The RCC Teaching and Learning Playbook
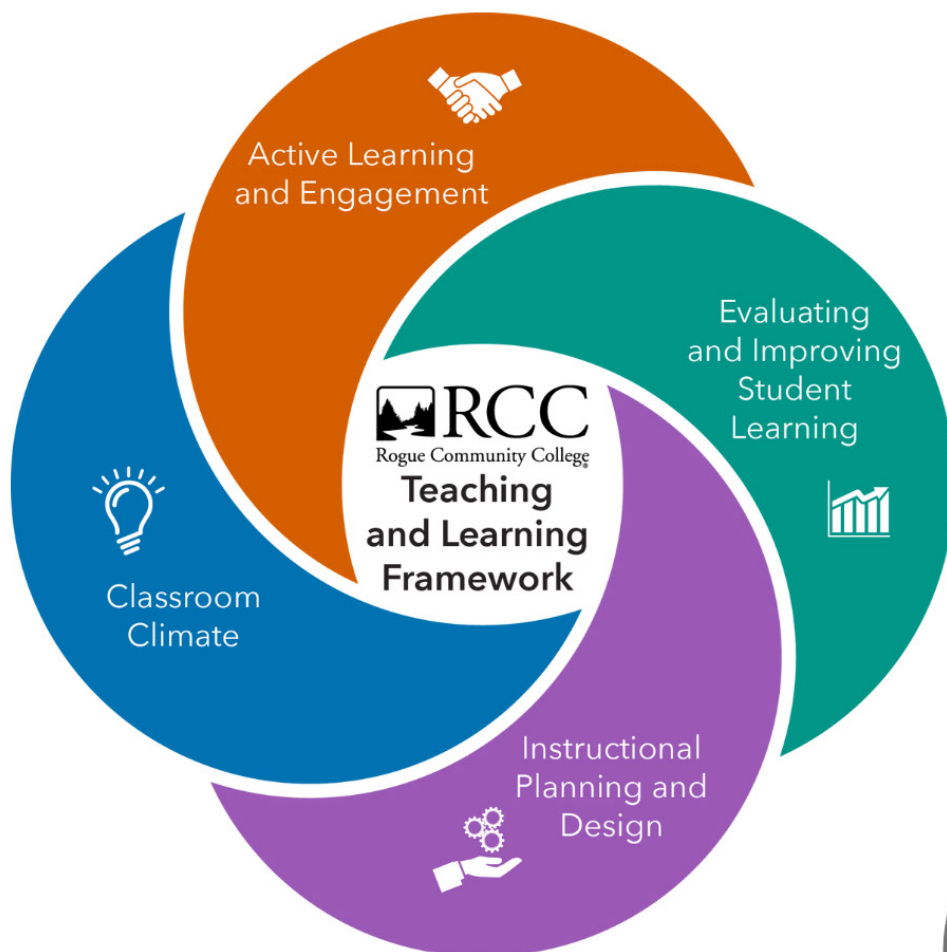
A curated list of practices and strategies that work

Part 3: Active Learning and Engagement

RCC
Rogue Community College
Teaching and Learning Framework

- Active Learning and Engagement
- Evaluating and Improving Student Learning
- Instructional Planning and Design
- Classroom Climate

Compiled by Your friends in the Teaching and Learning Center

What is active learning? What is engagement?

Active learning is a teaching approach that actively involves students in the learning process. Rather than passively receiving information, students engage with the material through meaningful activities and thoughtful reflection. This process fosters collaboration, autonomy, and deeper understanding. When appropriate, technology can be a valuable tool to support these goals by creating interactive and flexible learning environments that offer personalized feedback and enhance engagement.

Engagement refers to the level of interest, attention, and motivation that students display during activities. Engaged students are mentally and emotionally invested in their learning, participate actively, and feel a sense of connection to the content, their peers, and the overall learning experience. Promoting autonomy through choice and encouraging self-reflection helps students take ownership of their learning and deepen their understanding.

What's in this part of the playbook?

For more support with these and other teaching and learning strategies, reach out to us at oa@roguecc.edu.

Active learning strategies

What they are:

- Approaches that facilitate active participation, ensuring students are engaged in the learning process rather than passively receiving information

- A mix of instructional delivery methods (e.g., direct instruction, group work, self-directed learning) and guided discussion activities designed to promote collaboration and critical thinking

When to use them:

- When introducing new information that requires active practice and engagement for students to solidify their understanding

- Whenever students need to process new concepts, develop skills, or practice academic language in meaningful contexts

- During group work or paired activities to facilitate deeper understanding through dialogue and collaboration

What to look out for:

- Ensure clear instructions for activities, providing models and examples as needed to guide student engagement.

