REPORT

Mix it up

Creative strategies to get students into talking pairs in the university classroom

Simon Brownhill

Abstract

In recent years, 'the field of higher education ha[s] become increasingly interested in assessing traditional instruction practices (e.g., lectures) and modifying them towards more student-centred and active instructional approaches' (Kozanitis and Nenciovici 2023: 1377). Innovations in practice, such as talking pairs, are being embraced by instructors to advance their pedagogy and engage students more deeply in their learning. This report focuses its attention on the partners students talk to, the concern being that the quality of learning is affected if these are not changed regularly. To positively address this, a suite of creative strategies is helpfully 'pooled together' to help instructors get students into talking pairs, along with a recognition of associated practicalities. By *mixing it up*, instructors can effectively support the improved capabilities, attainment and learning of students in the university classroom.

Keywords

creative strategies, organisational ideas, paired talk, tertiary students, university classroom

For over 30 years, there has been a growing interest in active learning in higher education (Hartikainen et al. 2019). The expectation of institutions to 'produce skillful, problem solver, and competent graduates' (Sewagegn and Diale 2019: 31), coupled with broader economic and political changes, have resulted in tertiary providers looking for ways to be 'continuously

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developing, border-crossing, investigative and innovative' (Børte et al. 2023: 597), particularly in relation to teaching. Subsequently, traditional lectures and their effectiveness have become the subject of much scrutiny (Schmidt et al. 2015), with assertions being made that they promote 'less *active student involvement* in the learning process', 'reduced *depth of student thinking* inside the classroom', and 'lower levels of academic *achievement (learning)* and academic *performance (grades)*' (Cuseo 2007: 2; original emphasis). Understandably, a wealth of institutions is turning to contemporary instructional practices which require students to be 'active agents throughout the educational process' (Martel and García 2022: 2). Rooted in constructivist learning which 'moves from experience to knowledge' (Cooperstein and Kocevar-Weidinger 2004: 141), this pedagogical shift is fuelled by a multiplicity of empirical studies that support the value of active learning in tertiary environments, with findings demonstrating 'enhanced student outcomes (for example in motivation, learning, enjoyment)' and 'enhanced [student] retention of information over the long term' (Fields et al. 2021: 2). In light of this, institutional policies, particularly in Europe, are being encouraged to 'steer towards promoting active learning' (Christersson et al. 2019: 6), empowering instructors via staff training on active learning as part of their continuous professional development.

To increase the 'transparency and reproducibility of [quality] teaching practices' in the tertiary sector (Driessen et al. 2020: 1), specificity is required when using the term 'active learning'. Sadly, no universal definition of the term exists. In the context of college and university classrooms, Charles Bonwell and James Eison offer a valuable explanation:

> Active learning suggests that students must do more than just listen: They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most important, to be actively involved, students must engage in… higher-order thinking tasks…. Within this context, it is proposed that strategies promoting active learning be defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing (1991: 2).

Rodney Carr and colleagues (2015) build on this, offering a broader understanding of active learning by suggesting it involves 'participating in a community-based project as part of a course, working with other students outside of class on assignments, discussing ideas from a course with others outside the class, and tutoring peers' (Ribeiro-Silva et al. 2022: 2). What unifies the above is the notion of 'doing'. The supplemental materials of

Emily Driessen and colleagues (2020: 1) offer an 'Active-Learning Strategy Guide that defines 300+ active-learning strategies', reinforcing the wealth of 'doing' (pedagogical) ideas that are available for instructors to embrace as part of their practice. One key active learning strategy of particular interest to this report is student talk, principally because it can promote desirable higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation and creation (Krathwohl 2002; Radebe and Mushayikwa 2023), especially when utilised as a partner activity (Ryan 2021). A diverse range of talking strategies is commonly deployed in primary and secondary school contexts – think talking partners (Kotler et al. 2002) and the Think-Pair-Share strategy (Peter and Nwanneka 2021; see Cooper et al. (2021) for alternatives to the Share portion) – whereas at the university level, paired oral interactions can be typically characterised by the Turn and Talk routine described by Alicia Stewart and Elizabeth Swanson (2019: 3): 'Students are provided with a short prompt to discuss content or a skill. Students turn to their predetermined partner and answer the prompt while their partner listens. Then, the partners switch roles to allow the second student to address the prompt'.

