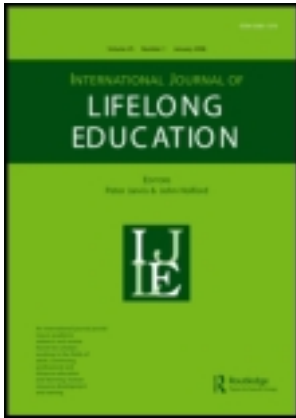


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### Educators, learners and active learning methodologies

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# Educators, learners and active learning methodologies

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Picking up from a previous publication in *IJLE*, the primary objective of this article is to engage in a critical analysis of the concept and practice of ‘active’ (including ‘participatory’) learning as well as the usefulness to educators of ‘active learning methodologies’. Through a review of relevant literature and research, highlighting problems in theory, and an analysis of examples of active learning in practice, the article addresses a number of issues raised by previous attempts to promote active learning. It argues, in conclusion, that while promoting active learning is generally a good thing, the success of an active learning methodology depends not on methodology alone but, ultimately, on the constantly-evolving, dialectical relationship between methodology and learners, mediated by the educator. Practical implications are that educators need not be over-obsessed about questions of methodology, though it is important to experiment with new methods and make them a constant focus of discussion between educators and learners; further research could focus on the extent to which (and under what circumstances) educators and/or learners might change (or already have changed) their perceptions about different ways of teaching and learning.

## Educators, learners and active learning methodologies

In an earlier edition of *IJLE*, Kember *et al.* (2001) argue that conceptions of good teaching remain polarised between two broad categories of ‘teaching as transmission of knowledge’ and ‘teaching as learning facilitation’. While this may be true, ‘teaching as transmission of knowledge’ has clearly been under siege in recent decades: discovery learning (Hodkin and Robin 1985), student-centred learning (Brandes and Ginnis 1986), ‘deep’ as opposed to ‘surface’ learning (Entwistle *et al.* 1992), ‘andragogy’ (Knowles 1980), ‘problem-posing’ (as opposed to ‘banking’) education (Freire 1972), ‘participatory rural appraisal’ (Chambers 1993) and so on—in their different ways, while these and other movements do not ignore the need to acquire knowledge, they conspire to make ‘teaching as transmission of knowledge’ appear amateurish and outdated. In theory, at least—perhaps less so in practice—the discourse of ‘teaching as learning facilitation’ has surely attained dominance in contemporary education?

Implicit in the notion of ‘teaching as learning facilitation’ is the need for learners to assume an active and participatory role in the educational process. In

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turn, both within formal and non-formal education, this has led to the common usage of terms such as ‘active’ or ‘participatory’ learning (see Campbell and Burnaby 2001, IIED, Denicolo *et al.* 1992). Strictly speaking, there are distinctions between ‘active’ and ‘participatory’ learning, though sometimes the terms appear to be used interchangeably (see Active Learning Centre), but the arguments I make in this essay apply equally to both: for convenience, I mostly make reference to ‘active learning’ alone. ‘Active Learning’ may be described as a theory, in that it has evolved generalised principles about the nature of teaching and learning, but it is also closely associated with the implementation of practical teaching methodologies in that it provides numerous examples of the kind of activities and pedagogical techniques educators can appropriately exploit in different learning situations.

However, from both my own experience and the observations of other learners and educators, attempts to promote active learning often raise a number of awkward questions: do people necessarily learn by engaging in activity? Why does an active learning methodology seem to work for some educators (and learners) but not for others? Where there are problems, does the fault lie with ‘active learning’ theory and practice or with particular educators and learners? To what extent does context and culture affect the appropriateness of active learning? If educators and learners are more comfortable with a traditional methodology, why should they bother changing to something else? Does ‘active learning’ liberate learners from the possibility of intellectual manipulation—associated with ‘teaching as the transfer of knowledge’—or can/does it apply more subtle forms of ideological control?

In addressing these questions, my understanding is that ‘active learning’ embraces a multitude of educational disciplines and endeavours, both formal and informal; I also write from a position generally supportive of active learning, with a strong focus on adult education and a commitment to the ‘radical’ or ‘popular’ tradition. In this article:

the first section offers a critical review of the *theory* of active learning and, as evidenced by existing literature and research, summarises potential difficulties inherent within the concept.

The second section examines the *practice* of active learning. It begins, in part (a), by describing a range of experiences across a number of disciplines in which I have personally sought to promote active learning: these experiences then serve as raw material for analysis in part (b) where I attempt to draw useful, practical conclusions on the relationship between educators, learners and active learning methodologies.

