Despite attending numerous seminars, workshops, and symposia on the use, approaches, and benefits of active learning in a college classroom and its role on enhancing student learning, I often still find myself conflicted and troubled when implementing these in my own classroom. The speakers present clearly outlined examples of how we as faculty members have and can easily introduce active learning approaches such as the “think-pair-share” and the “jigsaw” approach in our classroom. I leave these programs all charged up and ready to utilize these techniques because I am truly interested in improving student learning and outcomes and making my classroom an environment that promotes student learning rather than faculty teaching. I want my students to be able to problem solve and utilize critical thinking. I hurry back to my office to think through how I can include some of these activities in future classes and then it happens. WHAM! All the ghosts of past and present teachers and “my perception” of reality hit me square in the face. A technique or approach that seemed so easy to implement from a workshop suddenly has an energy of activation or a hurdle that seems enormous and daunting. So I took the advice of Leo Tolstoy and ceased a moment, stopped my work and took a look around.

As I think about these approaches, I become very conflicted. If I am to implement these techniques in the classroom, it will take time away from the short amount of time that I have to “cover” all the material my students must know from my section or course. I am concerned that if I do not directly provide this information from my lips or from detailed handouts that they will not necessarily read or get this essential material. It will put them at a disadvantage for future courses taught by my colleagues. Will I be chastised or cautioned by my colleagues and/or my chair for not teaching the required material in the program. Furthermore, what will happen to my individual teaching and course evaluations if I am the only one who utilizes these techniques in the classroom or if the students are expecting strictly a lecture format as is done in other courses. Finally, what if I cannot function well as a “facilitator” rather than a “lecturer.” What about those dead times when you ask a question in class and not one hand is raised or answer heard for what seems like an eternity but is actually only 5–10 seconds. As I mull over these concerns, I can feel myself slipping back to my own classroom experiences as a student where most of the time involved lecturing by faculty members. Why do this “active learning stuff” and ruin a good thing? After all, I get good teaching evaluations and seem to be good at lecturing. It seems so much easier to lecture rather than restructure to introduce active learning approaches and to take a risk at something I am not familiar with implementing in my classroom. The ghosts of past and present instructors are powerful forces and I find myself starting to second-guess any enthusiasm that I had for these types of activities.

Yet, the little voice in my head says to keep going for it is the right thing to try. The educational literature, written by pharmacy colleagues and by others in health care education, provides evidence that these approaches can enhance student learning. I know that there has to be a better way to help my students in their learning. Why should I be reluctant to try new things in the classroom when I am not reluctant to implement new techniques or ideas in my laboratory or other service activities? I ask myself how can I reduce the perceived energy of activation or find a catalyst to help me over this real or perceived barrier.

With continued reflection, it occurs to me that when struggling with my research I ask others for their advice and suggestions. I am not afraid to get out of my office, walk down the hall or across campus, or even call or e-mail others to discuss research issues. Collaborating with others is a key element in developing a successful research program. Furthermore, it is actually an enjoyable aspect of my job as a faculty member. Yet, in my teaching activities, why do I not employ the same approach to challenges in the classroom and to my role as an educator? I too often find myself working alone and not seeking collaboration with others when strug-
gling to enhance my abilities as an educator. I think to myself what an interesting dichotomy this is between my teaching and research activities. Why am I willing to talk with others about research challenges, but reluctant to interact with others when trying to improve as a teacher? Further reflection on this question suggests that there is no logical reason not to ask for assistance when trying to improve my effectiveness as an educator. There are many ways available, from formative peer review to discussion groups to one-on-one discussions at the local coffee shop. So, every time I am faced with this situation, I take the first few baby steps and discuss teaching with a close colleague in my department or school.

Simply by sharing or working collaboratively with others in introducing aspects of active learning in the classroom, the energy of activation needed for implementing these methods does not seem as large. I have been very fortunate as an academician over the years to have the opportunity to work collaboratively with talented colleagues in 3 pharmacy programs. In each situation and at each institution, we, as colleagues, seemed to function as a catalyst for the other. It seems that we are all struggling with many of the same issues and want the opportunity to work collaboratively. Some of the most enjoyable activities in a large college classroom setting have been when working with 1 or 2 other faculty members on these types of activities. It started by discussing our educational goals and then choosing what we think will work in our given situations. We would initially help each other as these activities were implemented (eg, strength in numbers) and would grow in our confidence with time to perhaps a point where we would do this in our classroom alone. Our fundamental assumptions were that the first time it would not be perfect and we would learn each time we implemented one of these activities in the classroom. The important aspect was to give it a try and see what happens to student learning. We started slowly with 1 or 2 activities in a given semester. Over the years at various institutions, I have found by initially working together, my colleagues and I were able to achieve our desired educational goals using these techniques, while at the same time learning from each other and our students. It made our time in the classroom more enjoyable. There were times when things did not go as we planned, and we questioned whether it would be better to go back to all lectures, but we as a group remained steadfast to this commitment.

We did initially experience some reluctance from the students, particularly by those who have not had the opportunity to be actively engaged in a college classroom. We reminded each other that this process is as scary for students as it is for us as faculty members. Yet, it is my experience that this reluctance for getting involved in the classroom dissipates with time, and active learning becomes the students’ expectation rather than something they dread. There is both a learning curve for the students and faculty members when using active learning in the classroom. This is especially true in the large classroom setting. Patience, diligence, and commitment to the process are essential elements for success and can be achieved by working with other faculty members when we are willing to collaborate and open up our classrooms to each other. It also provides an excellent opportunity for faculty members to develop our own skills as a team member. More importantly, it is in these types of activities with our colleagues where we share enjoyable moments that are remembered long after a class is offered.

So, perhaps after leaving the next seminar on active learning, the goal is for each of us to remember that we are a community of scholars both inside and outside of the classroom. In his book, The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life, Parker Palmer discusses knowing and learning in a community and reminds us that the only thing that never fails is that we learn something. Palmer goes on to say “if we lead and we who teach would take that counsel to heart, everyone in education, administrators and teachers and students alike, would have the chance at healing and a new life. Learning – learning together- is the thing for all of us.”

REFERENCES