedback on the overall experience and the main points that people will take with them for their own future practice. Bibliographical references are then distributed and commented on.

**Reception and perceptions of the workshop**

Both within the UK and internationally, the workshop has been very well received for a number of reasons that have been regularly highlighted in the post-workshop feedback:

- Its modeling format: participants continuously comment on the fact that the most valuable assets of the workshop consist in both the facilitator modeling teaching informed by Active Learning principles and the reflections on these that subsequently follow. The delivery of the workshop gives participants a clear example of what Active Learning means while, through reflection, helping them to become consciously aware of the principles underpinning practice.
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- The clear relationship between theory and practice, where theory means both acquiring a critical capacity to theorize, in addition to engaging with a number of major educational theoretical frameworks and concepts. Participants appreciate the opportunity of arriving at their own theories of learning and teaching, first and foremost, before starting to engage with those of others. This is fully in line with Mezirow’s view of learning as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation for future action (Mezirow & Taylor 2009). Participants have often commented on the value of the integrative experience involving their own prior knowledge and personal epistemologies (Hofer & Pincher 2001) and new learning and understanding, in a continuous cycle of interpretation and re-interpretation of their own sense of pedagogical practice. The cyclical and integrative nature of the workshop between theory and practice allows participants to experiment with what Active Learning means as a transformative process.

- A strong emphasis not just on the “what” and “how” to teach but, crucially, on the “why” we teach or would prefer to teach in a certain way (Kreber 2004), and the similarities this may bear (or not) with more student-centered ways of doing so, especially in relation to the specific disciplinary frameworks within which they are embedded. Participants really appreciate the opportunity to discuss the application of Active Learning principles to their own practice and/or re-considering this in relation to the former.

- Finally, participants comment very favorably on their progressive understanding of pedagogy as the complex interfacing of cognition, intuition, thinking and affectivity (Immordino-Yang et al. 2015) which can help students to see the relevance of what they learn for their personal and professional life.

Taken as a whole, the workshop is valued as a rich and transforming experience that helps with both the understanding and practice of student-centered pedagogies, and their role in shaping the participants’ pedagogical roles, attitudes, values and overall profiles. The following comments are typical of what participants say about the workshop:

1. “I found it engrossing, exciting and genuinely transformational. I really appreciated the way that Professor Di Napoli’s talk demonstrated the principles that he was demonstrating, because I find it much easier to remember processes than facts. So I (actively) learnt that generating participation in a large group needs nothing more technological than a flipboard and a pen, and that seeing a list we generated as a group appear on the next slide, almost word for word, is a powerful way of validating a group’s knowledge base and creating group cohesion.”

2. “In the Active Learning module, the ice-breaker at the beginning of the session made the group more relaxed, and allowed me to work in relationship with others. This allowed us to exchange ideas more effectively, and I was able to learn from interaction with peers. My perceptions of teaching as a focus on facts shifted into a realization that it is a process of assimilation of understanding – that theory is slowly ascribed to experience rather than the other way around. The teacher acts as facilitator of the group. Learning can be achieved through use of non-verbal cues, and through being able to tell a good story. This was demonstrated when Professor Di Napoli spoke to us in fast incomprehensible words but then gave the same delivery much more slowly and with use of body language – it made me realize that much can be conveyed through body language and projection, and through our impressions of the teacher. It is through activation of both cognitive and affective networks that deep learning can take place, and the teacher creates the optimum conditions for this.”

3. “An important part of the first module was Roberto Di Napoli’s talk ‘What is Active Learning? From Practice to Theory (and back).’ I felt an excitement to utilise principles of active
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learning, such as making the session relevant to the learner creating links between existing knowledge to construct new ideas. The lecture was delivered using principles that promote active learning while teaching the principles of active learning. This was instrumental to changing my attitude toward teaching, as it showed that active learning is not imparting material but adapting frames of reference and promoting deep thought and understanding in your audience.”

In the case of Singapore, the following brief set of comments resonates with participants’ experience at St. George’s:

• “Practices what he preaches! All those ideas in action.”
• “Numerous table discussions. Engaging facilitator who encourages participants’ responses! Mini activities conducted. Facilitator values each contribution from participants.”
• “Demonstration of strategies by participants themselves. Very effective to learn about effective teaching strategies.”