### **The theory of active learning: a critical review**

#### *On definitions of active (and participatory) learning*

“Active learning” (is) . . . an umbrella term to express a wealth of ideas. In fact, there is no hard and fast definition of active learning; it takes on different meanings and different degrees of emphasis, in different subject areas and for different groups of learners’ (Denicolo *et al.* 1992:3); the same could be said for ‘participatory learning’. It serves little purpose here to debate the precise meaning

of each term (see Denicolo *et al.* 1992: 3, IIED and Sauvé 2001 for a fuller discussion)—and the examples used in the next session should serve as useful illustrations of what they mean in practice—but as a prelude to discussion it is worth highlighting some principal characteristics. In theory ‘active’ and ‘participatory’ learning both (a) seek to encourage independent, critical thinking in learners (b) encourage learners to take responsibility for what they learn (c) engage learners in a variety of open-ended activities (projects, discussions, role-play exercises and so on) to ensure they have a more protagonistic, less passive role than in ‘the transfer of knowledge’ view of education. Process, as well as product, is important (d) consider it an important though not exclusive role of the educator to organise appropriate learning ‘activities’ in which learners can explore and develop their knowledge base and thinking: a variety of pedagogical techniques have been developed with this end in mind.

Additionally, ‘participatory learning’ conveys the idea that learners possess important knowledge and understanding already, prior to engaging in explicitly educational activity, and that education is about sharing the different knowledge and understandings of both learners and educators: hence the ‘participation’ of individual learners is also important for the education of their co-learners (and educators) as well as for their own individual development.

### *Problems and issues*

The first problem with active learning is that appearances may be deceptive: because learners happen to be engaged in some kind of observable activity, this does not mean that they are necessarily the ‘subjects’ of their own learning, rather than objective recipients of information, as active learning theories would have us believe. Research with University students, for example, shows that even when a course is run using an active learning methodology, and the explicit aims and objectives of the course seek to promote active learning, the system of assessment often falls back on a good old-fashioned test of accumulated knowledge. Under this scenario, student learning strategies home in on the requirements of assessment—‘students take their cues from what is assessed rather than from what lecturers maintain is important’ (Brown and Pendlebury 1992: 7)—and the lofty aims of active learning remain at the level of rhetoric. Externally, then, learners appear active: internally, cognitively, they may simply be involved in a process of acquiring and regurgitating pre-packaged knowledge.

Conversely, the opposite may also be true. Knijnik’s work with the Landless People’s Movement (the ‘MST’) in Brazil (Knijnik, quoted in Coben 1998: 210), for example, shows that what might appear, superficially, as ‘banking education’ could actually be something in which, ironically, far from being passive, learners are active manipulators of the educator: peasants explain how they pretend to listen to lectures from government technicians, knowing that it will open doors to important contacts and credit from which they are normally excluded; but quite deliberately, they then go on to do their own thing and ignore the exhortations of these technicians who do not understand the implications of the radical struggle in which the MST is engaged. Coben (1998: 211) concludes that ‘the elaborate game being played out leaves Freire’s distinction between banking and problem-posing education, with its assumed transparency of motivation, far behind’.

A second problem concerns the aims and objectives for promoting active learning in the first place. For many currents within active learning, process is at least as important as product and active learning is meant to foster the spirit of enquiry, work towards open-ended outcomes, encourage critical thinking and hand over power from educators to learners. At other times, though, it sometimes seems that active learning is simply seen as a more efficient method of transmitting pre-packaged knowledge than traditional didacticism: the method may look different from 'teaching as transmission of knowledge' but the ultimate aim, and the underlying epistemology on which it is based, is the same.

A third problem concerns the active learning taking place within the framework of a humanistic approach to education, such as that advocated by Malcolm Knowles in his notion of 'andragogy'. Humanistic approaches do place value on process, open-endedness and critical thinking and active learning is seen as a way of enabling people to become more complete human beings in their journey towards 'self-actualisation'; but the lack of political analysis underlying humanistic approaches means that (a) whether or not educators and learners are aware of it, active learning may be taking place within an over-riding ideological framework which limits (or even controls) the kind of thinking likely to take place. Knowles' conception of andragogy, for example, sees no problems with the self-directed, active learning which takes place within the conservative, almost reactionary framework of some types of employment education (Tennant 1997) (b) in some cases, working for individual self-actualisation clashes with the collective good. Take the hypothetical case of arms-dealers (an extreme example, I admit): building on their desire for personal growth and improved professional performance, an active learning programme could be designed to make them much more effective at selling weapons and increasing profit. For the rest of us, however, the consequences would be potentially calamitous. The same argument would apply to those working in particular sectors of big business, tabloid journalism, product advertising and so on, where, arguably, the *less* effective the learning process of these particular students, the greater the 'self-actualisation' of everyone else.

