

Engaged Literacy Learning: Strategies to Maximize Student Participation

by Dr. Kevin Feldman

Active participation of ALL students is absolutely essential to the success of every lesson; this is especially the case in today's diverse classrooms, with a range of learners and skill levels. A number of simple, yet powerful active learning strategies have been validated to assist teachers in maximizing students' engagement. In each strategy the teacher assumes the role of classroom director or "learning choreographer," ensuring to structure the task so that each student, regardless of their prior knowledge, is actively engaged. The motto in an active participation classroom is "learning is not a spectator sport—if it is worth doing, then we all need to do it!"

Choral or Whole Group Responding

Choral or whole group responding involves the teacher posing a question and the entire class answering in unison. Choral responding works well when the answers are short and identical, such as when reviewing sight words before story reading. Choral responding provides a safe environment for practicing new skills, focusing attention, and modeling language usage.

Tips for Choral or Whole Group Responding

1. Ask a question and tell students "think—don't blurt."
2. Provide thinking time (hold your hands up for younger children to signal "thinking time," no calling out answers.)
3. "Thumbs up when you know": Ask students to show you they are ready with the thumbs up signal.
4. If not all thumbs are up, scaffold by providing more information.
5. Give a signal (e.g. lower your hands) for everyone to respond.

The addition of "thumbs up when you know" is important because it allows every child to make their own learning connections without better-prepared students dominating the classroom interaction.

Whip Around the Classroom

The classroom whip around is a fun, engaging strategy that provides students the opportunity to practice summarization and oral recitation in a safe classroom environment. The whip around is particularly useful for encouraging students to identify key ideas, themes, and summary information at the end of a lesson or activity. Teachers can also modify the whip around by having students write a word or phrase on a sheet of paper and stand to show the class their response as the "wave" circulates around the classroom.

Tips for the Classroom Whip Around

1. Pose an open-ended summary type question (e.g. the most important thing we learned about ____ today was ____).
2. Provide thinking time—and model an example if needed (partner responses can be added to ensure all students have something to contribute).
3. Answers should be kept short and to the point (model this for students).
4. Start anywhere in class and whip around the room with students quickly sharing their answers—no discussion or comments.
5. Students have the right to pass.

Structured Partner Strategies

Perhaps the most flexible and well-researched set of active learning practices involves various forms of structured partner responding. In all partner strategies the teacher matches each student to an appropriate partner (generally matching high-performing students with middle-performing, middle-performing with

lower-performing students) and provides the student with a specific role for the activity. Structured partner responding works well across the educational spectrum, from kindergarten through graduate school classrooms and across curricular domains.

Taking a few minutes to teach your students to be excellent partners is essential to preparing them for success. Providing a direct model of what a good partner acts like is most helpful, especially for younger students.

Partner Social Skills

Three key social skills for a partner to have are:

1. Look—look at your partner.
2. Lean—lean toward your partner.
3. Whisper—use your “12-inch” voice.

Think–(Write) Pair–Share

“Think–(Write) Pair–Share” provides a useful strategy for engaging all students in literacy activities. The key to successful use of this strategy is in choosing a provocative, open-ended question (e.g. *Why do you suppose the author told us this now?*) coupled with adequate thinking time. It is often helpful to add a writing step (e.g. “*List at least three things we have learned so far about ___*”) during thinking time. Writing provides an overt indicator of what students are thinking as well as helps students to focus their attentions on specific issues of importance. Think–(Write) Pair–Share can be used before, during, and after reading to increase student engagement.

Tips for Think–(Write) Pair–Share

1. Pose an open-ended question (no single answer).
2. Students individually think of answers (useful to have older students write responses in a notebook/double-entry journal, etc.).
3. Designate students as a one or a two; direct ones to share answers for a minute, then reverse the process.
4. Teacher randomly calls on individuals to share with the class.

