



## Regular Article

# ***Active Learning is a Pedagogical Approach: the Meaning and Philosophy behind***

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### **Abstract**

Regarding the broad meaning of pedagogy and its relations with other concepts in the educational field, this article aims at presenting the concept of pedagogy shortly; explaining how it is related to other aspects of the field of education. One of those aspects that are in the interest of educators around the world currently is active learning.

**Key words:** *Active Learning; Pedagogical Approach; Meaning; Philosophy behind.*

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## **Introduction:**

Historically, pedagogy is an educational concept, but it has not had specific definitions. Traditionally pedagogy is viewed as a tool between the outcomes defined in curricula and other guiding documents and the learning process, so it should be goal and student oriented and be a systematic process. On a general level, Watkins & Mortimore (1999) explained that pedagogy can be understood to mean raising young learners in the society. The Greek-origin word *paidagogin*, simply means "to lead the child." In the English-speaking world the concept of pedagogy is related to formal learning environments and classroom-based learning because of teachers' interventions.

## **The Meaning of Pedagogy:**

Kangas et al (2021) explained that the concept of pedagogy has come to cover the practice, teaching orientation, organization of the learning environment, and the operational culture. Van Oers (2008) added that pedagogy is understood as a concept of teaching in curriculum documents and often connected with the general understanding and beliefs of learning. Van Oers (2008) and Fler (2010) concerned with the pedagogy of learners' education in the context of learning. Some of their concerns are adult oriented such as learning to perform and learning to make meaning, and some are child oriented such as learning to belong and learning to participate. Van Oers (2008) put a model of pedagogy aimed at learning of important concepts and skills that are appropriate for the cultural community and set by more advanced members of the community, where the pedagogy aims to produce learning. All those aspects are consistent with active learning approach starting by its meaning and philosophy behind.

## **- The Meaning and Definition of Active Learning:**

Although active learning as a concept was emerged and flourished within the last decades of the twentieth century, it was emerged since the ancient times in most philosophies and theories and has reemerged in the relative modern learning theories. Also it was recommended in the thoughts of philosophers who were interested in thinking about how individuals learn.

Practically, active learning has been applied by some educational scholars in some developed countries during the years of the second half of the twentieth century when some British and American education institutions energized in promoting the use of activities through the instructional situation. For example, "Nuffield Foundation" and School Council of England pledged to develop curricula in the period of 1950-1970 regarding the content of subjects and learner-centered teaching methods. In the United States, there were many recommendations called that educational institutions should adopt learning strategies that address mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, social aspects of the learner.

However, several definitions have been developed which are affiliated to active learning concept as well as active learning strategies. To define active learning, the two parts of the concept: "active" and "learning" are to be described briefly here. For the first part of the concept which is "active"; it was reported that there are many definitions for the word "activity". For instance, activity was described as the means that can be used to enrich and vitalize the curriculum based on learners' dealing with the natural and human components of the surrounding environment in order to acquire the initial experiences that lead to the development of their knowledge, attitudes, and values directly. Practically, the term of activity can be described as the procedure which is organized by the school to be integrated with the content to enhance and support it and motivate the learner to be active and positive, either inside or outside the classroom to acquire information, skills, and experiences that lead to her/his comprehensive development. There is no doubt that the previous meaning can help making the school like a complete and integrated community that trains young people on the lives of communities. Moreover, this meaning can infuse the spirit of community inside learners, train them on the mutual and cooperative understanding and support and endure their personalities as they face the challenges of life.

