Collaborative Book Review: Chapter 2 “Structuring Active Learning”

in *The New College Classroom*

Written by Marilia Kaisar

In Chapter 2, “Structuring Active Learning,” Katopodis and Davidson outline some of the core pillars of active learning. Although short, this chapter begins to frame four central tools of active learning: scaffolding, growth mindset, the flipped classroom, and backward planning (30). A structure of activities becomes crucial, when trying to reimagine learning as an active social experience where students can become agents in their learning path. They write:

“Giving students freedom to be curious, to create, and to lead requires planning and organizing activities for them to use that opportunity and autonomy productively” (30).

An organized activity flow enables students to collaborate, question, explore, and grow. As outlined by Katapodis and Davidson, I will also try to outline the four main techniques of active learning elaborating in the chapter:

- **Scaffolding:** breaking up assignments, ideas, expectations, and learning goals into smaller digestible chunks (31); as the writers call it, “thinking about the gradual, stepped learning(scaffolding) can be an excellent place to begin implementing active learning” (32). This chapter seems to be a space where ideas are introduced but not extensively elaborated.

- **Growth mindset:** the definition here comes from Dweck, and it is the belief that skills can be improved with time and effort (33). A growth mindset is especially beneficial for creating an equitable and inclusive classroom as it recenters agency and allows all students to grow, learn, and explore learning.

- **Flipped classroom:** students prepare outside of class and arrive in the classroom to answer challenges or problems, through low-stakes questions, or group work activities where students think of answers and then present their ideas to the group: allowing everyone to develop the thinking and knowledge to respond to the prompts offered (36). It is through the process of trying to find the answer that the students acquire the tools needed to gain expertise and learn together.

- **Backward planning:** designing a syllabus “backwards” with the intention of arriving at the intended goals and ensuring that the assignments/readings/activities are directly related to those learning goals. (37). Often, students can even be asked to contribute to the design of those learning outcomes.

The four tools/elements of active learning in this chapter are only introduced without diving deeper into how they can be applied in different set ups. This is probably because this chapter occurs in the
beginning of the book, setting up the stage for what is to follow. Coming from an Arts and Humanities background, I found the examples offered rather abstract and hard to apply in classrooms engaging in creative projects like making films, collages or designing.

As both a Graduate Student Instructor and a Teaching Assistant, I have been implementing a lot of those activities in my own classroom, as I have had the chance to teach and design my own courses three times now. A growth mindset and flipped classrooms can be incorporated in the time we share together; backward planning and scaffolding can explored during course design or backend of the course. As I am designing courses, I often try to reframe learning outcomes, structure assignments as building blocks, gradually introduce projects in steps, or even offer opportunities to revise work or writing as the final version of an assignment.

In the last course I designed, I experimented with letting students decide together in class what the fifth parameter of the grading rubric will be. In the classroom, we spend some time discussing together why they are being graded, in what way and how to succeed in the assignment: then, I would explain each element of the rubric and craft together with them the 5th rule of the assignment. A growth mindset and a flipped classroom are tools that can operate and show up in the class itself, they come up in how you structure activities, how you speak to the students, and how you even flip the script as an instructor to turn them into agents and active participants of their own learning.

**Works Cited**

Peer Reviewed by Joshua Goodstein