When Social Anxiety Meets Active Learning:

Fostering an Inclusive Active Learning Classroom for Students with Social Anxiety

Dr. Jessamy Comer

Senior Lecturer

Department of Psychology, College of Liberal Arts

How do students with social anxiety behave in the classroom?

Examples from your experience?

What is Social Anxiety?

APA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders- 5th Ed.* (2013)

- Marked fear or anxiety about social situations in which the person is exposed to possible scrutiny by others
  - Social interactions (e.g., having a conversation, meeting new people)
  - Being observed (e.g., eating or drinking in public)
  - Performing in front of others (e.g., giving a speech)
- Person fears they will act in a way that will result in negative evaluation from others (i.e., will be humiliated/embarrassed, rejected by others)
- Social situations almost always provoke fear and are avoided or endured with intense discomfort
- Fear is out of proportion to actual threat

How might a classroom environment activate some of these symptoms?

How Does Social Anxiety Affect Undergraduate Academic Performance?

▶ Prevalence estimates of social anxiety in college undergraduates vary widely

  ▶ Anywhere between 5-33% (Campbell et al. (2013); In some samples, as high as 61% (Cohen et al., 2019)

  ▶ Likely increasing, especially since pandemic

▶ Yerkes-Dodson Law: Strong anxiety tends to hinder performance on tasks

  ▶ Optimal performance occurs with moderate arousal

▶ Strong anxiety can lead to impaired academic performance, academic frustration, poor quality of life, and discontent (England et al., 2017; Sudir et al., 2012)
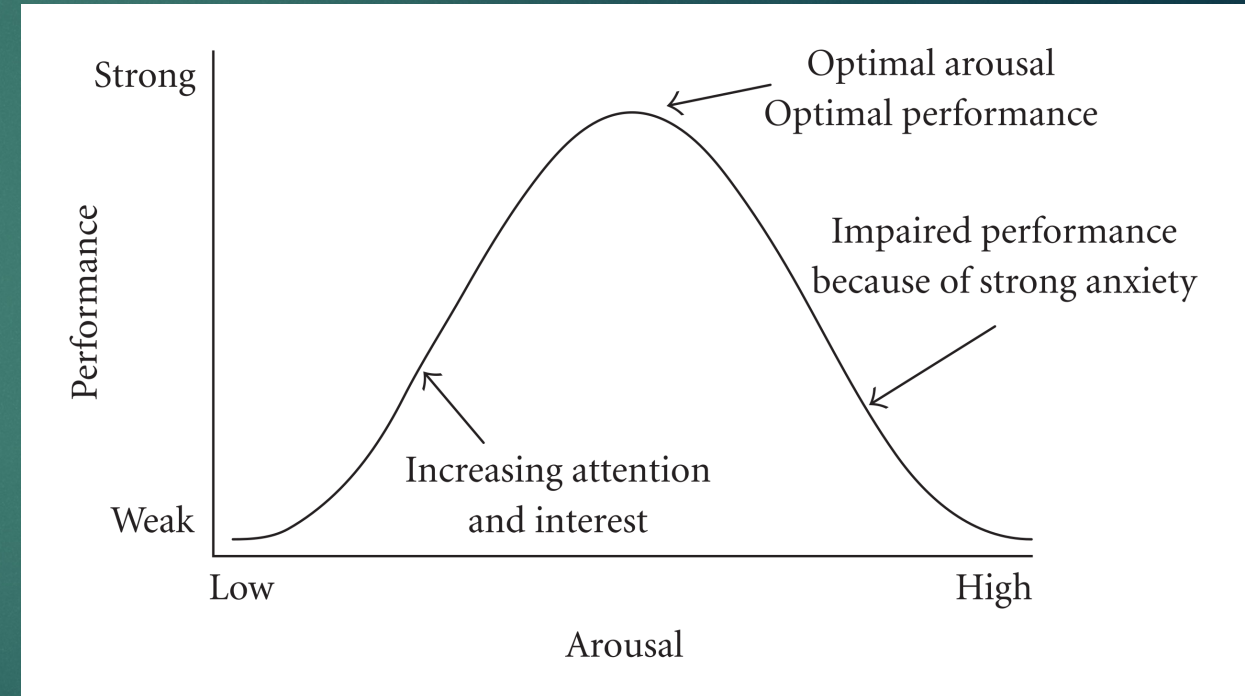

Yerkes-Dodson Law

What is Active Learning?

▶ Instructional techniques designed to engage students in their own learning and ultimately reach higher levels of learning (Nicol et al., 2018; Zepke, 2013)

▶ Examples of Active Learning Techniques:

   ▶ Small-Group and/or Large-Group Discussions

   ▶ In-Class Demonstrations of Course Concepts

   ▶ Individual Response Technology (e.g., Clickers, Kahoot, etc.)

