Case Study – Active Learning

Read the following case study and then discuss with your group the questions that follow.

Karen has been teaching full-time at PCC for 4 years now. When she first started as an adjunct in 2012, she had no idea that she would fall in love with teaching and wind up being a full-time instructor. From the very beginning, Karen has always enjoyed talking about teaching with her colleagues, and if you were to ask her about her own learning trajectory as an instructor she would openly share how that learning curve was a steep one for her. During the first couple of years, Karen says all of her energy and attention were dedicated to: (a) figuring out the various logistical processes and procedures connected with being an instructor at PCC (e.g., Canvas, adding and dropping students, PCC Connect, etc.), and (b) gaining a solid grasp on the course content she was responsible to teach. Only in the last year or two has she begun to think more explicitly about her own pedagogical and instructional approaches and the ways in which they might be shaping her students' success. Coincidentally, Karen's own refocusing of attention onto pedagogy and instruction has occurred at the same time that multiple college initiatives have begun emphasizing the need to improve student success rates, and eliminate observable equity gaps along the lines of race/ethnicity.

During the 2017-2018 academic year, the Academic Senate sponsored two student panels. One was titled: "Why I Dropped Your Class," and the other was titled: "Why I Completed Your Class." Karen attended both and was intrigued by what she heard at these events. During the latter panel, one student named Bryan shared about the value of working in groups during class. Apparently, after getting to know the other students through group work, he often discussed with them his questions about the course content. He stated: "That's the meaning of going to college…to learn something, to be more knowledgeable…not just to be seated there and listening to the class."

In reflecting on what she heard at these panels, Bryan's comments were most striking to Karen. She had recently begun to pay attention to the fact that not all students in her own classroom were engaging with the course material in the ways she wanted them to. Determined to enhance student success and equity in her own classroom, Karen began exploring some of the literature on active learning and found the evidence in support of this approach to be quite compelling. She settled on a couple of strategies to try out in her own classroom—(a) think, pair, share; and (b) jigsaw—and immediately began to incorporate them.

While all of the students who typically engaged with Karen during class continued to do so, these new strategies seemed to have little immediate effect on the engagement of those she was specifically trying to reach. This initial lack-luster result did not deter Karen, however, as she was convinced these strategies could improve engagement for all students. She consequently continued to implement these two strategies through to the end of the semester, but her success never really improved. Whenever she asked students to do a think-pair-share or a jigsaw, they at best half-heartedly played along, and at worst completely disregarded her request and conveyed a sense of frustration. Karen was perplexed. Why were her students not willing to fully participate in these activities? What was she doing or not doing to produce such an outcome? Was this whole active learning thing just another big idea that does not really work in reality?

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<u>Discussion Questions</u>

1. Reflect on Karen's situation. What might be some of the reasons her implementation of these two active learning strategies has not been entirely successful?

   a. Is it possible that Karen might be making some inaccurate assumptions about her students? Explain.

   b. What assumptions might students have about Karen's instruction? Explain.