Of concern to this report is not the formulaic approach described above – this could be addressed with reference to the adapted work of Frank Lyman (2003) and Elizabeth Mulvahill (2019) – but more who students are conversing with when engaged in paired talk. Gretchen Brion-Meisels (2023) asserts that it is 'easy for students to get into a routine of where they sit and [thus] who they talk to. While this might build a sense of familiarity among some students, it naturally limits the sharing of perspectives and building of community among all.' Indeed, whilst talking to the same people can help to form reciprocal friendships (Faur and Laursen 2022) and support student mental health, there is a danger that paired verbal response work can become stale and academically unproductive if the pairings are not regularly changed. In an effort to counter this, I argue that there is a need to *mix it up*.

The need to *mix it up*: An explanation

In simple terms, *mix it up* refers to getting students to find someone new to talk to in the university classroom. As opposed to asking them to 'find someone new' and hope that this approach will work (this is rarely effective as students typically prefer to stay in their 'comfort zone' and talk to the person next to them), Aviva Levin (2021) argues that instructors need

to take 'responsibility to give [students] opportunities and encouragement to meet and work with new people'. To achieve this, Tolulope Noah (2019) asserts that instructors need to design 'a strategy to group students [as this] reduces much of the stress in class students face when asked to "pair up"…. This helps them to meet peers, hear diverse perspectives, and not worry about exclusion'. I believe this strategy can be developed with reference to a suite of creative strategies that instructors can select from to pair their students up for 'duo discussion' (my words).

Categories of creative *mix it up* strategies

The suggestions offered in this report are drawn from my extensive professional practice as an instructor at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level. Organised into three main categories, the first two are offered in grid form, Table 1 offering pairing strategies that require no resources, with Table 2 recognising the value of simple, purchasable resources which can be used to *mix up* students for paired talk. Whilst the strategy descriptions promote a match between two entities (for example, the same letter of the alphabet on two separate index cards), an effective alternative is to pair students up by difference (for example, different countries of birth).

Table 1. Creative *mix it up* strategies to pair students that do not require any resources

Finger digits – pair students by the similar number of digits personally chosen and held up/not shown on one hand.	*Sizes* – pair students by similar hand size (span), hat size, or shoe size (same shoe colour is an alternative).	*Names* – pair students by the same initial letter in their first name or by the number of letters in their family name.
Birthday details – pair students by matching their birth month, or birth date (not year or age as students may wish to keep this information private).	*Matching…* – pair students by matching hair colour/length/style/cut, eye/sock colour, or make of their digital device (phone, laptop or tablet).	*Favourite…* – pair students by their favourite season, favourite primary/secondary colour, or favourite meal of the day.
Fasteners – pair students by a similar fastening found on an item of their clothing, for example zips, studs, buckles (belts), Velcro, or laces.	*Hands, arms and legs* – pair students by their dominant writing hand or by folded arm/leg (the right or left forearm/leg on top).	*Colour pinch* – pair students by 'pinching a colour' (holding on to an item of clothing worn and matching the colour).

Table 2. Creative *mix it up* strategies to pair students that require simple, purchasable resources

Scrabble tiles – pair students by tile letter or letter value.	*Bingo balls* – pair students by number (purchased or self-made).	*Paper clips* – pair students by size or colour (if plastic coated).
Playing cards – pair students by suit, suit colour, or card value. Alternatives include number, picture, and question and answer cards.	*Pens* – pair students by colour, make, or type (for example, highlighter, marker and gel). Alternatives include crayons, coloured pencils, and brushes.	*Pipe cleaners* – pair students by colour or length (if cut). Alternatives include plastic pegs, spring clamps, and sealing bag clips.
Ribbons – pair students by colour or fabric length (pre-cut). Alternatives include string, lace, raffia (eco-friendly), and strips of paper.	*Sweets (wrapped)* – pair students by the wrapping colour, size, shape, or make. Note: avoid the handling of sweets by students who have nut allergies.	*Buttons* – pair students by size, shape, texture, or composition (material). Alternatives include coins and counters (e.g., the game Tiddlywinks).

