

# Doing Learning Differently: International Student Experiences with Active Learning

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## ABSTRACT

Active learning has been advocated as a method of instruction in higher educations since the early 1980s, yet little attention has been paid to the way students respond to— and *perceive the quality of*— active learning instruction. Notably, there is little understanding of how international students, who prior educational experiences are with transmission-centered instruction, are frequently under-prepared for the diversity of active learning instructional strategies used in American higher education. Therefore, we ask *how do international students perceive the quality and benefit of active learning instruction in American higher education?*

Shifting the evaluation paradigm to focus on student-centered classroom experiences, we conducted an affective study on student reception and perceived value of active learning. Through phenomenological interviews with 20 Indian international students studying in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington, we sought to find how participants experienced the transition to active learning, and whether they found value in the new instructional methods. Findings indicate participants found active learning to be more engaging and beneficial for retention; however, expectations could be confusing and predicting one's success challenging. We provide considerations working with international students most familiar with transmission-based instruction and underserved groups.

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## INTRODUCTION

In scholarship on active learning we see an expressed interest in implementing instructional methods that can accomplish higher-level thinking goals, while at the same time, little understanding of how students receive this instruction. The overall purposes of this qualitative study is to achieve an *understanding* of how students make sense out of their lives, delineating the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning - making, and describe how students interpret what they experience in classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

Focusing on the experiences of Indian international students studying in the United States de-centers active learning research. Our focus on this specific demographic minority in higher education courses is rooted in the way students perceive the value and purpose of varying instructional methods is heavily influenced by their prior educational, ethnic, and socioeconomic experiences. In India, many colleges and universities practice a 'transmission-only' form of education, where students attend class, take notes while the professor lectures, and leave. These students go on to feel relative mastery over the 'understanding' of knowledge levels of Bloom's taxonomy of learning but are unequipped to apply this knowledge or practice any higher order of mastery.<sup>2</sup>

Indian international students are growing as a proportion of undergraduate students at American colleges and universities. The number of Indian students studying in the United States increased 12.3% from 2016-17, and currently Indian students comprise over 17% of all international students (about 1.08 million) studying in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Instructors benefit from professionalization that informs their ability to work with studies of varying educational backgrounds.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

Ten international students from India studying at the University of Washington were interviewed. Students were given a standardized list of active learning activities and definition of active learning for reference during the interview. The phenomenological interviews centered on their feelings about active learning techniques (e.g. group presentations, writing reflections, debates) and their perceived value.

The interview questions allowed for a semi-structured inquiry into student experiences and perceptions; moreover, it allows for students to *reflect upon* their perceptions as individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences.<sup>4</sup>

*What were the most valuable learning experiences for you in your program at the University of Washington?*

*Why were these experiences valuable to you?*

*Please think a moment about which activities stand out most in your memory. How are they memorable to you?*

*How did these teaching strategies affect your learning?*

Figure 1. Semi-structured interview questions.

Interviews were transcribed and coded to the principles of horizontalization, treating all data and perspectives with equal weight.<sup>5</sup> Constituents of experience were linked thematically based on data convergence. Researchers maintained subjectivity and process memos and period check-ins through the coding process as phenomenological themes were identified.