Regarding the definition of "learning", several definitions have been mentioned in previous literatures. Those definitions have been undergone in light of views of those pioneers and researchers as specialists in the learning process. However, it has been concluded from several previous writings that some describe learning as a "result"; a result that happens according to learners' performing of certain experiences. Others describe it as a "process"; a process that causes a change in the behavior of the individual. In this context, some psychologists tend to describe learning as a result; such as saying "a change in behavior" or "a relative permanent change in behavior" or "a semi-permanent change in behavior". On the other hand, many researchers in the field of curricula and instruction tend to describe learning as a procedure that learner practices during the instructional situation in order to gain information, skills, and aspects of thinking that satisfy her/his current desires and help her/him solve life problems in the future after graduation. Generally, Stephen Klein, in his book "Learning: Principles and Applications" 2002, defined learning as an experiential process resulting in a relatively permanent change in behavior of the individual. From the previous educational points of view, it can be concluded that learning is an active process, and the learner is the center of active learning situation. Hence, the role of school and community is to take care of that by providing experiences to help the learner acquire the behavioral habits as well as the other desired educational aspects. Those behavioral habits serve as a reference for learning in line with the common definition of learning that is: relative permanent change in the behavior of the individual as a result of performing experience related to that behavior.

So active learning means something different to different individuals, and while some believe that we do not need a theoretical definition of active learning as long as it is impossible to learn

anything without activity, we must understand the role of active learning and how it can be used with learners in different ages. We must believe in the active learning approach during which the learner is involved in reading, writing, listening, deliberating, and giving her/his points of view as a result of practicing of those processes. Active learning is different from the traditional method of teaching in which the teacher is a lecturer and the learner is a receiver of nothing but theoretical information.

Generally speaking, active learning has many attributes including that it is planned, organized, purposeful, meaningful, actual, and practical, done by learners, and guided by teachers ...etc. It demands reading, writing, playing, drawing and solving problems. However, (McKinney, 1998) stated that active learning is based on two assumptions: a) learning is usually an active process carried out by learners, b) learning, as noted by the results of research studies, can be in the highest level when the learner is engaged completely in the instructional situation. Usually, active learning can be practiced in the various stages of education, from pre-school to post-graduate; it can be done with small and large groups based on the willingness of both teachers and learners. All those components for active learning came in the core of pedagogy.

### **- Philosophical Foundations of Active Learning:**

Generally, philosophy has been emerged generally to look at beyond what has been seen and perceived in our daily life. It has come with science together to meet the human needs, interests, and desires. Perhaps one of the most important benefits of returning to the philosophical foundations of any phenomenon is to help searching for the origin of this phenomenon. Considering active learning as an idea was recommended in the philosophies generally and in the philosophies of education particularly. Also it can be said that active learning as a procedure has been attained in all approaches, strategies, and methods of teaching and learning which came as a result of recommendations and applications of those philosophies. Since philosophy expresses thoughts and perceptions taken from the culture of society, education represents the practical aspect which converts these thoughts and perceptions to the behavior and practices carried out by the individual in her/his life. In other words, if philosophy is a reflective and intellectual process, education is an the field of implementation.

Regarding the relationship between philosophies and active learning, it has been appeared that there was some features relate to active learning in those philosophies especially in respect to individual activity through instructional situation. At the same time, those features of active learning with philosophical opinions are in the core of pedagogy. Here are some philosophies that have a background on active learning.

**Idealism:** despite the dualism philosophy of Plato (427-347 BC) came to encourage preparing the mind through memorization, it was accompanied with the Socrate's method of dialogue and with the Plato's method of questioning at the end of his age.

**Realism:** Aristotle's (384-322 BC.) realism explained that the facts come from the real sensory world and must be examined and discovered through the real life of the individual. Then individual should use her/his senses through dealing with the nature around. In his book, "The Book of Self," Aristotle confirmed the direct observation for things and then identifying the common characteristics among them, and distinguishing essentials from non-essentials in order to reach the essence of things. Does not this represent one of the basics of active learning now?

**Pragmatism:** pragmatism returns to Herclese (535-475 BC) and was flourished with John Dewy and Wiliam James through the nineteenth and twentieth century. It came to confirm that education is life, so it called for learning by doing. It called also for using varied and multiple teaching methods and focused on using experimentation, projects, problem solving, inquiry, and discovery through learning. Moreover, the curriculum of this philosophy was based on activities.

