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Active Learning in Lecture-Based Courses: "Discipleship Survivor" as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Despite educators acknowledging the pedagogical benefits of active learning principles and activities, large enrollment classes most often take place in fixed-seating lecture halls. This proves challenging to designing creative activities for student engagement. In this article, the authors describe one such creative activity used in a large, introductory course on the New Testament. "Discipleship Survivor"—an exercise in which each week students voted on which of Jesus's twelve disciples would be cast out of a boat—proved to be particularly engaging and effective. From their follow-up study with students, the authors highlight principles that will allow other instructors to adopt and adapt their own material to make lecture-based courses more interactive and engaging.

KEYWORDS

active learning, constructivist learning design, gamification, student engagement

Although traditionally lecturing has been the primary delivery mode in universities, research has been demonstrating that this is not always the most effective option (White 2011), in large part because in the digital age students can receive the same information from other sources. For some time now, universities have been brokering new technologies to move away from traditional, in-class lecturing methods. For example, in "flipped classrooms" content delivery is being shifted to audio or video recordings that can be viewed online, allowing in-class time for students to engage in interactive activities (Baepler, Walker, and Driessen 2014; Pickering and Roberts 2017). Not everyone is on board, however, and many professors continue to use lectures as their primary teaching strategy, either by force of habit, comfort, or the physical layout of the classroom (lecture hall) they are assigned. But whether content delivery is online or in person, research on cognition has clearly demonstrated that students do not learn well by only passively listening to lectures (Halpern and Hakel 2003; Rollins 2017, 3; Barkley and Major 2018, 3).

In contrast, educational research points towards the effectiveness of active learning, which requires students to participate in the learning process (Cameron 1999, 9). Students are invited to engage in activities and processes that employ their minds, and sometimes their bodies, in ways that move beyond listening to the dispersal of

information by the instructor and the parroting back of the same information.[1] Student engagement can include activities such as games, debates, presentations, problem solving, discussions, and role play. When a student engages in active learning, they are self-motivated and able to learn beyond the recall of facts or singularly focusing on getting a good grade (Rollins 2017, 104; Thaman et al. 2013). Using constructivist learning principles that place students at the center of the process, students are challenged to think about, talk about, and relate the information to their lives (Cameron 1999, 3; Mallin 2017, 242–243; King 1993, 30).[2] Active learning is being advocated in learning environments for students of all ages, as it is shown to result in increased engagement, increased critical thinking, increased knowledge retention, and increased understanding (Christenson 2018, 99–100).[3]

With the push for active learning in higher education, there has been an associated push for implementing active-learning classrooms that are designed to increase interaction between the students and with the instructor in higher-education institutions (Chen 2017, x; 2018; Whiteside, Brooks, and Walker 2010). Yet, while interactive classrooms are ideal for engaged, constructivist learning, most institutions of higher education do not have the financial or logistical capacity to make large-scale conversions of their learning spaces. The unfortunate reality is that most instructors end up in rooms designed around the lecture model, particularly for courses with large enrollments (i.e., fifty or more students). And thus, the problem remains: how do professors engage students in large lecture classes, particularly in those with fixed seating? While some discussion can be enabled—student-to-instructor or pair-and-share dyads or triads, for example—this is a far cry from the interactivity that the scholarship of teaching and learning is promoting. In this article we will describe and assess an activity in an introductory Bible course that proved pedagogically effective in addressing this issue.

Discipleship Survivor

The New Testament course (RELS 214), offered at Queen's University, a publicly funded, research-intensive institution in Canada, is designed to give an overview of the content and background of the twenty-seven documents that comprise the New Testament. Through these texts, students explore the historical development of various facets of the early Jesus movement as it is expressed in the literature of the various communities of the first and early second centuries CE. The course is scheduled in a lecture-style hall with seventy to one hundred students who take it as an elective in their program.

The course syllabus articulates three key learning outcomes that students will demonstrate as a result of taking the course:

LO1: Comprehend how scholars use historical, literary, and archaeological evidence to understand and reconstruct the development of religious groups and movements in antiquity.

LO2: Understand the historical development and the diversity of the early Jesus movement.

LO3: Respect diverse interpretations of biblical texts and early Christian movements.

The physical setting of the course lends itself to delivery of lectures, but over two decades of teaching, the course instructor (Ascough) has increasingly introduced one or more learning activities into every class period, sometimes taking up to half the class time or more in a non-lecture format. This is particularly important since the course is a three-hour period once

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1 A good guide to such actions can be found in the modified version of Bloom's well-known taxonomy in which Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) switched out the nouns for verbs across the lower to higher order levels of learning and the subsections of remember, understand, analyze, apply, evaluate, and generate (cf. Bloom 1956; Ascough 2011, 52–53).

2 On constructivist learning see Fernando and Marikar (2017), Olusegun (2015), Vella (2001, 42–44).

3 Active learning is not without its detractors; some university faculty see active learning as "another in a long list of educational fads" (Prince 2004, 223). One of the main arguments against active learning is the "coverage problem." That is, active-learning activities take up class time, resulting in less time for instructors to cover new material (Faust and Paulson 1998, 17; Michael 2007, 44). Further, preparing active-learning activities often takes much more time. If an instructor already has their lectures prepared from previous times that they taught a course, it will take them more time and effort to redesign the course. In addition, active-learning techniques often require pre-class, hands-on preparation, which can be seen as a waste of time (Faust and Paulson 1998, 8). While literature in favor of active learning agrees that some active-learning activities take more preparation, there are also many active-learning activities that require little preparation. Further, once an active-learning class is designed for the first time, little preparation will be needed for future classes. More importantly, although less information may be taught by the instructor, more information is actually understood and learned by the students (Michael 2007, 45).

a week for twelve weeks, and thus clearly not conducive to straight lecturing. Nevertheless, while the activity described below works particularly well in our university's configuration (twelve disciples—one for each week of the course), it can be adapted for other teaching patterns by having students engage in it for just one class period per week.

