

Effectiveness of Active Learning in Social Science Courses at Japanese Universities

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Abstract : In recent years, Japanese universities have begun to face a dilemma: more than half of all high school graduates go on to attend an institution of higher learning, overwhelming Japanese universities accustomed to small student bodies. These universities have been forced to embrace qualitative changes to accommodate the increased number and diversity of students who enter their establishments, students who differ in their motivations for learning, their levels of eagerness to learn, and their perspectives on the future. One of these changes is an increase in awareness among Japanese educators of the importance of active learning, which deepens students' understanding of course material through a range of activities, including writing, speaking, thinking, and presenting, in addition to conventional "passive learning" methods such as listening to a one-way lecture. The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the teaching method adapted to improve active learning. A teaching method designed to promote active learning was implemented in a social science course at one of the most popular universities in Japan. A questionnaire using a five-point response format was given to students in 2,305 courses throughout the university to evaluate the effectiveness of the method based on the following measures: the ratio of students who were motivated to attend the classes, the rate at which students learned new information, and the teaching method adopted in the classes. The results of this study show that the percentage of students who attended the active learning course eagerly, and the rate of new knowledge acquired through the course, both exceeded the average for the university, the department, and the subject area of social science. In addition, there are strong correlations between teaching method and student motivation and between teaching method and knowledge acquisition rate. These results indicate that the active learning teaching method was effectively implemented and that it may improve student eagerness to attend class and motivation to learn.

Keywords : active learning, Japanese university, teaching method, university education

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