



Passive vs. Interactive Environments

What type of activities do you feel actively engaged students in learning?



READINESS

Recall your secondary school education. Imagine the classes you attended. What types of activities do you remember as typical in your classes? Did the teachers engage you in class discussions? Did you participate in small groups for discussion? Did you listen to lectures? Did you participate in role-playing activities? When you read in your classes, did you discuss the reading? Did you write about the reading? Did you write in classes other than English and for purposes other than testing? What type of writing did you do? Would you consider your role as a secondary student as generally an active participant in the learning process during class or as a passive recipient of the teacher's knowledge? Would you characterize the classroom as a place in which students and teacher interacted, constructing knowledge together as they listened, spoke, read, and wrote?

Purpose for Reading

Two lesson descriptions follow. Both lessons are designed to enable secondary students to list the major events that led to the initiation of the Revolutionary War and

to articulate reasons proposed by colonists for remaining under the jurisdiction of the British Crown and for separating from it. The reading material in this chapter will help you answer these questions: In which lesson are the students more active participants in the learning process? In which lesson are the students more involved in constructing knowledge as they interact with the teacher, each other, and text by using all of their language-processing facilities?

READING MATERIAL

Read the following two lesson plans.

Lesson 1

Ms. Jones takes attendance as her eighth grade U.S. history students settle into their seats. She reads the objectives already on the chalkboard, saying, "Today you will learn the reasons why some colonists began to want independence from Britain and reasons why others continued to lobby for maintaining the existing relationship between the colonies and the Crown." Ms. Jones then begins the lesson by asking students to list and explain specific key events, including events such

as the passage of the Navigation Acts; the Stamp Act of 1765; and then the Intolerable Acts of 1774, which affected the colonists' perceptions of their relationship to England. Ms. Jones leads the students through a chronological listing of these events, which they recall from the chapter entitled "The Road Toward Independence" that they were supposed to read for homework. She asks for students to volunteer information about the various acts; after a student has contributed a response, she uses the overhead projector to show the class what key points they should copy into their notes.

After ensuring that the class has the list of major events written down, Ms. Jones then continues with a lecture that she organizes by using a chart with the two columns "Reasons Against Separating" and "Reasons for Separating," filling it in as she talks. She has passed out to the students a blank chart (Figure 1.1) that the students use to organize their note taking.

As her class time draws to a close, Ms. Jones tells the students, "Now you should be able to list the key events that led many colonists to begin to

think about independence from Britain.” She goes on to tell her class to read the chapter in their text entitled “The

more independent than they used to be because they now baby-sit and mow lawns and so have money of their own to

spend; however, they are still dependent on their parents for major expenses, but after high school graduation, they will have to take more responsibility for their economic security. Other students discuss how,

at age 13, they have limited freedom of movement and must depend on parents to take them places unless they can walk or ride a bike, but note that, after age 16, they will be more mobile—although they may not be able to afford a car of their own, they will be able to drive.

Next Mr. Smith asks, “We’ve been studying the colonial period. What does asking you to write about your relationship to adults now and at 18 have to do with the colonies and their relationship to England?” After several students have contributed answers, such as noting that the colonies, like the students themselves, are developing increased skill and ability to take care of themselves over time, he tells students to open their texts to the chapter entitled “The Road Toward Independence.” He instructs the students to take 10 minutes to skim the reading, looking for key incidents that affected the colonists’ perceptions about their relationship with Britain, which eventually contributed

to the start of the Revolution.

After Mr. Smith calls time, he tells the students to move into pairs based on classroom proximity. Each pair is to create a chart, based on what they have just read, which indicates key events and their dates in one column, and the resulting effects on colonial/Crown relations in the other column. After 10 minutes, he calls on different pairs to contribute events to a master chart, and the class as a whole helps to organize the events in sequential order and to clarify the significance of each item listed.

