



Hernandez, K. (2018). *Activate: Deeper learning through movement, talk, and flexible classrooms*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

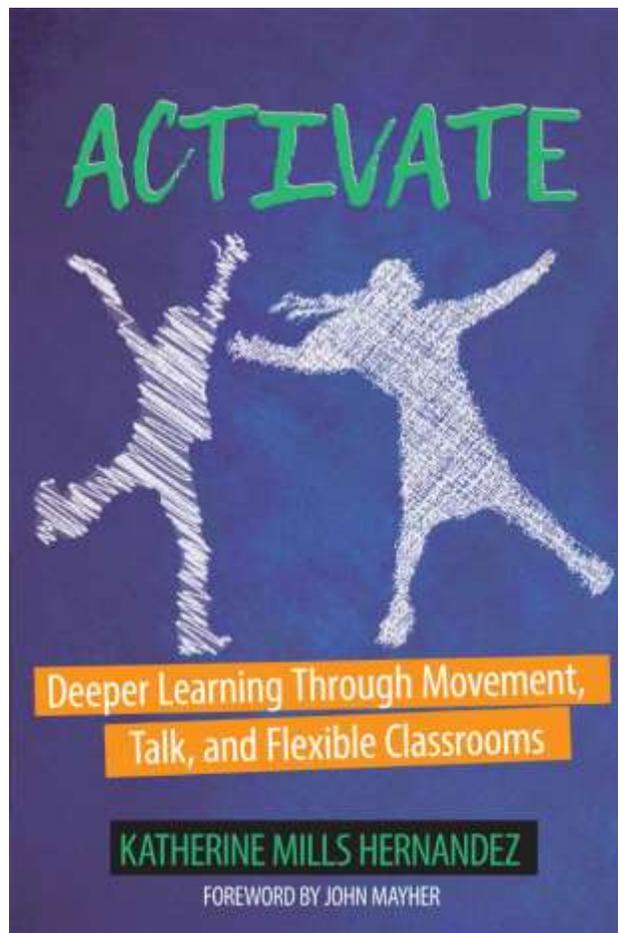
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Katherine Mills Hernandez is clearly a teacher who captivates her students. She has the kind of classroom where students are deeply engaged in the learning process and participate in experiences that they will remember long after they are no longer her students. I have never met her, but she is clearly the type of teacher leader who is a powerful model for those educators seeking to refine their craft. I would love to be a fly on the wall in her classroom, as observing that kind of dynamic teaching is always an incredible learning opportunity. While that is not likely to happen, what is possible is learning about some of the strategies that make her an engaging teacher through her new book, *Activate: Deeper Learning Through Movement, Talk, and Flexible Classrooms*. In *Activate*, Hernandez invites us into her classroom and has something to teach even the most experienced teachers.

Hernandez starts the book with an introduction, in which she makes the case for “active engagement,” i.e., “when students do something that facilitates cognitive processing of course content.” Chapter one, “The Story,” is a description of how she came to be interested in the topic. She details the ways



that she wanted to improve her teaching and the educational experiences of her students and outlines things that transformed the way she teaches. The next chapter, “The Science,” focuses on some of the research that provides the science behind the teaching strategies Hernandez proposes in regard to movement, talk, and creating a flexible environment. The remaining chapters provide implementation suggestions. Chapter three focuses on strategies to increase student movement and talk; chapter four focuses on manipulating the classroom space to enhance students’ learning; and chapter five outlines the stages of implementation of the strategies discussed in the two previous chapters.

