

ACTIVE LEARNING FRAMEWORK CONSULTATION FORM

The consultation is part of the Novigado project's O2 "Active Learning Reference Framework".

How should active learning look like in a school? What would you recommend to teachers?

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Let's Activate Teaching / Learning in Contemporary School.

A "contemporary school" is such a broad concept that, before I go on to discuss introducing active learning methods at school, I will try to devote some time to describing the image of the institution responsible for educating the next generations. No wonder that there is no single picture of a modern school. Everyone, at least at a declarative level, agrees that education "is important" and is one of the main tools in the fight against poverty, social inequalities, intolerance, and populism. Therefore, at the declarative level there is an agreement that the school should constitute the foundation for building a better, more prosperous and peaceful world for future generations. Despite this fact, most countries still lack sufficient investment in education and, as a consequence, the prestige of the teaching profession remains low.

Education is also a frequent topic of discussion at various levels of politics. . It is also present in social conversations or at family gatherings. In such conversations, for example, one often hears opinions about the "old-fashioned school" and about its resemblance to the education from the long-gone times, i.e. the Prussian model of school, in which there is a one-sided system of information transfer: teacher - student. This a model is also characterized by too much factual knowledge, uncritical reception of information by students, whose success or failure is measured by the percentage of information that they manage to store in their memory.

On the opposing side of the spectrum, one hears about the so-called "School of the future", in which students are at the center, and in which they are able to follow their abilities and interests, and where the role of teacher is completely different. He is to be a guide, a tutor who teaches a young person to enter adult life with a pool of appropriate skills. Thus, attention is paid to the difference between skills and messages and the change of the learning paradigm from encyclopedic to the skill-oriented one. A special attention is paid to developing soft skills, primarily through various types of **active methods**.

Two models

While looking at the debate about the "schools of the future" from the outside, one can notice that proponents of changes pit a teacher-centered school (where the teacher's task is to pass selected messages on to passive students) against a student-centered school (where mechanisms of the modern world are learned together with appropriate skills and a teacher assumes the role of a guide or coach).

Let us stress that the latter model is based on methods which make students active. Those active methods require the student to forget the role of the listener uncritically receiving information from the teacher's (system) and enter the role of the subject who can actively shape

the didactic process. In the traditional, expository model the teacher also lacks independence, he/she is forced to strongly focus on the curriculum imposed by the system, which determines what should and should not be said.

The two models presented above coincide with an increasingly visible political and ideological division that are present in many countries. It is clear that people with conservative, traditional views are in favour of education which will want to equip students with a certain set of attitudes, consequently, the education system will be subordinated to it. People with liberal views will move away from teaching by heart, look for a new vision of the school giving the student and teacher more freedom in the area of teaching content.

The public debate experienced a breakthrough when Sir Ken Robinson gave his TED talks, which once made a dizzying career in social media. In one of them the author clearly and precisely listed the differences between the old and new school. He argued that the old one was created for a different socioeconomic situation (times of the Industrial Revolution), and that the contemporary situation is completely different.

The school of today still has no one, clear direction. There is no common form or vision. The school is at a crossroads and is the subject of debates not only among the most interested stakeholders, but also among politicians who, in view of the fact that education affects almost everyone, see it as a field for their activity, including the populist activity.

So before answering the question of what "active learning" means and how to enable it, I will look at the different areas on which the success of this process depends.

