Responsive Classroom Approach to Active Teaching

What Is Active Teaching?

Active teaching is a straightforward, developmentally appropriate strategy for delivering active instruction to middle school students.

During the active teaching portion of a lesson, the teacher is responsible for presenting, explaining, illustrating, and demonstrating content in a way that enables students to meet a learning objective—one that clearly describes what students should know, understand, and be able to do.

Although lecturing while students take notes is a common strategy for teaching, more effective strategies for middle school students are those that play to their developmental strengths and needs for activity, social interaction, and fun.

Three Phases of the Responsive Classroom Approach to Active Teaching:

- Phase 1: Teach and Model
- Phase 2: Student Collaboration
- Phase 3: Facilitate Reflection
Phase 1: Teach and Model

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Graphic organizers</th>
<th>Physical models</th>
<th>Mental Images</th>
<th>Pictures, Pictographs, and Ideographs</th>
<th>Kinesthetic Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A graphic organizer is a visual tool students can use to express their thinking and knowledge, grasp of concepts and ideas, and understanding of the relationships among them.</td>
<td>Creating a physical model enables students to engage in hands-on learning. Students create concrete representations of what they’re learning or use computer-generated models or simulations, which helps them form stronger mental images of this knowledge.</td>
<td>When students are given opportunities to develop pictures in their minds, such as by guided visualization and guided imagery, they can better solidify their learning. Students can do this by incorporating their five senses and emotions to generate a picture in their minds of content and skills being learned.</td>
<td>When students engage in drawing, painting, and using technology (tablets, laptops, whiteboards), they can create their own pictures to represent their knowledge and understanding.</td>
<td>Activities that allow students to move and use their senses helps them solidify their learning by creating strong mental images based on these physical experiences.</td>
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| Language Arts | Science | Math | Social Studies | | |
|--------------|---------|------|---------------|| |
| • Cause and Effect Cycle | • Models of abstract concepts in literature | • Pattern blocks, tiles, and other math manipulatives | • Maps | | |
| • Compare/Contrast | • Pizza wheels of main ideas or character traits | • Geoboards, geometric solids | • Foldables | | |
| • Flow Chart | • Flash cards of vocabulary or spelling words for English language learners | • Dice | • Board games | | |
| • Text-to-Self Connections | • Model of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Maps | | |
| • Text-to-Text Connections | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Foldables | | |
| • Text-to-World Connections | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Board games | | |
| • Bridge Map | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Maps | | |
| • Word Web or Mind Map | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Foldables | | |
| • T-chart | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Board games | | |
| • Five W’s | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Maps | | |
| • Goal-Setting | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Foldables | | |
| • KWL | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Board games | | |
| • Venn Diagram | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Maps | | |
| • Brace Map/Parts to Whole | • Models of a skeleton or other anatomical models | • Models of atomic structure or molecules | • Foldables | | |

| • Guided Think-Pair-Shares | • Infographics | • Icons and symbols | • Interactive learning structures that involve movement, such as Maître d’ and Swap Meet | | |
| • Describing icons, pictures, and photos | • Illustrations, sketches, drawings, portraits | • Collages | • Demonstrations, such as Fishbowl | | |
| • Interactive Modeling lessons | • Explaining symbols | • Drawings | • Human models, such as a three-person model of the digestive system (or any other body system) | | |
| • Making concept maps | • Making sketches | • Comics and graphic novels | • Physical representations of characters and events from literature or history | | |
| • Describing physical sensations as emotions | • Describing physical sensations to promote memories of specific events | • Photos | • Movements associated with reading, such as the brain break The Fidget Family | | |
| • Using mnemonic/associative devices | • Using senses to imagine places, events, people | • Videos | • Curriculum-related brain breaks that involve movement, such as Human Number Line and Evolution | | |
| • Creating analogies | • Visualizing concepts and characters from books | • Charts | • Role-plays | | |
| • Using senses to imagine places, events, people | • Completing cloze sentences | • Graphs | • Charades, such as acting out vocabulary words, key concepts, characters and historical figures, or events | |
## Phase 2: Student Collaboration

Student collaboration gives students the opportunity to come together by thinking and talking to each other about key points they noticed during the teach and model phase.