Nevertheless, a question inevitably surfaces at this point: how can a workshop, however helpful, interesting and well-structured, help to change the educational and pedagogical culture of an institution? Clearly, a workshop by itself is not enough and needs to be integrated with a number of other initiatives, carefully embedded within a transparent and well-articulated philosophy of change, which can assist with “moving the needle.” A workshop can be a lever for change but, per se, it is not enough to effect change and innovation. An integrative approach to the overall educational culture of an institution is needed.

In the remainder of this chapter we shall first illustrate what St. George’s and the National University of Singapore are trying to do, painstakingly, to move the institutional culture toward a more integrated and principled student-centered culture.

A workshop as a lever of institutional change?

We conceive of integration as a framework which informs institutional decision-making and contains a philosophical, value-laden, conceptual core around which all institutional activities and structures revolve: as an “institutional architecture” (Trowler & Bamber 2005). At St. George’s, transformation is the guiding principle of the Education and Students Strategy and this is being pursued by the different academic and academic-related communities, and through the work done by the Centre for Innovation and Development of Education (CIDE). As described in a previous section, the latter is putting in place a series of integrated initiatives that act as cement in the pedagogical culture of the institution, and the workshop on Active Learning is foundational to them all.

Unlike St. George’s, the National University of Singapore (NUS) is a large, multidisciplinary institution. The university has 16 faculties and a medical school, with a total of 40,000 students and 4,000 members of faculty or adjuncts. NUS is a huge and complex organization. In this context, the workshop does not form a cornerstone of comprehensive pedagogical change as it is not an integral part of educational development at the institution, in part because of the greater complexity of the university, and in part because the first author, who designed and delivers the workshop, is not a member of staff. Nevertheless, having been run three times over the last 3 years, the workshop has had significant impact at the University.

The workshop is congruent with priorities at the National University of Singapore to advance educational practice that is informed by the learning sciences and underpinned by
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relevant scholarship. A key element of the institutional architecture that has been in place at the university to support this agenda is a newly reformed education-focused career pathway (Geertsema et al. 2018). Because of its commitment to good teaching, the university is committed to providing promotion opportunities for faculty who have developed a strength in the education part of their role. To recognize and reward such faculty, an alternative to the much more usual research-focused tenure track has been established. In order to progress through this track, the most fundamental requirement is for faculty to demonstrate evidence of positive impact on student learning. For more senior positions, educational leadership is expected, which is understood in this context as institutional influence on learning and teaching practices. In addition, it is possible to progress on the basis of demonstrating influence through contributions to educational knowledge, by means of pedagogical research. Such research is not a requirement of the track, but the university recognizes and will reward it if it can be linked to teaching practice. For the highest level of appointment, tenured professor, international leadership through global influence is required.

It is in this context that, in 2016 and 2018, the workshop was offered by the first author as a guest of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning, which runs academic professional development at the University. He was invited as the Centre’s Educator in Residence for 2016, a prestigious fellowship during which the invited scholar delivers a public lecture; offers workshops and roundtables for faculty members, students, and academic developers; and meets individuals and groups from various departments. Active Learning: From Practice to Theory, and Back was successfully offered as a workshop to members of the academic community at NUS during the residency. This evaluation of success is grounded not only on the positive feedback from participants through the regularly used survey, but because on the basis of this session a group of participants in the workshop invited the presenter to return to the university in 2018 as a Fellow of the residential College of Alice and Peter (CAPT). In 2018, he consequently visited the university and once again ran the workshop, both at the center and at CAPT.

The workshop, with its inductive, practice-oriented approach and strong theoretical underpinnings has very much resonated with participants. Indeed, it modeled exactly the type of focus on higher education learning and teaching the University seeks to foster, by working in an integrative way to link practice and theory. Since theory here is grounded in practice, the workshop opens up the possibility of emergent praxis, understood as “collective activity that combines moral purpose with political commitment and tactical skillfulness” (Räsänen 2008, p. 3). In this way, the workshop design has spurred local efforts to engage in renewal of academic work, thereby contributing to changes in organizational culture as participants were able to relate it to their practice, since it offered them “alternative frames of interpretation or narratives” (Räsänen 2008, p. 2; see Alvesson & Sveningsson 2016) that opened up possibilities of local action.

The ideas articulated and practiced in the workshop resonated with participants for the reasons mentioned in the earlier discussion of the Singapore context: Active Learning is an institutional priority in the drive toward lifelong learning and critical thinking to prepare students for the future. The workshop was especially helpful in providing participants with practical strategies grounded in educational theory and the learning sciences. By connecting scholarship with teaching practice and learning, the workshop both modeled good teaching practice and advanced the integrative agenda of the Centre and the College.