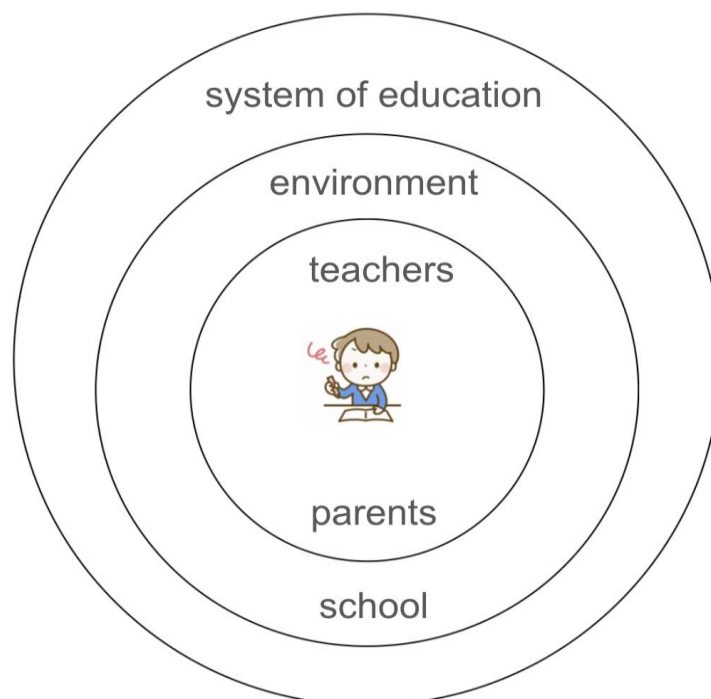


Figure 1 - The Student Ecosystem

The educational ecosystem consists of numerous components. Each of them is internally diverse and affects the final result of the student's education. It can be reduced to a simple scheme in which one can see which components directly affect the student. Looking at the current situation, it is clear that there is still no agreement on the answer to the simplest questions: what is a "good school", how to recognize a "good student" or even: "what is a good teacher characterized by". Until such a consent can be reached, it will be extremely difficult to do anything. Activating teaching and switching from one work model to another, therefore, requires, if not a universal agreement, at least an understanding regarding what it means and what it is used for.

Let's look at the individual elements of the chart above and the challenges that are associated with them on the road to full activation. Of course, one should assume that these elements strongly overlap and it is impossible to describe them without showing others at the same time.

i. The Students

Students come to school with specific ideas about the school in their minds. A young person builds their image of school based on literature, films and, above all, their family members' opinions. The older the student are, the more factors influence their expectations. **Consequently, it is crucial to provide students with a coherent picture of the school they attend.** Practically, this process should include all students, from the youngest to the oldest classes. School reality shows that active learning is usually associated mainly with the youngest grades. The older the students become, the more academic their education becomes. This may also stem the fact that students themselves, influenced by the school tradition, take this gradual change for granted and treat it as the natural course of things. Learning is becoming more and more serious, which usually means more listening, less action. Being aware of such a mechanism, we should enact a systemic change to this traditional image of learning.

ii. The Teachers

Teachers work directly with students. It is up to them to decide on the choice of teaching methods, the way the core curriculum is implemented and how to make students active in the classroom. One often hears the opinion that active methods are a good break from tedious work. This shows that many teachers treat active methods as an ornament which will make it easier to introduce and teach this "serious" material using the traditional method. **Unless active methods are viewed as serious, effective tools for developing important skills, there will be no suitable conditions for learning.** Teachers must be authentic in what they do, they must believe that what they do moves their work forward. This is the first, though not the only, condition for their students to engage in tasks at the appropriate level and to help them see the sense in what they are doing.

iii. The Schools

Contemporary schools feature various teaching attitudes, including the extreme ones, which can be attributed to the two models described in the introduction. One subject can be taught by two teachers with extremely different views on teaching. I deliberately decided to use the word "views" and not "methods" because - as I explained above - often the choice of methods depends precisely on the definition of "good teacher". A

good example would be two teachers of history, a subject that many believe has a very important formation role. One of them will teach by lecturing, explaining, telling stories about the past centuries. This teacher will require his/her students to remember not only facts, but also the interpretation of events. The other will try to get his/her students to recreate the past, and then they will together attempt to confront their outcomes with the content of the textbook and subject them to critical analysis. These two approaches in one school can create tension at many levels: among students, parents and other teachers (e.g. form teachers of those students). Students will learn different things, they will work in different ways, both at school and at home. To avoid this, **one needs to talk about methods at school level, not just in subject-based teams of teachers.** Similar two work models can be described in the case of biology, mathematics or natural sciences. It is up to the school management and subject team leaders to explain the place and role of new methods in building a new, active school.

