

Lecture to Active Learning

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Introduction

To lecture or not to lecture, that is the question. This might not be exactly how Shakespeare phrased it, but that is the question that confronts university faculty on a daily basis. With the constant conversations about how to best present and transmit information to students, the question is how to take a class that is currently all lecture and make the transition to more engaged and active teaching.

At the Daniels School of Business, the business law course is a required course for six of the eight undergraduate majors. It is a stand-alone course that does not build to another course, nor is it a prerequisite. Thus, for many students it is a course they dread, but must take either to move from pre-major into a major or to graduate. Students will take it at any point in their academic journey from first semester to last semester prior to graduation with the majority taking it during the second or third year. In addition, most sections contain 55 to 70 students making them larger than a seminar, but not a truly large lecture.

Prior to the redesign described here, the student experience fluctuated dramatically based on the instructor. The content and assessments varied dramatically and students were well aware of the variations. The course has been taught by full time faculty and part time adjuncts. Currently it is taught primarily by full time clinical faculty and staff lecturers.

Is it possible to make a lecture class more active?

As an attorney who became a professor, I actively have sought opportunities to engage with the teaching and learning experts at my institution as teaching has become my vocation. Through the training opportunities I was continuously challenged to consider how to redesign my courses to be more active.

My first response? Was it even possible?

That was the question that used to weigh me down anytime I gathered with master faculty at Purdue University. I aspired to be a top professor, one who could keep students engaged AND help them learn content, but I wasn't sure how to transform a class I called *Law School in a Semester* into any form of engaged learning. The more I considered the challenge, the more I determined I to try. There had to be a way, and I committed to find it.

I have a deep desire to be an excellent teacher and engage my students in the content. At the same time, I must cover chapters of content in this core course to meet the learning objectives of our course. We take an aggressive approach that as I've reviewed syllabuses from other business schools, I've realized covers more material than is found at many programs.

Turning a lecture-based class into a more student-focused, active-learning environment can be

accomplished, but takes some thoughtful planning. In this session, you'll learn quick tips and strategies to take what you're already teaching and turn it into activities that connect the material to the real world and your students' lives. We will build in quick bursts to generate ideas for your specific class. While each teacher and course are unique, if I could transform law school in a semester from a dreaded course to students' favorite, you can do it with your course, too.

Learning Objectives:

- 1) Analyze strategies for incorporating active learning in quick bursts in your course.
- 2) Create a plan to implement small changes that build over time into a larger intervention that impacts student learning.
- 3) Formulate a first step for your course.

Strategies for incorporating active learning in quick bursts in your course.

Every course covers years' worth of material. We always feel the pressure to teach more than we have time to cover. So how can we move forward in a way that allows us to cover the required material with integrity while also inviting students more deeply into the process? In their book Dynamic Lecturing: Research-Based Strategies to Enhance Lecture Effectiveness, Christine Harrington and Todd Zakrajsek² define interactive lectures as "a combination of lecturing and brief, active learning opportunities." The business simulation I describe here is designed to be one piece of creating an interactive learning environment. Here's how I approached it:

1) Head into class with an eye to experimentation.

Every class becomes an opportunity to experiment. Periodically across each semester I would enter class with the intention to adopt a "spontaneous" in-class activity. Then I would take notes on what worked and turn it into an activity I could replicate the next semester. One time it would be asking students to think about a concept that confused them from the last class, and then in groups address work in teams to answer those. Then each team would have 60-90 seconds to teach it to the rest of the class. Another time it might be inviting students to hunt for examples of the types of torts and sharing those in class. Over the course of several semesters, I built a repertoire of a dozen activities. This means approximately one designed in class activity per week.

2) Collect the tested exercises and compile them into a larger simulation.

Over the course of semesters, I realized these individual exercises if compiled could become a larger, coordinated portfolio project. For this to work, you have to take the time after each experiment to capture it and make notes on what worked and how to improve it next time. This became the foundation for the simulation that has been adopted in all sections of the core course I coordinate. I began the process of turning these individual activities into a combined sequence that students would do in teams across the semester in what has become the Business Simulation. This gives students an opportunity to discover the intersection of law and business by bringing it to life through application.

² Christine Harrington & Todd Zakrajsek, Dynamic Lecturing: Research-Based Strategies to Enhance Lecture Effectiveness, 31 (2017).

A key part of my teaching philosophy is that I want students to understand how the law applies to students both today and in their future careers. Otherwise, the law can feel disjointed and disconnected from what they are studying. The simulation gives specific opportunities to apply the law they are learning in our core business law course to companies they create. In summary through the simulation, students:

- Work in teams to collaborate on the creation of a company. They start by developing team rules and guidelines, an important part of learning how to work as a team. This is key to communication and the group projects that will follow students throughout the business curriculum.
- Have autonomy to create a company of their choosing. It becomes quite the collection of everything from dog walking to coffee shops to food trucks and luxury car rentals. They decide where the business will be located, which impacts the law applied in future assignments. We evaluate the different types of entities and the advantages and disadvantages of each.
- Work through a corporate ethics statement and stakeholder analysis. They evaluate how their product or service could cause harm and how to guard against that. They consider the values that will govern the actions of the company and its agents.
- Complete the only individual portion of the simulation, a personal ethics statement, which challenges each student to consider individual values that will serve as guardrails to their future behavior. It also invites them to consider why these values matter to them and how to incorporate these for future behavior and decisions.
- Flow into exercises related to real property, employment law, insurance and many more areas.
- Complete activities through the life cycle of the business until we kill it in bankruptcy.