### Three Key Strategies for Student Collaboration

<table>
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<th>Provide a structure for students’ collaborative conversations</th>
<th>Jump-start students’ thinking with questions or sentence stems</th>
<th>Reminding language</th>
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| • For pairs—Think-Pair-Share, Think-Write-Pair-Share, AM/PM Partners, Swap Meet, Walk and Talk | • **Question:** In what ways do these parts work together? In what ways are they distinct?  
• **Sentence stem:** When I think of [example, constructing a five-paragraph essay], I imagine the parts as ________.
• **Question:** What are some similarities and differences between these categories, and do you see a different way to categorize these items?  
• **Sentence stem:** What I noticed that these categories of [example, software features] had in common was ________.
• **Question:** How should someone decide which of these solutions to try in different situations?  
• **Sentence stem:** I can imagine how ________ would solve the problem if ________ but not if ________.
| • Remind students of the expectations for small group learning.  
• Refocus students and keep them on track during conversation. |
**Phase 3: Facilitate Reflection**

Teacher-facilitated reflection helps ensure that students make meaning of their learning by thinking about how they experienced that learning.

- **Reflection allows us to make sense of new information.**
- **Reflection is not the same as recounting or restating.**
- **Teachers use prompts and questions to foster fruitful reflection.**

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<tr>
<th>Three types of prompts that help students focus on the specific goals of reflection, with examples of how a teacher might use them:</th>
<th>Three types of reflection questions help students to:</th>
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</table>
| **Discussion activities**—To facilitate student reflection on taking responsibility for their learning, a teacher could have students do an inside-outside circle discussion of what they did to contribute to their own learning today or what they would do differently next time to learn even more. | **1. Become more aware of how they learn.**  
➤ What skills or strategies did you use to help you learn the content?  
➤ What do you believe the teacher could have done differently to help you meet this objective more easily? |
| **Writing activities**—To help students reflect on the strategies they used to help them learn a difficult concept, a teacher could prompt them to write, on their own or with a partner, a list, paragraph, or journal entry about their strategies and then invite the class to popcorn share, if appropriate. | **2. Take more responsibility for their learning.**  
➤ If you could do this over, what would you do differently to improve your performance?  
➤ Which aspects of your efforts do you think contributed the most to your success in meeting the objective? |
| **Art activities**—A teacher could prompt students to think about, doodle (draw), or pair-share an image that represents the growth in their learning. | **3. See growth in their learning.**  
➤ How can you prove that you met the learning objective? What evidence do you have to support your response? |
Teacher Actions in Student Practice

For student practice to be most effective, teachers need to take three key actions:

1. Remind students of the learning objective
2. Structure and focus meaningful practice
3. Use formative assessments to determine readiness

These three actions are not necessarily sequential; teachers can use them in a fluid way. Just as a painter dips into a palette of colors to create a successful painting, teachers dip into these teacher actions as needed to ensure that every student has a successful practice session.
1. Remind Students of the Learning Objective

Help Students Reconnect to the Objective

It’s important to reconnect students to the learning objective before they begin to practice.

For example, seventh grade English language arts teacher Ms. Lopez is teaching a lesson on character analysis. As the class moves into the student practice portion of the lesson, she says, “Remember, our learning objective is to understand static versus dynamic characters and to see how characters fit with their environment.”

Use Envisioning Language

To promote the growth mindset that is so important if students are to master new challenges, use language that presents a clear and engaging picture of what is possible for students and that elevates practice over performance.

For example, Ms. Lopez says, “With practice, you’ll get better at analyzing characters, and you may even begin to understand the real characters in your life with greater insight. Remember, we’re just practicing now. This isn’t for a grade. This practice is just meant to help you get better and better at this skill.”

Avoid Grading Students During Student Practice

Although student practice is an opportunity for students to react to our active teaching, it is not the time to put a final stamp on their efforts in the form of a grade. Grading students’ early efforts during student practice may result in their forming fixed-ability mindsets.

Instead, give students opportunities to “play around” with the new content. Even formative assessments done during student practice are intended only to inform our decision-making about what supports students may need: Should we stop and reteach something? Would an anchor chart help students solidify their learning?