- Strive for balance among various strategies to accommodate different learning styles and preferences.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

Guided, shared learning

This strategy is a way to shift the responsibility from instructor to students as they gain proficiency in a skill or concept.

Gradual Release of Responsibility is a structured approach to learning framed around four stages: **I Do, We Do, Y'all Do, and You Do**.

In the **I Do** stage, the instructor models the skill or concept by demonstrating processes, strategies, or problem-solving methods. Students observe and take notes, focusing on understanding the foundational steps.

The **We Do** phase shifts to a collaborative approach, with the instructor guiding students through practice. Here, students actively engage with the task, working alongside the instructor who offers support and clarifications as needed.

In **Y'all Do**, students practice with their peers in pairs or small groups. This stage encourages deeper understanding through collaboration, allowing students to refine their skills and receive feedback from classmates. The instructor steps back but remains available for guidance.

Finally, **You Do** empowers students to apply what they've learned independently. By this point, students should feel confident in demonstrating the skill or concept on their own, showing mastery through individual tasks or assessments.

This sequence gradually builds students' confidence and ability, scaffolding them toward independent, self-assured learning.

Checklist: Gradual Release of Responsibility

The instructor:	✓
Demonstrates the new skill or concept to students (I do).	
Models how and when to use specific strategies and resources (I do).	
Provides structured opportunities for students to practice the skill with support (We do, Y'all do).	
Provides timely, targeted feedback to students during guided practice (We do, Y'all do).	
Allows time for students to incorporate feedback into their work (We do, Y'all do).	
Reduces the support (scaffolding) as students demonstrate increased understanding or skill.	
Gives students opportunities to demonstrate the knowledge or skill on their own (You do).	
Returns to any of the previous stages at any time if students need more guided practice or modeling.	

Case-Based Learning

A guided inquiry approach

This strategy focuses on creative problem solving using both real-life and mock scenarios.

Case-based learning actively engages students in analyzing and solving real-world scenarios that often mirror professional or field-specific challenges. By working through realistic scenarios, students can apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations, reinforcing their understanding through active application and helping them make meaningful connections between classroom content and the demands of their future careers.

The selection of quality cases and scenarios to study is crucial. Often, instructors can find open-access cases online that are relevant to the topics students are studying. Alternatively, instructors can write their own cases tailored to specific learning outcomes. Guiding questions are essential for structuring the case analysis and ensuring that discussions remain focused and aligned with learning objectives.

Instructors often encourage students to identify and debate multiple solutions, weigh evidence, and consider diverse perspectives, making the activity rich in learning potential.

In addition to fostering academic skills, case-based learning nurtures soft skills that are invaluable in professional settings. Through peer interaction, students also learn to respect diverse viewpoints and develop strategies for consensus-building.

After a group discussion, the class debrief session may spark further insights and support students in refining their analytical skills. Follow-up assignments, such as individual reflections or written analyses, can deepen comprehension and encourage students to evaluate both their own and their group's approach to the case.

Checklist:
Case-Based Learning

The instructor:	✓
Selects or creates cases that tell an interesting story that is relevant to students and to the learning outcomes.	
Selects or creates cases that are complex (i.e., have many factors to consider) and do not have one obvious solution.	
Creates guiding questions that focus students' attention on key aspects of the case and facilitate group conversation.	
Establishes the expectations for pair or group work (e.g., if any pre-work is needed).	
Assigns students to pairs or groups (if collaborative learning is the instructor's intention).	
Monitors in-class discussions and steers groups back on track when necessary.	
Designs an assessment method for students to showcase their analysis and provide evidence of meeting learning outcomes.	

Simulations

The power of experiential learning

This strategy is a way for students to apply their learning in a realistic role-play, game, or exercise.

Simulations immerse students in real-world scenarios where students role-play positions related to their field of study. This experiential method enhances understanding of complex concepts and promotes the development of essential skills. Whether it involves role-playing a negotiation, conducting a mock trial, or engaging in a simulated crisis response, simulations provide a dynamic environment for learners to apply their knowledge in a practical context.

Creating a simulation from scratch can be tricky, especially when attempting to replicate situations with numerous complex factors. Focusing on learning outcomes helps instructors decide what to emphasize or simplify, with simpler simulations often leading to more effective learning.