The third and final category capitalises on readily available digital/online resources which instructors can use to pair up students for talk, examples of which include:

- Applications (apps): *Team Shake* and Group Maker (*ClassDojo*).
- Websites: *Random Name Picker*,[1] *Random Student Generator*,[2] and *Wheel of Names*.[3]

The practicalities of mixing up students for paired talk

Any attempt to *mix up* students requires instructors to be mindful of a number of practicalities. One consideration relates to how to physically distribute and collect in/store tangible pairing resources (as per Table 2). I personally advocate the use of opaque food bags, recyclable boxes, and/or clean plastic trays/tubs. Another consideration is linked to timing as there is a necessity for instructors to plan when they are going to distribute tangible pairing resources to prevent this 'eating' into valuable learning and teaching time. I advocate initiating the distribution just before whole group taught input, ensuring that sufficient time is given for students to randomly choose an item ('No peeking!') before they are needed, making sure that there are enough resources for all students. It is recognised that it is easier

to *mix up* students when the group size is manageable, for example, a maximum of 50. In a large lecture hall with 150+ students, pairing students *is* indeed possible as students can talk to a peer who is in front/behind/diagonally opposite to where they are sat (adapted from Simon Brownhill 2023). Student movement in the learning space can be hindered if tables and chairs are fixed to the floor or offer little space for safe navigation – where this is an issue, instructors are encouraged to be creative and use alternative available spaces to *mix up* students for paired talk, for example, the classroom corridor, the gymnasium, or the quad.

Concluding comments

This report serves as an important attempt to help instructors creatively pair up their students in the university classroom to reduce the risk of learners always talking to the same individuals. By embracing the identified categories and associated strategies, instructors can work to ensure that by the end of a taught unit/module 'every student has worked with every other classmate…which promotes a strong classroom community and helps students feel more comfortable participating' in paired talk opportunities (Reid 2019). I argue that the ideas offered in this report can be utilised by instructors across the social sciences, especially where paired talk is being embraced as part of their active learning arsenal. The physical act of mixing students up (getting students who are able to stand and move around the learning space) also makes a small but positive contribution to the implementation of *physically active learning*, which Andy Daly-Smith and colleagues (2020) argue is essential for 'national education and health policies' in England to embrace, especially when students engage in student talk out of their seats (see Brownhill 2023). Admittedly, the *mixing up* of students into talking pairs requires time for planning (when to distribute/collect in the resources) and careful instruction (accommodating student movement into pairs in the learning space; ensuring that students with a physical disability are not expected to move into their pair, their non-disabled peer moving towards them instead). However, when established as an integral practice, the resulting effects of *mix it up* can be extremely positive, providing 'opportunities for [all] students to get to know each other, encounter different perspectives, and learn from one another' (Noah 2019).

Simon Brownhill is a Senior Lecturer of Education (Teaching and Learning) at the School of Education, University of Bristol. Specialising in pedagogy, he teaches on the MSc Education programme and supervises doctoral students (EdD and PhD). His varied research and writing interests include supporting and training adult learners, children's writing (fiction and non-fiction), effective behaviour management in the classroom (3–11), men who work in the Early Years (0–8), self-reflection, and creative assessment. He is co-author of the award-winning book *Men in Early Years Settings: Building a Mixed Gender Workforce* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019).
Email: simon.brownhill@bristol.ac.uk; ORCID: 0000-0001-9155-5252

Notes

1. https://www.flippity.net/
2. https://www.transum.org/software/RandomStudents/
3. https://wheelofnames.com/

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