Finally, active learning is also a hallmark of what is variously termed 'radical', 'popular' or 'liberatory' education. In Latin America, for example, popular education is renowned for its dynamic, active, participatory methodology: human statues, sociodramas, simulation games and the likes—a vast repertoire of methodological tools for engaging people in discussion and action in the struggle for social change (Kane 2001, Boal 1992). Sometimes this is even seen, mistakenly, as its defining characteristic, to the extent that even multi-national companies, Central American armies and the CIA have all claimed to be involved in popular education, just because they use 'participatory techniques' (the CIA once placed an order for 2000 copies of Bustillos and Vargas' (1993) classic two volumes on 'Participatory Techniques for Popular Education' (Kane 1995a)). This is mischief-making, of course: to be authentically 'popular', education must have a *political* commitment in favour of the 'oppressed', something Bustillos and Vargas spell out forcibly in later editions of their book. (Outwith Latin America, 'Freirian' methodology has also been called on in the support of 'enterprise education' (Gibson 1994)).

But this paradox, imperialists and revolutionaries working from the same handbook, is a clear illustration of the complex, problematic nature of the concept of active learning. While an awareness of this complexity has implications for

educators, it is also illustrative to consider active learning in practice, as well as in theory, prior to any final analysis.

### **The practice of active learning (a): a range of examples**

In the early 1980s, I served as an English language assistant in France to key participants in the emerging methodological revolution known as ‘communicative language teaching’ (see such publications as: Rinvolucri 1984, Wright 1989); in the mid 1980s to early 1990s, I worked for Oxfam in the innovative discipline of ‘development education’, a cross-curricular approach to promoting critical thinking and action on ‘third world’ issues (see Christian Aid Education Sector 1986, Fyson 1984, Hicks and Steiner 1989); in my current university employment, in addition to teaching and organising language courses, I research and engage with social movements working in ‘popular education’ in both Scotland and Latin America (see Kane 2001, Crowther *et al.* 1999, Gadotti and Torres 1994). In their different ways, each of these fields has made a significant contribution towards—and inspired, albeit with caveats, my own enthusiasm for—active learning methodologies.

What follows is a description of ten relevant experiences, or *vignettes* of practice, from across these three areas (though active learning need not involve the same degree of physical movement required by many of these examples): numbered and titled for reference, they will be called on as evidence for a critical analysis of the *practice* of active learning in the next part of this section.

#### *Example 1: ‘Square go’*

We were in a school running a simulation on the history of Apartheid in South Africa. Dressed ridiculously, in bomber helmets, military costumes and colourful blobs on our heads, we were oppressors from another world and bossed the pupils about. ‘Good land’ and ‘bad land’ were marked on the floor. Pupils only moved if we needed labour and they could produce a passbook on demand.

Unexpectedly, the PE teacher walked in. We couldn’t come out of role so, naturally, I ordered him off our land. He looked me in the eye and said, ‘nobody speaks to me like that’. Good actor, I thought, and shouted again, this time stamping my feet. ‘NOBODY speaks to me like that!’ he growled. I began to have doubts. But he couldn’t be taking us seriously, surely, and the third time I really let go. That’s when he grabbed the back of my neck and, to the raucous cheers of liberated pupils, marched me into the corridor, threw me against the wall and demanded a ‘square go’ (the west of Scotland term for ‘a fight’).

#### *Example 2: ‘Role-play’*

I organise courses in 16 different modern languages for adults. One day I was called to reception to advise a potential student. ‘Look’, she said ‘put me on any course you like. I don’t care what language I learn—Chinese, Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, it doesn’t matter—just as long as nobody makes me do role-play’.

*Example 3: 'One potato, two potato . . .'*

As a Development Education worker, I attended a workshop in England on techniques appropriate for youth work. A sack of potatoes was passed round, we closed our eyes and took one out. 'Get to know your potato', we were told. 'Feel it, rub it, explore its shape, then put it back in the bag'. Next we opened our eyes and tried to find our potato. It wasn't easy. This was to show that people and things can be more complicated than appearances suggest.

