USING PEER INSTRUCTION TO PROMOTE ACTIVE LEARNING

What is Peer Instruction?
Peer instruction is an interactive technique which promotes active learning among students. As the name implies, students in the class are called upon to explain concepts to one another. The role of the teacher is to design questions that will effectively assess and promote comprehension of key and difficult concepts and to give students the opportunity to test and share their knowledge with their peers.

Peer instruction may be used in conjunction with other pedagogical practices, such as flipped classrooms. It does not have to rely on the use of any one educational technology and it can be extended beyond the strict space of the classroom by incorporating Concept Tests into a Moodle page, for example. The main thrust behind the use of peer instruction is to ensure that students are actively engaged throughout the learning process.

General Guidelines
Although there are different ways to use peer instruction as part of your pedagogical toolkit, having a set of general guidelines may help you incorporate and adapt this technique to your own teaching environment:

1. Identify concepts with which students tend to struggle in your course.
2. Design questions which effectively test students’ comprehension of these concepts (Concept Tests).
3. Break up the passive learning format of a lecture by including one such question every 10 to 15 minutes.
4. Pose the Concept Test to the class and ask students to respond (e.g. through “clickers” or cue cards).
5. Collect the responses in order to assess how well students can apply the concept and/or give students an opportunity to gauge where they are in relation to their classmates.
6. Particularly when there is variation in the responses given by students, ask them to discuss their answer with someone who had a different answer form themselves.
7. After these discussions, conduct another poll of responses.
8. Explain or ask a student in class to explain the rationale that leads to the right answer (if there is only one correct response).

Remember, this is a general guideline. You can adapt peer instruction to use in small classrooms or outside the space of the classroom through web-based components. It can be used for questions where there are multiple correct answers and/or as a way of generating debate about a concept where there is no scholarly agreement. Some of the resources on the back of this sheet offer ideas about different ways of using peer instruction.
Resources about Peer Instruction

- Eric Mazur – Confessions of a Converted Lecturer presentation at Carleton: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=85m0n3fQHRc
- Eric Mazur – Peer Instruction presentation at Carleton: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Ay3SVyDNTrg
- The development of the Peer Instruction model: http://mazur.harvard.edu/research/detailspage.php?rowid=8
- Peer Instruction 101: What is Peer Instruction: http://blog.peerinstruction.net/2012/03/15/peer-instruction-101-what-is-peer-instruction/
- Turn to Your Neighbor - A Peer Instruction Blog: http://blog.peerinstruction.net/
- Join the Peer Instruction Network: https://www.peerinstruction.net/
- Monash University, Peer Instruction in the Humanities and Arts: http://arts.monash.edu.au/philosophy/peer-instruction/
- SWoRD (peer review system for written papers that could be adapted for use with Moodle): https://sites.google.com/site/swordlrdc/