**Humanism:** although Humanism was flourished during the Renaissance, it focused on the mind as a human function and thinking as a function of the human brain. It also focused on activities across the curriculum and recommended putting the real problems of life in front of the learner to help her/him observe, discover, practice, be curious, and examine in active context.

**Naturalism:** Naturalism concerned with learning through the use of direct experience. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of its pioneers, said "Let nature educates the child according to its principles, and hence the role of the teacher is to encourage the learner to teach her/himself."

**Essentialism:** Essentialism came during the twentieth century in the United States to confirm that school should work as a ship to reform the society, and must prepare proficient learners to live in that society. So it focused on the learning of reading, writing, and arithmetic as fundamental aspects in learners' life. And no one can ignore the importance of these aspects as basics of acquiring many other skills and abilities required to attain active and effective learning.

**Progressivism:** Progressivism which derived its principles from pragmatism came to explain that the value of the ideas comes from the practice and implementation. So its pioneers confirmed that function of the school should extend to improve the quality of life of the individuals and community, and not only to teach the basics of knowledge for them. To attain this purpose, progressivism focused on providing and developing new approaches of teaching and learning, and also called for several principles that are being recommended currently in active learning situations. Those principles are like learning from nature, individual learning, self-learning, personal responsibility in learning, and classifying learners during the instructional situations according to their abilities and interests, and curriculum design based on problems.

**Perennialism:** Perennialism has appeared during the twentieth century in the United States. Although it was built on the ideas of Socrates that referred to the importance of languages and mathematics as the heart of formal education, it explained that the learner should discover the facts and values from the curriculum by her/himself. One of the pioneers of that philosophy was Robert Hutchins who stated that studying literatures in an integrated context can make the learner ready for anything in her/his life. He believed that when individual learns to read, write, and calculate, she/he can have a great chance to think about the traded facts and ideas in the community, and then it is easier to live with that community (Travers & Rebores, 2000). With regard to what can be attributed to active learning here, it can be said that this philosophy recommended reading, writing, calculating, discussing, and debating. These aspects can help learners move, work, practice, and think about the social, economic, and political issues around them in their daily life.

**Social Reconstructivism:** this philosophy, was emerged within the confines of progressivism. It considered the school as a means to reform social, political and economic aspects of the community and then strengthens the relationship between school and community. Accordingly, its pioneers focused enthusiastically on the activity-based curriculum and participation and contribution of learners in community life. Some of active learning strategies that emerged as a result of these philosophy recommendations are: problem solving, discussion, projects, and field trips. It also recommended that school must reflect the social life outside school.

**Existentialism:** this philosophy came prior to the mid-twentieth century in Europe and the United States. It confirmed that as long as the individual is responsible for her/his personal happiness, she/he must develop her/his abilities and potentials. It recommended that a learner should choose the greatest amount of knowledge and skills to learn and be in a manner that helps her/him accept those knowledge and skills. It focused on the individual projects with reflective thinking, and recommended making literature and humanitarian studies areas a fertile ground for those who are looking for the development of their capacity to express themselves. Moreover, this philosophy recommended that teachers and learners should work together to develop open and safe relationships. Travers and Rebores (2000) stated that although there is no an actual large number of teachers applied the recommendations of this philosophy in its infancy in public schools; psychologists may have supported this trend because they usually deal with the emerged problems of learners based on their personal needs.

Shortly, this article has tried to explain the meaning of pedagogy and how much it is related to one the most important issues in education field which is active learning. Active learning is a compressive approach that has its special meaning, philosophical foundations, characteristics, purposes, strategies and benefits for all ages. So it is related to the broad meaning of pedagogy according to the pedagogical aspects that were explained through the starting point of this article and need to be more studied and researched together.

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Active Learning is a Pedagogical Approach: the Meaning and Philosophy behind

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