iv. The Parents

The parents' trust in the school and its teachers is the foundation in building the students' mental safety. If there is a lack of understanding between the school and the parents, if the teachers do not see in the eyes of parents the approval of how the school works, this is a very negative phenomenon. An example of a lack of trust is a situation in which parents send their child to private tutoring lessons because they think that their child is learning "too little" at school. **Those parents are unaware of the new school and its new methods and challenges. They may feel uncertain when they see and hear about methods that differ from their perceptions of school based on their personal school memories.** Hearing about group work, debating and abandoning memorization, they may have the impression that "that's not it". I often encounter such an attitude of parents who, at a declarative level, during the recruitment process of their children, express their acceptance for the departure from rote learning in favour of developing soft skills. However, over time, when their children do not spend hours studying definitions, rules or dates at home, they experience a growing sense of uncertainty. They often ask themselves: "does my child really learn", "what will my child be able to do". "What will happen if my child meets students who are taught in a traditional way." To avoid such tensions, one needs to provide explanation related to active learning to the persons who surround students at home, in their natural, household environment.

v. The Environment

By the environment, I understand the circle of friends of the students' parents. Those whom parents meet and whom they know personally as well as people befriended at various social media. Such a group is a place where people naturally talk about school, partly because many of them have children who attend schools. This is a key group in which participants of discussions are usually loosely related or completely unrelated to the world of education, yet they attempt to compare not only individual teachers, but also schools as well as education systems from other countries. The problem, however, is that during such debates there are no common criteria for assessing the quality of teaching.

For some, the crucial criterion will be related to the amount of information remembered, for others, it will rather be the ever-increasing ability to ask critical questions, for others still what is most important is the mental safety of the child in the school building. Of course, those different approaches stem from the abovementioned traditions from which participants of those discussions originate.

Active learning is not yet as widely known and understood as memory-based learning, hence parents intuitively find it reassuring when their children's teachers require students to be able to memorize all the capitals of European countries, rather than devote classes to why and whether it is worth learning all those capitals by heart. Another manifestation of the tension associated with new methods may be the method of assessment. The summative assessment system is by far the most prevalent one. Grades expressed as letters or numbers are simple and easy to quote, show off or - above all, compare with others. This cannot be done with formative assessment, which is not intended to classify the students' work into one of the groups of grades, but to describe their acquired skills and identify areas of further development. Still, parents and students who are accustomed to traditional assessment want me, as the school head teacher, to "translate" their extensive feedback into a summative assessment expressed by a grade, explaining that it will be easier for them to answer their relatives' questions about how their children are doing at school.

Learning focused on the students' development, on their predispositions (characterized by active methods, formative assessment, flexible approach to the curriculum, often using teachers' proprietary syllabuses) is still perceived as an experiment, and consequently, is treated as one connected with the risk of maladaptation to the "real school world." This sense of uncertainty may arise during conversations in an environment where one can hear complaints about the ossified school on one hand, and fears related to alternative educational methods.

vi. The System of Education

It is a truism to say that it is the national school system which is generally responsible for the way education looks. The system of education includes the structure of individual educational stages, current core curriculum, education system, various types of teacher support, the remuneration system, etc. The school system is a derivative of the political situation in a given country. It is more or less directly up to politicians how much priority will be given to education, who will deal with it at the executive, control or advisory levels, and finally, and to what extent those people will be open to new trends and a way of teaching that differs from the traditional one. International research, e.g. PISA, outline a certain direction in which education is heading. When one examines the skills which are assessed, it will become clear that those are skills related to creating, understanding, cooperation, and not to recalling or remembering information.