Mr. Smith now tells the students to get out of their seats. He tells some students to imagine they are merchants in the colonial times, others to imagine being farmers, others to imagine they work for the colonial government, others to imagine they are trappers, and so on. Given their role, students are to move to the left of the classroom if they would have voted for independence at the time of the Intolerable Acts; they should move to the right of the room if they would still opt for the existing relationship with Britain. The two groups of students now create lists of the reasons for their positions. After another 10 minutes, the groups present their arguments to each other, and each group has an opportunity to shape a rebuttal to the arguments offered by the other side.

Mr. Smith sends the students back to their seats and tells them to take three minutes to organize their notes for

1. Desire for economic independence	
2. _____	
3. _____	

Figure 1.1
Ms. Jones’s Chart

Shot Heard ‘Round the World,” which is about the battle of Lexington and Concord, in preparation for class the next day.

Lesson 2

Mr. Smith has the following instructions written on the board for his eighth grade U.S. history students to follow as they enter the room: “Open your notebooks and write freely for three minutes about how you, as an eighth grader, are both dependent on and independent of your parents or the adults with whom you live. Also, imagine how you will respond to this same topic when you are 18 and about to graduate from high school.” After he takes attendance, he tells students to wrap up what they are writing, and he calls on several students to share their written responses. As they talk, he makes lists on the board of ways in which the students imagine they will be both independent of and yet still dependent on adults when they are older. For instance, some students say they are currently

the day by using the points made in their discussion. He then asks them to swap what they have written with someone sitting nearby and then swap back and revise or add to their own notes as they deem necessary. He then asks students to volunteer to fill in the blank in the statement, "By the end of class today, we were able to ____." As he receives answers, he writes them on the board and asks students if they agree, shaping this statement of the objective until they reach consensus. For example, the students might complete the sentence by saying, "By the end of class today, we were able to discuss what effect those events had on the reasons the colonists articulated for remaining under the jurisdiction of the British Crown or for separating from it."

As the class period nears the end, Mr. Smith asks the class as a whole, "Those of you who were not yet for independence, what additional events or British actions would have to occur in order to sway you toward a position of valuing independence? Those of you who already want to achieve independence, what would you do now to move toward that goal?" Students respond, and he tells them to check their predictions as they read their assigned homework chapter, entitled "The Shot Heard 'Round the World." Additionally, he tells them that after they have finished reading, they should write, in their own words, a description of the first event in the Revolution.

Comparing Lessons

In which of the preceding lessons are students more actively involved in the learning process? In Mr. Jones's lesson, Mr. Smith's lesson provides students many opportunities for involvement in learning. They become actively involved in uncovering an emotional connection between their own lives and the situation of the colonists just prior to the start of the Revolution. They become actively involved in extending their content knowledge and constructing a sense of an historical period through knowledge gained during the class session. The activities that Mr. Smith planned for them ensured that his classroom example of an *interactive learning environment*. He has planned

- instruction that requires students to listen and read as well as to talk and write in order to gain the content information; therefore, engaging them in active cognitive processes (thinking during their instruction) (see Figure 1.2);
- instruction that makes the students actively participate in their own learning; and
- instruction that provides exposure to the new content information simultaneously with learning information.

Ms. Jones's lesson provides no opportunities for students

to construct knowledge for themselves. The students are merely recipients of the teacher's knowledge, which she passes on to them by using an expository teaching method, the lecture. In this lesson, she provides no guidance for the students' cognitive engagement in the subject at all.

For Ms. Jones, they merely reiterated what they had read, passing on the author's knowledge. Ms. Jones's classroom is an example of *passive learning environment*. She has planned

- instruction that often requires that students passively listen and read without a clear purpose (see Figure 1.2);
- instruction that puts students in the role of passive recipients of content information presented to them in a formal format.

Ms. Jones's classroom has the teacher more cognitively involved than the students, and the instruction that provides no guidance for initial exposure to the new information is simultaneous with some degree of that information.

IDENTIFICATION ANALYSIS

Go back to Mr. Smith's interactive lesson and make a list of the activities that give students direct involvement in the learning. Compare your analysis to the analysis that follows.

The *interactive learning environment* designed to help students interact with the material and that also