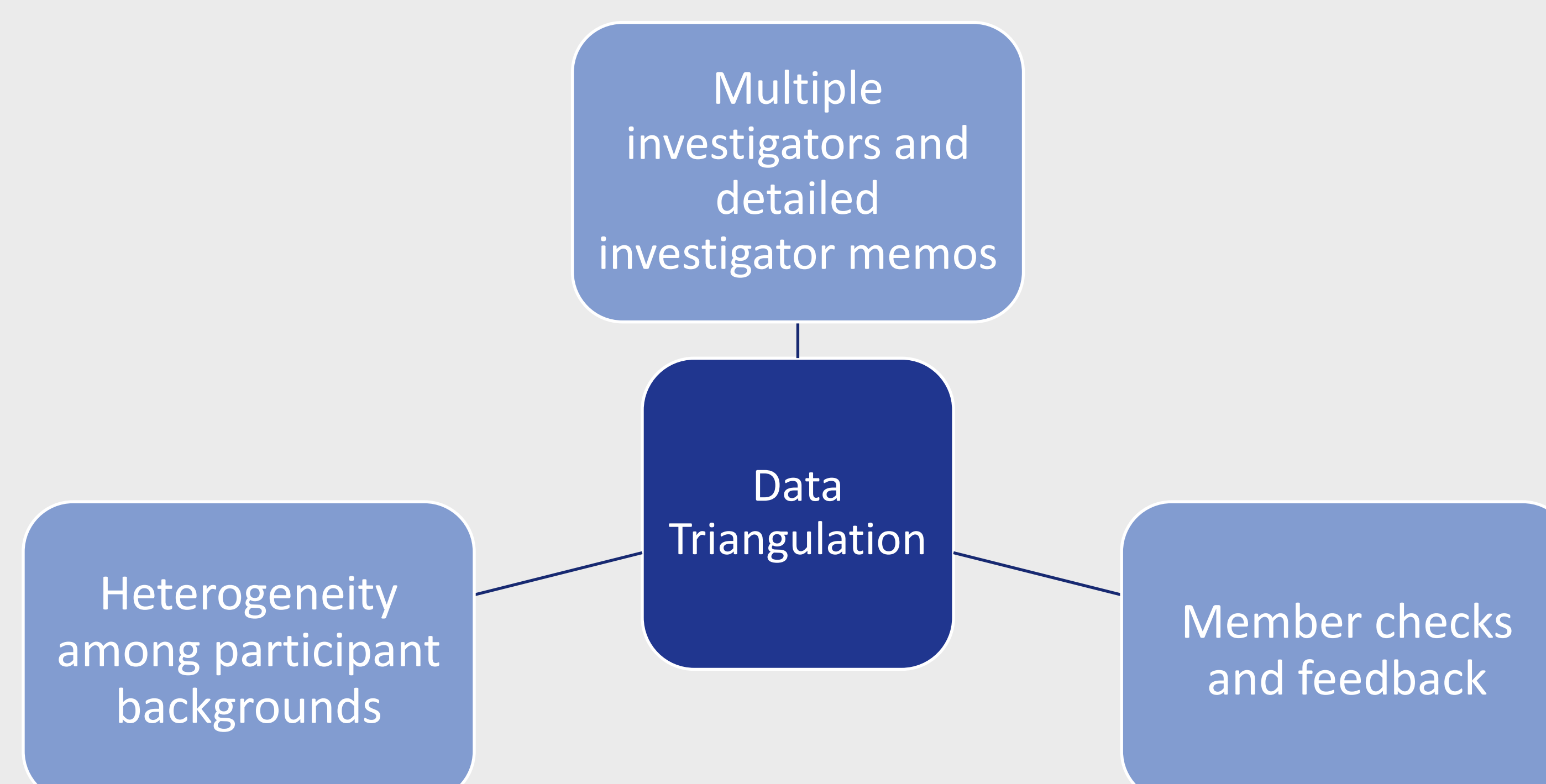


Figure 2. Data triangulation strategy.

## RESULTS

Year	Major	High School GPA	College GPA	Career Goal
Senior	Political Science	3.9	3.3	Marketing
MA	Information Management	3.7	3.5	Software Developer
Senior	Psychology	3.8	3.7	Counselor
Junior	International Studies	3.7	3.78	Public Relations
MA	Urban Design	3.7	3.4	Unknown
Junior	Sociology	4.0	3.9	Teacher

Table 1. Selection of Participant Data.

### Active Learning Supports Retention

Students were notably aware of the strengths of active learning in promoting retention compared to passive or transmission-based learning.

*It isn't until you have to try to put an argument together that you really know whether you know it or not.*

### Expectations in Active Learning are Less Clear

Participants shared that active learning instruction came across as more subjective than grades received from exams. Opinions on the open nature of expectations were divided. Some students enjoyed the flexibility, though others argues not all activities were beneficial. Instructor investment often made the difference in student experiences.

*Some activities don't stand out in my memory...just as busy work. The professor gave points for participating but didn't care how thoughtful people were in actually doing them.*

### Initial Imposter Syndrome is More Likely in Active Learning Environments

Connections emerged between uncertain course expectations and personal feelings of imposter syndrome. Students who were unused to vocal participation felt 'behind' native students. Adjusting to new classroom expectations took time for most students.

*It was not very forthcoming at first. It was really hard to adjust to talking. Here's you're required to have an opinion.*

### Mixed Meaning for Future Prospects

While benefits of active learning included greater retention, improved communication, and analysis, the potential for lower grades worried many students. Despite this, there was a common belief that an international educational experience could negate bias against lower grades.

*I enjoyed classes a lot more when the activities were engaging and we had to think, but it was hard to know what kind of grade I would get.*

## CONSIDERATIONS

### Offer Multiple Venues for Participation

Graded participation in the form of writing exercises or online, partner, or small-group discussions can relieve the stress of class-wide participation while acclimating students to the North American university environment.

### Prompt Student Reflection on Motivations

The least beneficial active learning projects were those that students did not see the value of. Incorporating activities that prompt students to reflect on what they hope to get out of it illuminates a longer trajectory for value in the moment *and* future.

### Dedicate Class Time to Academic Expectations and Integrity

Give examples of what successful participation looks like for a variety of activities to minimize subjectivity in grading early on in the quarter.

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