Conclusion: toward cultural change?

As we draw this chapter to a close, we return to the question of cultural change. Studies of organizational culture appear to confirm that it is very hard to change (Alvesson & Sveningsson
It is useful to distinguish between “grand technocratic projects” of cultural change, which involve a stepwise activity led by senior managers, and “everyday reframing” (Dee 2016, p. 55). The latter, in its recognition of people’s local sense making and the strong force of assumptions, connects with the tenets of Active Learning and with the design of the workshop that we are discussing here. The workshop aims to create an arena for reflecting on the meanings and purposes of education, rather than focusing on skills and top-down interventions only. It thereby enables the kind of mutual learning needed for cultural change and organizational learning (Dee 2016). This questioning of meaning and purposes, through reflection on practice underpinned by theory, helps to create the kind of “bottom-up agency (that) is needed to improve academic teaching” (Wilkesman 2016, p. 44).

We started by acknowledging the limited impact of a one-off workshop, however carefully designed and executed. In this respect, our two brief case examples are consciously contrastive in character: their difference demonstrates the crucial importance of context in education. In the first case, the workshop forms an integral and integrated part of the institutional fabric, whereas in the second case it does not, even though it has been impactful and well received. We can attribute this difference to various factors, and, among these, contextual ones are especially significant: the fact that we are dealing with different national contexts (the UK and Singapore), different types of institutions (small and specialized in healthcare versus large and comprehensive) and senior management’s attitudes to change. The institutional drivers that we discussed earlier in this chapter affect the degree to which the workshop can be an impactful force for change, as do the different institutional foci.

Despite these contextual differences, we agree with decades of research findings about educational development work that highlight factors that render it impactful, three of which we wish to underscore here (Pléschova et al. 2012, p. 17):

1. Well-designed, sustained programs of study rather than short, one-off workshops have an impact on teachers’ thinking and their conceptions of learning and teaching.
2. Learning and change require supportive contexts and, consequently, effective educational development involves creating cultures to encourage experimentation with student-centered curricula and teaching methods. Various levers for such culture change include incentives and building a shared language and understanding about student learning.
3. To effect meaningful change, it is imperative for teachers to discuss not only their teaching, for which a shared pedagogical language is needed, but also to discuss the evaluation results of their teaching that go beyond feedback from students.

These points resonate with our understanding of Active Learning as a conceptual framework that encourages interactions, integration and innovation based on informed reflections, feedback and collective knowledge and practice building. We argue that Active Learning can become the conduit for Active Organizational Learning. We need to draw on the tenets of Active Learning to connect with teachers’ values and beliefs and develop an institutional language that can transform values and beliefs about teaching and learning through active, practice-oriented and research-informed discussions, and forms of experimentation that integrate practice and theory. How might this happen?

Biesta (2010) supports approaches to pedagogy which open alternative possibilities for action not available when the focus is on “evidence-based best practice,” as the latter concerns the efficiency and effectiveness of the already existent (2010, p. 45). This is precisely what the workshop on Active Learning does through its reflective approach: it models learning by opening avenues for exploration through a focus not only on technical and normative changes, but through
fashioning a process which induces learning through reflections on practices and attitudes, with a view to inducing both attitudinal and behavioral changes. Active Learning creates a language and a conceptual glue through which organizational behaviors and actions can be understood and enacted for the flourishing of educational change at the institutional level.

To achieve this, we argue that a “conjoint authority relation” is needed within a higher education institution, one that mirrors the principles of Active Learning (Wilkesman 2016). This would involve a systemic approach to teaching that combines transactional, “top-down” governance – as exemplified in such policy initiatives as incentives and rewards for teaching – with a transformational, “bottom-up” form of governance to create opportunities and environments that are conducive for organizational learning, in that it encourages decision capacity on the ground as inspired by the tenets of student-centeredness and Active Learning. This interplay of transactional and transformational governance, with the dialogic feedback loops of the latter that provide members of the community with agency to innovate, might be termed an organizational performance of Active Learning. In following the tenets of Active Learning, the workshop that we have described and analyzed in this chapter has the potential not only to open up spaces for new ideas about teaching, but to create the conditions for establishing and nurturing a positive climate where teachers are focused on engaging students in the complex process of planning, executing, and reflecting on learning.

References

A workshop as a lever for change?