*Example 4: 'So-so drama'*

In Mexico City Oxfam's Latin America staff were being trained in popular education. Each country team spent a morning analysing and preparing a 'sociodrama' (a brief, roughly-scripted drama sketch which 'problematised' some aspect of their practice) to present to the full group in the afternoon. The Peruvian team's sociodrama showed they received too many telexes from Oxford.

Later, when we were working intensively, the co-ordinator called a halt and had us dance salsa for fifteen minutes. Only the British attendees seemed surprised.

*Example 5: 'The fingers'*

In 1999 I attended a mental-health workshop in Nicaragua. The participants were primary school teachers, traumatised by Hurricane Mitch. In the introductory exercise, taking turns, everyone lay down on a table and was physically lifted up by the other participants, each using one finger only, and transported to the other end of the hall. In the process you had to shout out, introducing yourself to everyone and saying how you felt about the workshop.

*Example 6: 'Unpopular education'*

In Scotland, I run a post-graduate course on Latin American popular education, part of which is a day-long workshop on methodology. Beforehand, so they know what to expect, I give students a handout on sociodrama, human-statues and poster work. On one occasion I was about to start when two students, both community education workers, stepped forward to object. They had seen these techniques in action before and had found them embarrassing and manipulative; they agreed to stay for the morning but reserved the right to walk out at any time. The other students, by contrast, were extremely enthusiastic.

*Example 7: 'The road from Dundee'*

We had developed a video-discussion exercise to challenge stereotypes of the 'third world'. Learners see a video comparing life in Scotland with life in Africa but beforehand jot down what they expect to see. Unexpectedly, the video only shows

good things about Africa and bad things about Scotland. The commentary on Scotland is delivered in an arrogant, aristocratic, English accent. The intent is to annoy Scottish people with an unbalanced representation of their country, made by an opinionated outsider, before comparing it with the way the ‘third world’ is conceptualised and represented in Scotland (expressed in their preliminary notes). The educator asks three main questions: how do you react to the video, what was the commentator’s agenda and was there any truth in the description of Scotland? What is said about Scotland is actually true though what *isn’t* said distorts the whole picture.

We had used this extensively with adults and children and were delighted with the results. But when I ran it with teacher-trainers in Dundee, there was immediate hostility. Instead of questioning the source of perceptions of Africa, the teacher-trainers were angry they’d been duped (no sense of humour at all!). When asked if there was any truth in it they replied with ‘what is truth’? Stupidly, I attempted to tackle this malicious, philosophical enquiry and it was downhill all the way after that.

*Example 8: ‘Problematising culture in Dubai’*

I was unhappy after my first attempt at teaching a course for adults in the United Arab Emirates. The students came from all over the Middle-East and there were cultural issues I couldn’t grasp. When I tried to organise group work, many appeared uneasy talking to the opposite sex and they kept changing my open classroom layout into traditional rows, sitting behind the desks.

The next year I began by ‘problematising’ the issue of culture and course methodology. I explained how I thought the class should run (which included mixed-group discussions) but gave students the responsibility of alerting me to any relevant cultural issues. Working in groups, they wrote any anxieties they had about the course on ‘post-its’, classified these into columns and put them up on the wall for everyone to see. It provoked much fascinating discussion and heated debate among the students—over Islam and the role of women, for example—and made it easier for me to negotiate the cultural minefield and proceed to the next stage. Most women were happy to work in mixed groups; four preferred to work with women only and were free to do so. But, as the classes developed, they gradually began to integrate into the larger group anyway, culture never being static, always negotiable.

*Example 9: ‘Bafa Bafa’*

This is a simulation game where there are two different groups and each is socialised into the rules of an invented culture. One culture trades cards constantly, with a number of regulations governing how it’s done; another has an elaborate arrangement about who speaks first in social interaction and a list of topics that can and cannot be discussed. Each group then sends observers into the other culture; they report back, trying to interpret its conventions. Then ‘ambassadors’ are sent to participate. Invariably misunderstanding the rules, their *faux-pas* ensure that they’re ostracised from the group.



*Example 10: 'Wee Willie Winkie'*

Teaching Spanish to adult students in the evening (average age 30–40), my most enjoyable experiences are when, as a way of introducing new language to students in an entertaining way, another tutor and myself regularly dress up and visit each other's classroom to act out drama sketches (see Kane 1995b, Kane and Morrison 1994). Having publicly made a fool of ourselves in this way, we then put students in groups and ask them to write their own drama sketch, over a period of weeks, and perform them in the last class of term. Despite my nervousness, this has never failed to be anything but a wonderful exercise.