   ▶ Problem-Based Learning

▶ Benefits of Active Learning:

   ▶ Higher level learning (Richmond et al., 2015, 2011), improved grades (Freeman et al., 2014), greater enjoyment of class (Muehlenkamp et al., 2015)

Active Learning Meets Social Anxiety

▶ Social anxiety is strongly correlated with active learning discomfort (Cohen et al., 2019)

  ▶ This discomfort is linked with poorer grades

▶ Students report some active learning techniques are more anxiety-inducing than others (Cooper et al., 2018; England et al., 2017)

Teacher: Okay, break off into groups for the next part of class

Introverts:
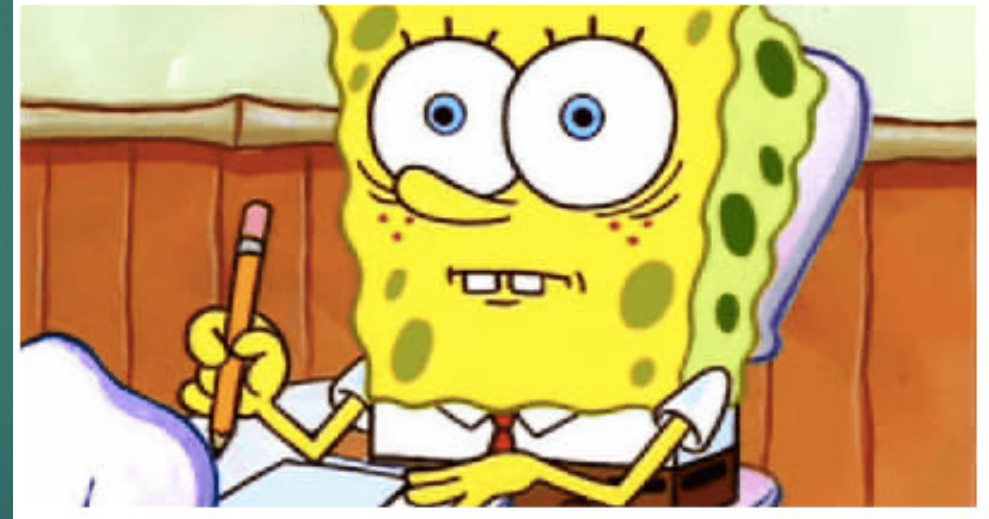
Anxiety-Provoking Active Learning Techniques

1
Low

Anxiety Level

5
High

Responding to Clicker Questions (Graded on Accuracy)

Anxiety-Provoking Active Learning Techniques

1
Low

Anxiety Level

5
High

Small-Group (3-5) Discussions

Anxiety-Provoking Active Learning Techniques

Anxiety Level

1
Low

5
High

"Cold call" or "Random Call" Responses

Anxiety-Provoking Active Learning Techniques

1
Low

Anxiety Level

5
High

Individual worksheet completion

Anxiety-Provoking Active Learning Techniques

Anxiety Level

1
Low

5
High

Partner Discussions

Anxiety-Provoking Active Learning Techniques

1
Low

Anxiety Level

5
High

Voluntary Responses to Teacher Questions

Anxiety-Provoking Active Learning Techniques

Anxiety Level

1
Low

5
High

Responding to Clicker Questions (Graded on Completion)

How to Deal with Student Anxiety in an Active Learning Classroom

► **Consider choosing techniques that are less anxiety-provoking**

  ► Instead of "cold calling" on students to respond, ask for volunteers

  ► Instead of grading clicker responses for accuracy, grade on completion

  ► Choose partner discussions rather than group discussions

How to Deal with Student Anxiety in an Active Learning Classroom

▶ **Consider revising activities to address source of anxiety**

- ▶ Source: Fear of public scrutiny
  - ▶ For group discussion participation, allow students to respond via written response rather than publicly
  - ▶ Allow students to submit a recorded presentation rather than present "live" in front of the class
  - ▶ Provide discussion questions in advance of class so student can prepare responses
- ▶ Source: Fear of social interaction
  - ▶ Allow students to choose to work independently rather than in groups
  - ▶ Don't ask students to "find a partner/group." Instead, assign partners/groups
    - ▶ Even better if you know their personalities and can assign a friendly partner to the anxious student!

How to Deal with Student Anxiety in an Active Learning Classroom

▶ **Consider revising activities to address source of anxiety**

   ▶ Source: Fear of evaluation

      ▶ Be sensitive in how you provide feedback. Avoid harsh, critical comments of students' ideas

      ▶ Use nonverbal cues to show positive affect, support, empathy, etc. while student is engaging in course materials

Other Ideas?

What other ideas do you have to reduce student anxiety in an active learning classroom?

Thank you!