3) Be willing to rethink and redesign your course.

A key element of the success of this adaptation became a willingness to do a wholesale redesign of the course that moved away from the way it had been taught and the organization of the textbook. The core idea became thinking about the design of the course around the life cycle of a business. It makes so much sense, but isn't how the textbook is organized or the course had been taught.

I worked with three other faculty (one full-time and two part-time) through a week-long curriculum sprint to coordinate and get consensus on the redesign of the syllabus and course design. This redesign occurred through a program facilitated at Purdue in summer 2020, when I also had to consider how to teach the course in a hybrid fashion for at least the Fall 2020 semester when I would have half of my class in person on any given day. This became a hidden opportunity because I created short pre-lecture videos to convey vocabulary and core content ahead of class time. Designed to be watched or listened to in short 10 minute (give or take)

bursts, these videos had the unintended benefit of providing pockets in-class time to use for in-class activities.

At the time, I didn't know how important the time invested in the collaborative redesign would be, because I planned to continue using the Business Simulation in my sections only.

4) Mentoring Faculty: The Simulation streamlines in-class activities for faculty, facilitating mentoring new faculty and adjuncts.

As a result of the COVID pandemic, we had 100% turnover in our adjuncts, and I found myself training six new adjuncts in Spring 2021. During the spring I finetuned the simulation while I was teaching, and in Fall 2021 I planned to roll out the simulation as a full package in my sections alone, however, the adjuncts didn't want to wait, so all sections I coordinate began using the simulations.

Having the simulation and its in-class activities developed made it easier to help adjuncts step into classrooms and develop as faculty. As part of a larger approach to mentoring them in the classroom, I could hand them the pre-developed set of exercises to implement immediately. Then together we have tweaked the instructions and use. Over time I've added additional activities such as drafting contracts, but it's from the adjuncts that I've gained the idea to have the student teams negotiate the terms of the buy/sell contract. Each team then drafts its own contract, but the collaboration with the adjuncts and now full-time faculty has been fun and added value. It's been a great tool to help develop new faculty and allow them focus on their teaching and the content while giving them a ready-made package of activities that apply the key concepts of the content and show students how the law interacts with and impacts business.

5) Develop an Attitude of Continuous Innovation

As mentioned above, this is a living simulation. Each semester I evaluate what worked, where teams have questions, what question or prompt I want to add to deepen student understanding, etc. I also consider if there are additional activities I can add or enhance. Last semester it was an expanded corporate governance section. Next semester it could be a revised UCC application.

6) The Business Simulation is Part of a Larger Course, not the Course

The simulation is 175 points out of a 1,000-point course. Five hundred points come from eleven quizzes (each worth 50 points, with lowest quiz score dropped) and another 200 from the final. It is the equivalent of three and a half quizzes and almost equivalent to the final. Much of the simulation will be worked on in the class, but not all of it. At times, student teams will need to meet outside class to complete assignments, but we do provide some time in class for many of the activities. It is a great way to keep energy up, especially during power hours.

Because students work in teams, I have collaborated with our teaching and learning

team to develop a quiz function inside Brightspace, the learning management tool we use at Purdue, for students to provide feedback on how the teams are functioning at two points in the semester.

They also complete a team contract at the beginning of the semester to establish clear rules and set standards from the beginning of their work together. The result has been few teams requesting assistance, but we have a mechanism for them to let us know that there is a problem while there is time to fix it.

7) Build Autonomy, Belonging, and Competence in the Content

The simulation is intentionally designed to provide students with mechanisms to build autonomy, belonging and competence. The use of autonomy was outlined above. The student teams help create pockets of community and belonging inside the classroom. In their book Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College,³ Peter Felten and Leo M. Lambert discuss the importance of professor to student relationships by also student to student relationships in the classroom. The simulation is one of the tools I utilize to build student to student connection. When coupled with in-class case work, students rarely go a class period without talking with each other as well as with me.⁴ More important, the students also have multiple opportunities to build competence in the course content in a way that takes stale vocabulary and turns it into core stories and concepts. In a sense they are creating their own case study and building competence in the content through the process.⁵ Several of the assignments at the end of the semester are intentionally designed to prepare the students for the final.

Next Steps

When I have time, the next steps will be adding variables and complexity. Great, you think you have hired independent contractors. Now X happened. How does that change how the company responds? How the law applies? Etc.? However, I haven't had the chance to do that. Then I would also like to incorporate the content from the simulation into the quizzes and final to ensure that all students have an incentive to work on all parts and not just rely on their classmates to complete all elements.

Conclusion

A business simulation, or something similar, can be used to turn a lecture-based class into a more active, engaged classroom. Start small. Play with one activity. See how it goes and tweak it. Then adjust and add another activity. At the end of a couple semesters, you too may be able to build a cohesive simulation that can be used across a semester. At a minimum you will have engaged your student in learning in a way that will benefit them... and you.

³ Peter Felten & Leo M. Lambert, Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College 91-95 (2020).

⁴ I also utilize tools like games in the minutes prior to class to engage students in

working collaboratively or in small groups to solve things like wordle, worldle, tradle, nerdle, etc. It's another great way to get students talking rather than on their devices in the moments prior to class.

⁵ Christine Harrington & Todd Zakrajsek, Dynamic Lecturing: Research-Based Strategies to Enhance Lecture Effectiveness, 92-93 (2017); Todd D. Zakrajsek & Linda B. Nilson, Teaching at Its Best 15th Ed., 225-232 (2023).