When I started to co-ordinate language courses to adults I ran a training session for other tutors on the use of drama projects. One tutor—whose work I greatly respected—assured me that this might be fine for thirty-something evening students but that it would be completely inappropriate for daytime classes in which a number of students were much older, more conservative and infirm. I made a point of taking daytime classes for the next few years to test this hypothesis.

I was nervous the first time I presented a drama project as a (strongly recommended) option. My amateur-thespian colleague was unavailable during the day so I could not lead or teach by example and many of my students were indeed aged and infirm. I could only argue my case and hope for the best. To my pleasant surprise, I found the students every bit as enthusiastic as their younger, healthier counterparts, and I still see vividly a wonderful sketch in which a 75 year-old man dressed up magnificently as Wee Willie Winkie (a character in Scottish folklore who is supposed to ensure children to go to bed by eight o'clock), complete with nightshirt, candle and long woollen hat.

**The practice of active learning (b): a critical analysis**

With reference to the series of questions posed about active learning in the introduction to this article, the lessons I draw from these experiences can be categorised as follows.

*The importance of perceptions*

Whichever educational technique an educator happens to choose, different learners may have different perceptions (and preconceptions) of what is actually going on. At one stage, I thought this was a regional-cultural issue: that it was fine to fondle potatoes in England and dance salsa in Latin America but try it in Glasgow and see what you get! I now consider it more either personal experience, preference or phobia. In the example (No 6) of 'unpopular education' people with the same cultural background had totally opposing views on particular techniques. And there is nothing which makes particular techniques uniquely appropriate to a particular place or culture: Morven Gregor's article (2000) shows that even though the educational-drama techniques of the Brazilian Augusto Boal are now world-famous, Brazilians can be every bit as bashful and resistant to 'drama' as the Scots—and though the British delegates were shocked at first (example No 4), they quickly adapted to salsa in Mexico.

Not having a clear enough sense of the purpose behind a particular technique or activity, learners may feel apprehensive and dream up their worst-case scenario. The point of role-play in language teaching is to allow students to practise for going abroad (in pairs, one student plays a waiter while the other orders drinks, for example): if not, the only situation which can be talked about is being a student in a language class. It does not require drama skills or an extrovert personality but, from a previous negative experience, this was the student's perception (example No 2). 'Square go' is an extreme example (No 1) of what can happen when perceptions vary dramatically (lesson learned: always put a 'drama-in-progress' sign on the door).

So the success of a particular educational activity depends on the learner's *perception* as well as the activity itself. This has two practical implications for educators. Firstly, if a particular activity is unsuccessful, it might achieve a different result when presented a different way. For example, the perception of teacher-trainers in Dundee (example No 7) was that they had been set up to look stupid and they tried to exact some revenge (unfortunately, on me). The next time I ran it with teachers, I shifted the focus to how they thought their *pupils* would react to the video. Though the teachers were still effectively discussing their own images of Africa—projected onto their pupils—this time they did not feel personally targeted and the activity worked much better: had I done the same in Dundee, I'm sure there would have been no problems. Similarly, I felt the potato exercise (No 3) was ridiculous and I mocked it frequently in development education circles at the time. But I later learned it could be useful with younger children: presented to me in that context, I might have taken it (slightly) more seriously. The same applies to 'ice-breaker' activities (like 'The Fingers': No 5). In Scotland, these are regarded by many with disdain, seen variously as a complete waste of time, emotionally manipulative or too 'touchy-feely' for our traditional, calvinist culture. Yet a good ice-breaker really does enhance the learning environment. I find the best thing is to find one which doubles as something else, a survey of everyone in the group, say, on a theme relevant to the educational event. This is presented as a 'serious' exercise (though it includes humorous questions) and everyone has a chance to socialise, loosen up and be better disposed to engage in discussion: an ice-breaker, by any other name, will work sweeter.

Secondly, especially if you are unsure how people might react, it pays to explain your methods openly from the start. I love 'problematizing' methodology in Dubai (No 8)—a classic example, in popular education, of teacher and students genuinely learning from an exchange of knowledge—and even if anxieties are not immediately dispelled, students know that they are taken into account and agreements to proceed can be negotiated and reviewed. For example, I explain the classroom layout (so students can change partners frequently without climbing over chairs), ask them to try it out and say that if they are not convinced after two days we can go back to doing it their way. Mostly students are converted but if not, we have at least given it a try and established some joint responsibility for the course format.