Thorough preparation is essential, including pre-simulation discussions, readings, supplies, equipment, or even preliminary exercises that introduce key elements they will encounter. Providing an overview of the simulation helps students understand the expectations and scope of their roles, setting the stage for meaningful participation.

The debriefing session following the simulation is one of its most valuable components. Reflection allows students to share their experiences, analyze their decisions, and reinforce the intended learning outcomes. This critical reflection enables students to grasp the nuances of the experience, developing deeper insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the material.

Checklist: Simulations

The instructor:	✓
Ensures simulation scenarios reflect authentic workplace situations and challenges.	
Selects or designs simulations to be realistic, yet manageable for students in terms of the factors represented.	
Prepares students with clear objectives, relevant knowledge reinforcement, and an overview of the simulation activity.	
Facilitate active student engagement and provide necessary support during the simulation.	
Conduct a thorough debrief session for students to reflect on the simulation experience and reinforce learning.	

Think-Alouds

Making thinking more evident

This strategy, traditionally used in reading instruction, can be used by instructors and students alike to describe thought processes.

Think-alouds are an excellent way to bring complex thinking processes to the surface, making invisible cognitive strategies visible. As the instructor, you are the expert in selecting from a set of tools and strategies to solve a problem, often drawing on years of experience and training. Students can benefit greatly from hearing how an expert approaches complex thinking.

When an instructor conducts a think-aloud, they verbalize their inner dialogue, narrating their thought process step-by-step as they tackle a problem. This approach not only highlights the decision-making that occurs at each stage but also emphasizes key strategies, such as evaluating options, weighing pros and cons, and considering alternative solutions. By witnessing this process in action, students can gradually internalize the instructor's dialogue, which serves as a guide for their own thinking and problem-solving capabilities.

Students can also do think-alouds! When they do, they provide instructors with valuable insights into their problem-solving choices and reasoning. This practice allows instructors to assess individual students' understanding, identify misconceptions, and tailor their support accordingly. Think-alouds contribute to a collaborative learning environment where students learn from one another by observing and imitating each other's thought processes. Encouraging students to share their thinking not only enhances their own learning via metacognition, but also builds a classroom culture of openness, curiosity, and collective growth.

Checklist:
Think-Alouds

The instructor:	✓
Identifies the problem-solving scenario, anticipating pitfalls and outlining key decision points.	
Articulates step-by-step thinking aloud, highlighting reasoning and decision-making.	
Discusses potential errors and offers strategies for avoiding those errors.	
Gradually releases responsibility to the students for explaining their own thought processes (modeled after the instructor's think-aloud).	
Intentionally incorporates opportunities for students to carry out their own think-alouds, whether as a whole group or in small groups.	

Sharing Stories

Speaking from experience

This strategy is one of the oldest forms of teaching and is a powerful way to connect and inspire.

Before the advent of printed word, oral storytelling was arguably the most common form of teaching. Stories build familiarity and trust, allowing listeners to engage with the content as if they were experiencing it firsthand. When used appropriately, storytelling can appeal to all types of learners—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—and can effectively cement key concepts in their minds.

However, not all stories are equally effective. We've all encountered narratives that detract from the main purpose or undermine the intended message. It's crucial that any stories employed in teaching are closely aligned with learning outcomes, ensuring that they serve a clear educational purpose. This alignment helps students see the relevance of the story to their learning, enhancing retention and understanding.

Effective storytelling in the classroom requires a careful balance. A good story should be concise yet rich in detail, engaging without overwhelming emotion, and academic in tone without being too dry. Incorporating elements such as vivid imagery, relatable characters, and meaningful conflicts can make the narrative resonate with students, allowing them to connect with the material on a deeper level.

Additionally, incorporating student-generated stories or encouraging them to share their own experiences related to the lesson can further enrich the learning environment. This approach not only fosters a sense of community but also empowers students to see themselves as integral to the learning process, reinforcing their understanding through personal connection.

Checklist:
Sharing Stories

Effective stories are:	✓
Academically relevant: Does the story have a strong connection to the learning outcomes that students are working toward?	
Not dull: Is the story of interest to students or just to the teacher?	
Concise: Have you cut out every word that you can? Generally, shorter stories are more powerful.	
Vivid: Have you included enough details to paint a rich picture?	
Emotional: Will the story touch students' hearts or get some other strong emotional reaction?	
Surprising: Can you make the story more effective by including a surprise ending?	
Humble: Does it glorify or inappropriately celebrate the teacher's successes? If so, that might be off-putting to students	

Technology tools to enhance learning

What they are:

- Digital resources and platforms that support teaching and learning by enhancing student engagement, collaboration, and accessibility.