Tell–Help–Check

Periodic review is one of the hallmarks of effective instruction, and is especially critical for less prepared students. Tell–Help–Check offers an effective strategy to ensure that every student, including second language learners, is actively participating in the review process. This strategy works well when reviewing factual information that has discrete right and wrong answers.

Tips for Tell–Help–Check

1. Designate each student as a one or a two.
2. Pose a closed-ended question (one right answer).
3. Give thinking time.
4. Choose one partner to tell the other all they can recall about the topic/subject/question (encourage students to make educated guesses—tell them to “give it a go” if they’re not sure).
5. The remaining partner helps by adding anything their partner left out, correcting, elaborating, disagreeing agreeably, etc.
6. Both partners check (in the book, notes, overhead, etc.) and validate, correct, or elaborate/explain their answers.

Give One–Get One

Brainstorming is an important classroom activity with endless permutations. Give One–Get One provides an interesting brainstorming variation. Students are asked to write their ideas down, then given a chance to get up and move around the classroom in a structured manner. This activity holds learners accountable for a productive outcome in which everyone fully contributes.

Tips for Give One–Get One

1. Students brainstorm and create an individually written list based on a prompt by the teacher.
2. Draw a line after the final idea noted (limit the time to a few minutes).
3. At the teacher’s signal, students are invited to move around the class and get at least one additional idea to add to their list, while giving at least one idea from their list to classmates.

4. Students return to their seats, review their new list, and discuss with a partner.
5. Teacher debriefs with the whole class.

Heads Together Discussions

Lively discussion is a powerful way to build critical comprehension and elaborate ideas after students have read a common text. Heads Together offers teachers a simple, yet elegant alternative to traditional hand raising classroom discussions. It provides all students with access to critical information while making each student responsible for responding to the question at hand. Heads together increases student performance in content area discussions. It is often helpful to assign additional roles of “checker” and “discussion facilitator” to provide additional structure for the discussion. The checker simply checks to make sure that all group members can answer appropriately if called upon, while the discussion facilitator’s job ensures that all group members participate and share information.

Tips for Heads Together

1. Place students in heterogeneous teams of three or four (combine two pairs if using partners regularly).
2. Students number off (e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4).
3. Teacher poses a question that requires conversation and elaboration. Set a time limit for the discussion.
4. Teacher informs teams prior to discussion that one number will be randomly selected, and that one person will be accountable for sharing the groups answer.
5. Students put their heads together to find the answer.
6. Teacher randomly selects one number, and “lucky” students share answers with the class.

Instructional Practices That Hinder & Limit Active Engagement in Literacy Learning

A number of commonplace instructional tactics place unintended road blocks in the way of full participation by every student in literacy learning. Below are a few tips for avoiding such road blocks:

The Three “No’s” of Active Literacy Learning

1. No blurting out answers: do not allow precocious students to blurt out answers and dominate classroom discourse—instead, use think time plus choral and partner responses.
2. No hand raising during discussions: the same students tend to raise their hands over and over and dominate classroom discourse. Pose questions and use partner, group, and random individual responses.
3. No round robin reading: round robin reading only involves one student while most of the others are off-task or dreading their turn. Effective alternatives include:
 - Choral reading—everyone reads together “keep your voice with mine.”
 - Close reading—teacher reads, students follow along, teacher leaves out every seventh or tenth meaningful word, which students read chorally.
 - Silent reading—teacher or students pose a question, read a paragraph or section silently (“if you finish before I say ‘stop,’ go back and read it again please”) followed by partners/whole class discussion.



Dr. Kevin Feldman is the Director of Reading and Early Intervention with the Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE). His career in education spans thirty-one years. As the Director of Reading and Early Intervention for SCOE he develops, organizes, and monitors programs related to K-12 literacy and prevention of reading difficulties. He also serves as a Leadership Team Consultant to the California Reading and Literature Project and assists in the development and implementation of PreK-12 programs throughout California. To learn more about Dr. Feldman's work, please visit the SCOE web site (www.scoe.org) and click on The Reading Corner.