Active learning and creativity

- Refer to the trainee teacher webpage on Active learning in geography and the trainee support sheets referred to on this page.

The value of active learning

Consider this quote from an Ofsted geography survey report in 2011 and discuss it with trainees.

“When the teaching was no better than satisfactory, an emphasis on covering content did not encourage active learning and, as a result, students’ geographical skills were often underdeveloped. Teachers did not make enough use of maps and fieldwork to progressively build up students’ skills in gathering data, analysis and interpretation. In far too many classes there was an over-reliance on text books, especially by non-specialist teachers. The result was frequently work that occupied rather than engaged students. In just over half of the schools visited, a narrow range of textbooks and a focus on factual recall rather than on exploring ideas failed to capture students’ interest. Higher-attaining students, in particular, were rarely challenged.’ (Ofsted, Geography: Learning to make a world of difference’, 2011)

As this extract makes crystal clear, it is important that students learn actively in geography lessons. But trainee teachers need to distinguish between ‘lesson activities’ and ‘active mental experiences’ for students. True active learning engages and challenges students’ geographical thinking. Sometimes ITE trainers observe geography lessons taught by trainee teachers where there is plenty of activity going on, but there is little meaningful learning.

Emphasise to trainee teachers the importance of planning meaningful learning activities, not just keeping students busy in their lessons. This means activities that promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of geographical content. Effective learning strategies engage students with the subject matter and facilitate higher-order thinking; not just the reproduction of knowledge or recall of facts, but comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of knowledge, i.e. Bloom’s higher-order cognitive abilities.

Teachers often talk about ‘Engagement’ of students, but this is rather a vague term. Refer to An engaging post by Mark Enser that makes a plea that it should be used to mean something important as a powerful part of learning. Discuss these ideas with your trainee teachers.

Introducing trainees to different active learning strategies

During their training trainees need opportunities to explore as many different types of learning activities as they can. Only then will they be able to select the ones that are most appropriate for the geographical learning that they wish their students to achieve. Encourage trainee teachers to ‘take risks’ with different activities while they have support from you or other geography teachers.
activities are more challenging than others. Card sorting activities, for example, are ‘safe’ for a new teacher starting to manage group-work and can be flexible in the length of time taken. Games and student presentations can pose more challenges. Encourage trainees to co-teach with you or another teacher if they are trying out an activity for the first time and feel they need support. Trainees should monitor the range of activities they use with different groups. This helps you, as an ITE trainer/mentor, to check they are not keeping to only a few activities that they feel comfortable with.

**Evaluating active learning strategies**

It is essential for trainee teachers to evaluate the learning that occurs as a result of the different strategies and methods they employ and not concentrate only on how they managed them or the outcomes in terms of student motivation. They should be reminded frequently that when they plan activities they should include how they will assess learning and the progress students make.

**Creativity in geography**

- Refer to trainee webpage on [Creativity in geography](#)

Creativity is part of a broad and balanced curriculum, and in geography lessons students should be provided with opportunities to think creatively about the natural and human worlds. Encourage trainees to broaden the themes of activities they use and extend both their own and their students’ creativity. Ensure trainees are aware of the wider curriculum objectives they will be achieving at the same time as teaching imaginative geography. Many ideas and references are given on the trainee webpage that you could discuss with trainees and they should follow up.

(Last updated February 2019)