- Tools that range from interactive apps for quizzes and discussions to platforms that facilitate peer collaboration and content creation

When to use them:

- When they meaningfully support the achievement of learning outcomes

- To promote student autonomy, build interactive experiences, and provide varied ways for students to express their learning

- To conduct formative assessments and provide feedback

- To support online or hybrid learning

What to look out for:

- Consider how intuitive the tool is for both students and instructors. An overly complex tech tool can hinder rather than enhance learning

- Balance technology use to prioritize those with the highest educational impact. Too many tools can overwhelm students.

Interactivity and Engagement

Tech tools that promote live interaction and feedback during lessons

Lumio

Interactive lesson delivery platform that allows students to actively engage with lessons

Slido

Live polls, Q&A, and quizzes to encourage student interaction and active learning

Kahoot!

Game-based quizzes and learning activities

Poll Everywhere

Live polls, word clouds, and Q&A to boost interaction

Click or scan here to see our complete list of recommended tech tools

Collaboration and Discussion

Tech tools that foster collaborative learning and student interaction

Perusall

Social reading platform where students can collaboratively annotate texts

Padlet

Collaborative boards for brainstorming, discussions, and organization/sharing of ideas

Figjam

Digital whiteboard for brainstorming, collaboration, and interactive activities

Content Creation and Presentation

Tech tools that help students and instructors create interactive or visual content

Scribe

Chrome browser extension that allows you to easily make step-by-step tutorials

Canva

Graphic design tool for creating visually engaging images, infographics, and other multimedia content

Panopto

Recording and sharing videos within the Blackboard ecosystem

Click or scan here to see our complete list of recommended tech tools

Studying and Review

Tools designed to help students study, review, and reinforce knowledge

Knowt

Flashcard-based learning tool that allows students to create and study quizzes from their notes

My Free Bingo Cards

Gamify review sessions using a classic Bingo format

Jeopardy Labs

Another gamified review option that uses the familiar Jeopardy! format

Bonus! Consider pairing Jeopardy Labs with the free Multibuzzer app.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Tools that promote live interaction and feedback during lessons

ChatPDF

Allows users to upload PDFs and ask questions about the content, receiving answers and summaries instantly

Google NotebookLM

Notetaking and research tool that can analyze documents to provide summaries, answer questions, and even create audio overviews

Blackboard AI Design Assistant

Interactive lesson delivery and collaboration platform that allows students to actively engage with multimedia lessons

ChatGPT

Conversational tool for generating text-based responses, providing explanations, brainstorming ideas, and answering questions

Practices that promote student autonomy

What they are:

- Strategies and methods that empower students to take ownership of their learning

- Practices that give students opportunities to make choices, reflect on their progress, and set their own goals

When to use them:

- Throughout the course to encourage self-directed learning, self-regulation, and adaptability

- In assignments where students need to work through challenges independently or collaborate in meaningful ways

- In formative assessments so that students take active roles in monitoring progress toward learning goals

What to look out for:

- Try to balance support with independence. Too much autonomy without adequate structure can lead to frustration. Provide clear guidelines, resource, and check-ins to support students adequately as they develop autonomy.

- Offer varying levels of choice to accommodate different comfort and skill levels.

Student Choice

Increase engagement by allowing students to choose assignments or project topics that resonate with their personal interests or career goals.

What this looks like in practice:

- Offering multiple options for projects or research topics, or letting students propose their own in alignment with course outcomes.
- Creating a choice board of readings or other learning activities that are all aligned to the learning outcome yet varied by topic and skill level.

Student-Led Discussion

Cultivate students' communication skills while giving them an active role in shaping their learning experience.

What this looks like in practice:

- Each student, pair, or group takes responsibility for leading a discussion or presenting on a topic in support of learning outcomes. They design guiding questions, facilitate discussion, and field questions from classmates.

Flexible Deadlines

Allowing flexibility with when students can turn in work encourages them to take responsibility for their time management while accommodating personal schedules and learning paces.