Examples of Reminders

Think for a minute before you begin practicing: What are you learning to do?

What did we say we’re going to learn to do through this lesson?

Remember, the reason you are practicing is ___________.

What skills (or content) might help you be successful during this work?

Do you remember when we __________?
2. Structure and Focus Meaningful Practice

Use Reinforcing Language
Because students build on their strengths, it’s important to observe and name what students do well during their practice sessions. We can use reinforcing language to recognize students’ successful use of skills, display of positive attitudes, and choice of productive work processes or strategies. By doing so, we provide students with useful, positive feedback that also expresses genuine appreciation and respect for their efforts.

Structure the Practice for Deeper Engagement
In order for students to make academic gains, they need to be invested in the work they’re doing. During student practice, we need to ensure all students are engaged in the practice by giving them meaningful tasks, ranging from working on a hands-on activity in pairs to participating in interactive learning structures and small group learning experiences. The structure we choose can provide many benefits for our students, including:

- Positive risk-taking
- Independence
- Collaboration
- Enjoyment

When students are provided with opportunities to engage with their academics in a safe, supported way, they’re more likely to take risks in their learning. When students collaborate with classmates, they’re able to problem-solve and experiment together, leading them to a deeper understanding of the content or skill. During student practice, the teacher is still there to guide and help facilitate, but students have a sense of independence as they build their knowledge base.

We also want to ensure that student practice is meaningful and enjoyable. Student practice should go beyond pencil and paper work. We know play and learning are deeply connected, and that playful learning is appropriate for middle school students. That does not imply student practice should be all “fun and games,” but it does mean the practice can be engaging and interesting.

Ms. Lopez, for example, challenges each small group to come to consensus on one static character and one dynamic character in their book and then complete a graphic organizer showing their consensus. Next, she has the whole class do a Stay and Stray interactive learning structure, with one group member presenting the group’s ideas to classmates who come over to their table. The high degree of social interaction, movement, and creativity Ms. Lopez sets up makes this practice enjoyable and interesting for these young adolescent students.
3. Use Formative Assessments to Assess Readiness

Use Formative Assessments

Before moving on to independent practice, use formative assessments to determine where each student is in their level of readiness for that practice. Formative assessments empower teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of their instructional delivery and make informed, confident decisions about whether one, some, or all students need reteaching or are sufficiently prepared to be released to independent work.

Formative assessment can take many forms:

**Hand Signals**
- Thumbs up
- Fist to five
- Need more time

**Teacher Observations**
- Walk around room and observe
- Check in with small groups
- Check in with individuals

**Quizzes/Written Assessments**
- Likert scales
- Foggiest point/clearest point
- 3-2-1
- Short answer
- Multiple choice
- Matching
- True-false

**Self-Assessment**
- Journal entry
- Exit tickets
- Now I know

**Oral Responses**
- One-word (or one-sentence) summary
- Foggiest point/clearest point

**Partner/Small Group Interactions**
- Tic-Tac-Toe or Think-Tac-Toe
- Think, Write, Pair, Share
- Four Corners
**Ask Diagnostic Questions**

Diagnostic questions enable the teacher to check whether students have accurate curriculum knowledge and understanding or can do what was presented to them during active teaching.

A vague or incorrect answer is a key piece of data for teachers, enabling them to see and correct students’ errors in thinking. Even a correct answer can be used to quickly assess the depth of a student’s understanding, for example, by asking the student to supply reasons and evidence for the answer. This kind of assessment and course correction are vital to keeping student practice meaningful.

- **If a student gives the correct answer**—Seek evidence for why the student got it right. Ask the student to support his or her answer. For example:
  - How do you know that?
  - Why do you think that is so?
  - What led you to think that?
  - Did something you learned in another lesson (class, time) lead you to that answer?
  - Can you think of another example of this?
  - When would this answer apply? Always, or only under certain circumstances or conditions?

- **If a student gives a vague answer**—Ask a follow-up question to help the student provide a more direct, firm response. For example:
  - Say more about that.
  - Can you share another example with me?
  - Explain what you mean by . . .

- **If a student gives an incorrect answer**—Follow up with that student to diagnose the fundamental errors in thinking or misconceptions that the student has and correct those. Consider the following scenario.