What is becoming increasingly important in the teaching process is experimentation, students' own critical analysis, in a word... scientific thinking. The examination system plays a big, systematic role in changing the way teachers teach, as it, in a way, forces them to focus on developing certain skills in their students. Many experts emphasize the relationship between the middle school exam in Poland and the good results of Polish students in the PISA survey. The policy-makers responsible for education in a

given country should do their best to make sure that members of the public, parents, teachers and finally students understand what the change in education is all about. **Of course, provided they want education to be successful. What education needs is not only new curricula, textbooks and teacher training, but also raised awareness among people indirectly connected with the school.** First of all, this type of awareness-raising campaign should focus on explaining it to all the stakeholders as well as to the public why students are learning differently than they did before. Why the change affects school curricula, textbooks, rules related to the use of new technologies and even the seating arrangement of individual classrooms. This campaign should be addressed to those not directly involved with schools, but above all, to parents, who are responsible not only for the education of young people in a formal sense, but also for the young people's sense of security. Such security in which students will know that what they do at school is accepted by their guardians.

vii. The Students once again

Students enter their school in the hope that what they will do inside will be purposeful and sensible. They hope that the policymakers responsible for education have decided on the best possible solutions which should be implemented because "they are necessary." Even despite students' complaints, opposing voices and rebellious attitudes, their education system is the result of the work of a multitude of people who are involved in education in a direct or indirect way. The school ought to be a place where students have a chance to develop both their intellectual and social skills, a safe place, whose concept was agreed on during debates on what constitutes a "good" school, on how a school should operate on day-to-day basis.

Everything should happen in a more or less thought-out way, which was defined by those responsible for education. In the BBC news devoted to students returning to British schools after the coronavirus pandemic, one of the teachers said that she did not know how she would work in a class where her students' desks would be arranged in rows and not TRADITIONALLY in group pods. A traditional classroom in Great Britain, no matter the students' age, is suited for group work, and students are prepared for cooperation. Students in other countries still see such classroom arrangement too rarely. Especially in case of older grade students. Being seated in a row even before the lesson begins, before the first word of the teacher shows them that their role is mainly to listen to what the teacher says and, in the best situation, to reference back to what was said.

In conclusion

In the world of today, the implementation of active methods into schools is a prerequisite for success. There is no escape from it, which is a consequence of the civilizational changes that the world has undergone in recent years. The situation is a bit like the way we use the Internet. In the times of Web 1.0, users were only expected to receive, read, and acquire online content. This situation changed dramatically with the advent of Web 2.0, when internet users could become active commentators or content creators, who can borrow, remix, cite and implement modifications. Accordingly, the role of passive users, i.e. recipients of online content, diminished. One can compare this situation to the role of students during the lesson. Activating students is a natural consequence of the changing times and the changing attitude of young

people, who are now bolder and want to take the floor, present their points of view or simply disagree. School should teach how to do this. Not in theory, but in practice.

In this document, I have tried to show how much we need general agreement regarding the way in which schools operate. I did not describe the diversity of active methods, but it is those methods that have the task of engaging students, pull them from behind their desks, sometimes even free them from their classrooms. Let me repeat: we should use them not just to make the transitive model more varied, but because they are the only way to prepare young people for what the world will expect from them. For this to succeed, the enthusiasm of individual teachers, even those gathered in online discussion groups, is not enough. What is needed is decisions at least at the school level. It is the lecture which should become an exception from the rule, a special moment when the teacher decides to employ this technique. Not the other way around. Parents and their friends who have children in other schools should know and understand that the next day spent outside the school walls, working in a group, or during a debate is not a waste of time. Consequently, policy makers responsible for shaping education should spend less time deciding on the content that students are taught and more on how to help them learn. What we need is them patiently explaining to everyone that there is no return to the type of schools where students were silently listening to what the teacher was saying in order to improve their memorization of facts.

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