What this looks like in practice:

- Ideal due date vs. real due date: Students are encouraged to turn in their work by the ideal due date, which aligns with the course's pacing and supports consistent learning progression. However, if they need extra time, they may submit their work by the real due date – typically set about a week later. This approach helps students balance their personal schedules with course expectations.

Student-Generated Exam Questions

Creating exam questions helps students think critically about course material, reflect on key concepts and skills, and consider how to assess learning.

What this looks like in practice:

- Prior to an exam, students submit potential questions that demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes. The instructor may include some of these questions in the actual exam, which also gives students a stake in the assessment process.

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Practices that create opportunities for reflection

What they are:

- Structured opportunities for students to look back on their learning, draw connections, and make meaning of new concepts.

- Ways for students to engage with the material on a personal level, promoting self-awareness and a deeper understanding of how learning aligns with goals.

When to use them:

- After key learning activities, assessments, or major milestones to help students consolidate knowledge and identify progress.

- When introducing complex concepts as a way to gauge students' understanding and to guide future instruction based on their reflections.

What to look out for:

- Because reflection can feel personal and may reveal struggles or uncertainties, it's important to create an environment where students feel their reflections are respected and valued.

- Prompt students to explore both what they've learned and how they're learning it. Encourage metacognition (thinking about one's own thinking) and making connections to prior knowledge.

Self-Assessment and Goal Setting

Empower students to reflect on their current understanding or skill level and set personalized goals for improvement.

What this looks like in practice:

- At the beginning of a new topic or unit of study, students complete a self-assessment related to the outcomes and identify specific areas they want to focus on. Students periodically revisit these goals to adjust them based on their progress.

Reflective Journaling

Encourage ongoing self-reflection to help students make connections between learning content and their personal or academic development.

What this looks like in practice:

- Students keep a journal throughout the term where they reflect on their learning experiences, challenges, and growth.
- The instructor may offer prompts to keep journaling focused on key learning outcomes and goals.

Debrief Discussions

Post-activity discussions encourage students to reflect on what they learned and process it as a group, which reinforces key concepts and promotes self-awareness.

What this looks like in practice:

- After completing a project or in-class activity, the instructor leads a guided discussion, asking students to consider what went well, what was challenging, and how they might apply the learning to future situations.
- Students are given the opportunity to reflect on how their performance in the project or activity relates to the learning outcomes, examining both their strengths and areas for growth.

Concept Mapping

Concept maps enable students to visualize their understanding of a topic and make connections between ideas, reinforcing reflective thinking on complex material.

What this looks like in practice:

- After learning a new topic, students create a concept map that connects major themes, subtopics, and key details.
- Instructors may find it helpful to provide an example or two of concept mapping so that students have a clear idea of the product.
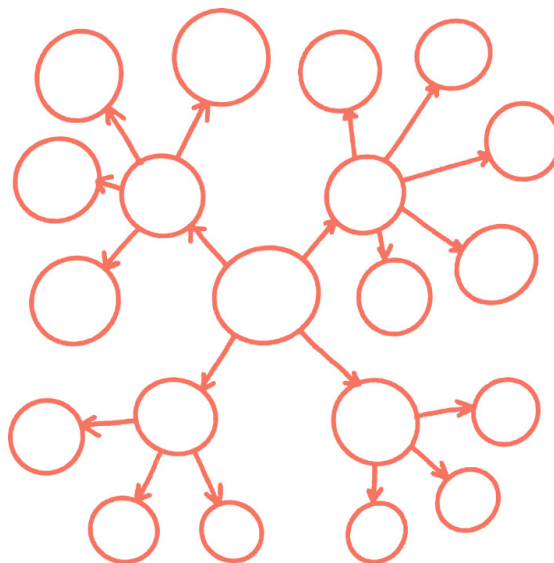
Additional resources for active learning and engagement

For more active learning strategy ideas:

See Teaching Tools' Active Learning Library and K. Patricia Cross Academy's library

For more strategies to get students discussing and interacting:

Visit the Cult of Pedagogy's Big List of Class Discussion Strategies

To scaffold students' academic discussions using talk prompts:

See the Progression of Talk PDF in this Edutopia article

For more support with these and other teaching and learning strategies, reach out to us at oa@roguecc.edu.

Looking for more resources to support you in your teaching and learning journey?

Discover the big picture! Dive into the full framework and its focus areas:

Promote connection and trust! Encourage meaningful interactions and collaboration:

Plan with purpose! Craft impactful learning experiences using backward design principles:

Measure what matters! Create meaningful assessments that promote growth and reflection: