Instructional Strategy: Guided Notes
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What is it?
This strategy is intended to enhance student comprehension of reading assignments in preparation for active learning techniques. Students are provided with handouts that include basic content questions as well as practice problems and critical thought questions based on the assigned reading. Students may use the handout to identify important concepts as they take directed notes and answer questions as they read. Alternatively, students may answer the questions after completing the reading to determine how well they retained the material. Regardless of the approach, students are expected to complete the handout *before* class to help prepare them for the classroom activities.

Why use it?
This strategy promotes independent learning as well as accountability and responsibility on the part of the student. It incorporates essential elements of the learning cycle including practice and reflection. The handouts also save valuable lecture time which allows for the incorporation of active learning techniques in the classroom. Evidence suggests that student satisfaction and academic performance are significantly higher in classrooms that implement interactive techniques as compared to a traditional classroom.

How to use it?
This strategy is versatile as it can be used in a number of ways. I use it as a basis for a traditional lecture in conjunction with active learning techniques. My typical class format is as follows:
- Students work in small groups (3-4 individuals) to discuss questions from the handout;
- Any questions that remain unresolved within the small groups are written on a 3x5 card;
- After a brief period (~10-15 minutes), I collect the 3x5 cards from small groups and address the questions in a Q&A session with the entire class;
- I provide a mini-lecture to cover confusing concepts as well as additional content that expands on the material from the handout;
- I follow with an active learning technique (e.g., problem solving, case studies, etc.) that applies the concepts to practice problems or "real life" situations; and
- Before dismissing class, I ask students to individually complete a 3x5 card indicating any remaining questions.

How to implement it?
While flexible and dynamic, this strategy requires careful planning. Clear learning objectives are necessary as handouts and activities must be designed with specific goals in mind. Learning objectives may also require prioritization to ensure that essential concepts are addressed. It is also important to determine the concepts that students are able learn on their own as this material will form the basis of the handouts. Lastly, it is essential to explain the strategy to students, specifically, why it is being implemented. While most students appreciate the active learning experience, some students exhibit resistance to an alternative approach. Frequent reminders of the advantages to such an approach are highly recommended. A sense of adventure is also helpful!

References

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