### *Learning activities or gimmicks?*

Personally I love using good, exciting, participatory techniques. The selection of an appropriate activity makes a difference to the level of interest of the learners and,

as an educator, it is satisfying to think that people might enjoy themselves as well as learn something useful. But the activities should never be gimmicks: they must have a serious purpose and relate to the educational aims and objectives. Sociodrama can be wonderful for exploring complex, difficult issues but in the example of 'so-so drama' (No 4), the whole morning was wasted on trivia. You always take a chance with this technique, given its unpredictability, but if there is nothing substantial to 'problematise' it can fall flat on its face: in this case, a simple brainstorm on improving practice would have done a much better job. Similarly, I have stopped running the elaborate 'Bafa Bafa' (No 9). It is supposed to simulate the problems of interculturalism and while it is terrific fun to do, I eventually concluded that for adults, at least, the learning is so superficial that it does not justify the effort.

Basically, despite my enthusiasm for imaginative ways of teaching and learning, I do not think we should be so obsessive about methodology that it becomes an end in itself. Good active learning (or popular education, for that matter) need not be a permanent process of animated dialogue, physical movement and exciting, drama-related activities. Within a dialogical approach to education, at a particular moment in time it can be entirely appropriate to study and discuss a passage from a book or invite someone to explain, without interruption, their understanding of a particular theme. Even the traditional 'lecture' has its place, the difference being that a speaker is not considered the bearer of undisputed truth but a stimulus for deeper discussion and reflection. And as we saw in the example of the Landless People's Movement in Brazil, just because people join in some activity does not mean that they are learning anything.

### *The mediating role of the educator*

Educators have the crucial mediating role between learners and method. If they have a wide repertoire of techniques and a desire to find or create the appropriate activity for a particular occasion, they can have a real impact on the quality (and enjoyment) of the learning experience. But, as I think the examples of 'role-play' (No 2) and 'unpopular education' (No 7) reveal, if they use the wrong technique in the wrong way at the wrong time or for the wrong reasons, they can put people off a particular way of learning—or teaching—for life (if sociodrama were really enlisted for the purpose of manipulation, then the fault lay with the educator, not the technique). Educators have to be alert to learners' sensibilities and balance these against what they consider the objectively appropriate method. But it is a negotiable space: even if learners are reluctant to try something different it does not mean we cannot encourage and cajole. Education is about learning new things, after all.

And no activity or technique stands alone, independently of the social dynamic between educator and learner. What works for some educators (and learners) does not work for others. In Scotland, I would not attempt 'The Fingers' (No 5) unless on a semi-party occasion. Nor would I have tried it with the group in Nicaragua as I do not think I would have carried it off. Yet the educators who did had a touch of charisma, they did not hesitate in the slightest, everyone (including me) overcame their reluctance, joined in, really enjoyed it and the day got off to a terrific start. If educators are uncomfortable with a particular technique, they should think carefully before using it: hesitancy can be infectious. On the other

hand, we do not want to stereotype ourselves into a methodological straitjacket either. Example 10, 'Wee Willie Winkie', shows that elderly, disabled learners can welcome drama as much as anyone else, if only educators are willing to try it: we need to keep experimenting and making mistakes to improve.

At the end of the day, then, the techniques and activities of 'active learning' methodologies are only tools of the trade: the more you have in your bag the better, and you have to use the right one for the job, they can be used with greater or lesser degrees of skill and the material you work with makes a difference.

But the questions that really matter are who are the artisans and what are they trying to construct? Back me into a corner and I would rather be lectured to death by a left-wing activist (barring a few notable exceptions) than join in some super-dynamic, mega-participatory workshop run by the CIA. But I am a bit old-fashioned that way.

### Conclusion

'Active' (as well as 'participatory') learning is an increasingly common term in education which comes squarely under the broad category of 'teaching as the facilitation of learning': what might loosely be called 'active learning methodologies' provide a host of imaginative pedagogical techniques for engaging learners in the educational process across a range of subject matters and in both formal and non-formal settings. However, at both a conceptual and practical level, a number of questions can be asked as to whether active learning actually achieves what it claims. While I generally consider myself a staunch supporter of active learning, I have argued that in any given situation the success of an active learning methodology depends not on the methodology alone but, ultimately, on the ever-evolving, dialectical relationship between methodology and learners, mediated by the educator.

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