

## Resource Guide

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### Reducing Student Anxiety during in class Active Learning

Many people have feelings of anxiousness, fear and worry as a response to everyday situations that are a normal part of life; however, these feelings can be severe and negatively impact the day-to-day lives of students in our classrooms. The presence of anxiety in college students has increased over the years with a 2022 report showing 65% of students reporting feelings of anxiety (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2023). Moderate levels of anxiety in a classroom can be motivating to individuals, but high levels are almost always detrimental to their experiences. Active learning can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and the fear of negative evaluation as they interact in front of their peers and instructors. Below are six tips that can help alleviate anxiety during active learning activities.

- **Be transparent:** To help alleviate student’s fears of negative evaluation, be up front about your reasons for using active learning in class as a low-stakes way for students to test their knowledge and form preliminary ideas. Remind students that they can learn from their mistakes and that this is time for them to get feedback on their learning. This can foster a welcoming environment where students feel safe going out on a limb because they know you will support them.
- **Scaffold active learning activities:** Students may become anxious when answering high-level questions during class when they have a fear for negative evaluation while learning material. Consider scaffolding your activities throughout the semester and progressively build toward more demanding learning experiences that ask for higher levels of interaction. Examples of this include small group brainstorming before a whole class debate/discussion, using peer review before submitting a draft to the instructor or collaboratively exploring research methods before designing an experiment.
- **Use low-stakes grading:** If in-class activities are asking students to work with new information, it can cause anxiety as they have not mastered material and feel more likely to get answers incorrect or say something wrong. Consider using low-stakes grading, either giving points for participation or making them worth a small percentage of their grade. Using low-stakes grading will leave room for students to feel comfortable making mistakes and practicing for high-stakes assessments.
- **Avoid Cold Calling:** Students may be anxious about speaking in front of the instructor and their peers for fear of negative evaluation. Consider asking for volunteers to share from the class or from a certain section of the room rather than calling on individual students. If sharing with the class after a period of collaboration, ask groups if they would be willing to share during group work time so they can be prepared or opt out.

- **Keep groups consistent:** Students may become anxious if they must work with people they have not interacted with or built rapport with. Consider having students convene with the same sets of peers for extended periods, so they get comfortable working together through challenging tasks.
- **Provide enough time:** Student anxiety can be raised if they do not feel they have enough time to think about and fully engage with the questions. During student work time, be mindful to give students enough time to think about and respond to questions.

#### Resources

Center for Collegiate Mental Health. "2022 Annual Report," 2023. <https://ccmh.psu.edu/annual-reports>.

Cohen, Matthew, Steven G. Buzinski, Emma Armstrong-Carter, Jenna Clark, Benjamin Buck, and Lillian Reuman. "Think, Pair, Freeze: The Association between Social Anxiety and Student Discomfort in the Active Learning Environment." *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology* 5, no. 4 (2019): 265–77. <https://doi.org/10.1037/stl0000147>.

Cooper, Katelyn M., Virginia R. Downing, and Sara E. Brownell. "The Influence of Active Learning Practices on Student Anxiety in Large-Enrollment College Science Classrooms." *International Journal of STEM Education* 5, no. 1 (June 12, 2018): 23. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-018-0123-6>.

*For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by email at [ctl@slu.edu](mailto:ctl@slu.edu).*