Lecture Breaks That Involve Students

Lectures promote more and better learning when they include breaks that involve students. Here are eight strategies you can use to make that happen. Use strictly enforced time limits, circulate around class listening to what students are saying, and encourage students to exchange quietly with each other to keep the noise level reasonable.

Pair and compare - Students pair with a person sitting nearby and compare the notes they’ve taken so far. They should be encouraged to expand their notes during the process.

Pair, compare, and ask - Students do the above but conclude by jotting down a question they may have about the material. You might field a few of these questions before moving in to new material.

Periodic free recall, with pair-and-compare option – Students stop taking notes, close their notebooks, and on a clean piece of paper they write down the two or three most important points made in the lecture so far. Student may do this individually, then compare and discuss what they’ve written.

Listen, recall, and ask; then pair, compare, and answer – You deliver a short (emphasis on the short) lecturette during which students only listen. They do not take notes. When you’re done, they write down the major points they’ve heard and any questions they have about them. Students should be encouraged to leave space between the major points so that when they partner and compare points, they can add material they may have missed. They might also be able to answer some of the questions noted.

Solve a problem – This may be an actual problem or it might be a test question. You might have students compare answers with a neighbor. Or you might have students vote for an option and then discuss the various possibilities with a partner.

Quick case study – Students work with a brief (one- to four-paragraph) case applying the content just presented in class. You might focus discussion of the case with specific questions. They might address those questions individually before they are discussed with a partner or in groups.

Pair/group and discuss- Students work together to discuss an open-ended question that involves the application, analysis, or evaluation of material just presented in lecture. Having students write something as part of this activity solidifies insights offered in discussion.

Adapted from The Teaching Professor, October 2003.