Hernandez has strengthened the book through the addition of several interesting text features. For example, chapter two includes a number of text boxes with quotes from former students that serve as testimonies to the power of the strategies she suggests. There are also a number of images throughout the text, including diagrams of classroom layouts, examples of anchor charts, and photos of students engaged in the strategies. These all help readers to visualize the suggestions. Combined with a number of vignettes from the classroom, they also add credence to the suggested techniques. They demonstrate that these are not just theoretical approaches to instruction, but that they are tried and true strategies that Hernandez has enacted as a practitioner. Perhaps the most helpful addition to each chapter is the “Active Engagement” boxes. Each of the active engagement activities includes a suggestion for some physical activity, along with concrete ways to employ the focus strategies for that chapter. These insets are opportunities for teachers to take on the role of learners as they read. They also allow Hernandez to practice what she’s preaching by utilizing some of the teaching strategies that she is suggesting. The book publisher, Stenhouse, also offers a free downloadable study guide for the book, which

provides additional reflection and application tools.

While the book is clearly meant for practitioners, not researchers, the author includes research that helps to build the foundation for each topic. In theory, this is a strength of the book, as it helps to make a case for the value of utilizing active engagement to enhance teaching practices and increase student achievement. However, it is also an area with room for improvement. There are parts of the text that read as if the research has been watered down. Although chapter three draws on “science” to help create a frame of reference for each of the three topics, some items feel more like research “lite,” or even seem to be stretched a bit to serve the author’s purposes. For example, the “science” chapter is split into three sections, one for each of the topics: movement, talk, and flexible environments. In each section, Hernandez makes the case for instructional shifts that promote more active engagement. She draws from a variety of sources, and although some are research-based texts or internet sites, many are not what most would consider research. A number of the resources are professional texts, which focus on various teaching strategies, and would not qualify as research per se.

An example of a section that would have benefitted from more research comes in the section of chapter two titled, “Why a Flexible Environment Stimulates Brain Activity,” in which rationale is given for changing behavioral patterns in order to activate the brain. Movement in the classroom and collaborative conversations involving students (the first two topics) are familiar to many teachers, but the idea of flexible classrooms is one that is likely to be more novel to most practitioners, and therefore needs the strongest evidence presented to make a solid case for it. This is particularly true since it is juxtaposed with the constructs of routines, patterns, and predictability advocated by many other professional texts. Hernandez herself

admits that it can be a polarizing topic. Unfortunately, there is very little science presented in this section to actually back up the argument for flexibility. Hernandez briefly references just four sources in this section: one on environmental factors stimulating new neural pathways, two on the effects of receptor stimulation on learning outcomes, and one discussing the detrimental effects of boredom on brain activity. None of them have a clear and direct link to the suggestions that Hernandez makes in the subsequent chapter on flexible classroom environments, “The Space.” In that section, the bulk of the writing focuses on the use of classroom space, primarily furniture and seating arrangements, and the potential benefits of changing the layout of the classroom. In an era that increasingly emphasizes “evidence-based practices,” this lack of a connection may make it more challenging for Hernandez to get buy-in from any doubting readers.

The “Science” chapter also features testimonials from former students. This seems like a mismatch. Although they are powerful statements and certainly indicate the potential for the strategies to make a difference for students, it is not clear why these testimonials were placed in the science chapter. Although the title of the chapter is “The Science,” there just is not enough actual research present to support that title. It would have been better named as “The Rationale” or simply “The Why.”

On the whole, Hernandez still manages to make a compelling case for her proposed teaching strategies. Although she is a secondary teacher with experience in the middle grades, the book is definitely useful to teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels, and likely post-secondary too. Her approach has great potential to result in students who are aware of their needs as learners. They understand the brain-body connection and the importance of movement. They know to take breaks, can advocate for more control and choice in their learning environments, and are capable of taking care of their own learning needs. They are increasingly empowered to be co-constructors of their own learning.

The book is a quick and engaging read. Some teachers may find that the strategies Hernandez describes push them out of their comfort zones. However, she is proactive in addressing challenges and identifies some clear ways for them to wade into the waters of active learning without going into the deep. Even those teachers who already use several teaching strategies that incorporate active movement, student discussions, and flexible classrooms will likely have at least a handful of new strategies to try, or new ways to think about strategies they may have used in the past.

About the Reviewer

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