"Discipleship Survivor" is an active-learning exercise that Ascough used in 2016 and 2019.[4] Towards the end of the first class of the semester, he projected the following text:

> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven*, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 16:13–19, NRSV)

Ascough recounted how, according to Christian tradition, this promise to Peter was not just the foundation of the church but, at least in some traditions, the establishment of the papacy. And since Peter was (reputedly) the first Bishop of Rome, Peter was the first Pope. After a brief pause, he pointed out that, according to the biblical accounts, during Jesus's trial Peter denied knowing him three times (Matt 26:69–75) and humorously suggested that perhaps Peter didn't *really* deserve the keys to the kingdom after all. Perhaps Jesus made a poor choice and one of the other disciples should have been given the opportunity to receive the keys, and thus perhaps be the first bishop of Rome!

Ascough then revealed a toy boat, ostensibly in the style of a first century fishing vessel from Galilee, that contained figurines of Jesus and the twelve disciples (Figure 1). He then tasked students with looking up the disciples of Jesus: Who were they? What did they do? Why might they be worthy of the keys? Why were they not worthy? Students were asked to come to the next class prepared to nominate one of the disciples to be removed from the boat, and told that they had to give reasons—for example, why should this guy go and others remain? Ascough gave them no resources or direction.

Figure 1: Toy Boat and Figurines

Throughout the semester, students came to class with evidence about the characters and deeds of the disciples that were drawn from a variety of genres such as the canonical Gospels, the non-canonical Acts of the Apostles, ancient martyrdom accounts, and medieval stories of saints, most of it gleaned from online resources. Students found resources on their own,

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4   This activity improvises on the popular television show *Survivor*, in which each week a member of one of two "tribes" is voted off the show by their peers. Although our own game might more properly be named "Disciple Survivor" since it determines who the last disciple remaining on the boat will be, but Ascough likes the play on words with "disciple*ship*" since there is a boat involved.

following links that often began with a Google search. Of course, such unguided searching can be problematic since there are a lot of questionable sources out there. Whenever questionable evidence was brought up, however, another student would usually challenge its veracity, with only the occasional nudge from the professor to say that it might not be reliable. This process not only addressed directly the learning outcome on the use of evidence in historical reconstructions, it also linked to a later assignment in the course in which students evaluate web sites focused on the historical Jesus.

Discipleship Survivor was a new activity Ascough introduced into the course in Fall 2016 and it was meant to be a short, somewhat peculiar way of getting students to recognize the challenges of reconstructing history. It was, as he anticipated and as one student commented, "a good ice breaker before the lecture began." To his surprise and delight, it turned out to be much more than that. As the semester progressed, this opening exercise took up more and more time at the beginning of class. Many of the students came to class prepared to make arguments for casting out one particular disciple or another. The first ten to twenty minutes of each class was devoted to the process of student nominations, argument, and debate until Ascough called for the vote and a show of hands in support of removing each disciple, with students only allowed to vote once.[5]

The different types of evidence students used launched discussions about how one assesses the relative worth of a particular genre (e.g., is a biblical Gospel somehow "truer" than a third century martyrdom account?). For example, students came to class the second week confused (as anticipated) because their searches had revealed that across the four Gospels included in the Bible there are fifteen named disciples, not twelve (see figure 2). Students were thus confronted with whether to accept the later church tradition that conflates characters in order to retain the count at twelve (i.e., Matthew = Levi; Thaddeus = Judas in John 14:23; and Nathanael = Bartholomew). This was the first inkling for some students, particularly those with a Christian background, that perhaps they did not know as much as they thought, or at least what they thought they knew might not be correct.[6]

Figure 2: The Named Disciples

JESUS' TWELVE DISCIPLES / APOSTLES

	Matthew 10:1-4	Mark 3:13-19a	Luke 6:12-16	John 1:35-51	Acts 1:13b, 26
1	Simon (Peter)	Simon (Peter)	Simon (Peter)	Simon (son of John; renamed Cephas, which means Peter)	Peter
2	James (son of Zebedee)	James (son of Zebedee)	James		James
3	John (brother of James)	John Boanerges (brother of James; "son of thunder)	John	"sons of Zebedee" (21:2)	John
4	Andrew (brother of Peter)	Andrew	Andrew (brother of Peter)	Andrew (brother of Peter)	Andrew
5	Philip	Philip	Philip	Philip	Philip
6	Bartholomew	Bartholomew	Bartholomew		Bartholomew
7	Matthew (tax collector) (9:9)	Matthew	Matthew		Matthew
8	---	Levi (tax collector; 2:13)	Levi (tax collector; 5:27)		---
9	Thomas	Thomas	Thomas	Thomas (the twin, 11:16; 21:2)	Thomas
10	James (son of Alphaeus)	James (son of Alphaeus)	James (son of Alphaeus)		James (son of Alphaeus)
11	Thaddaeus	Thaddaeus	---		---
12	Simon (the Cananaean)	Simon (the Cananaean)	Simon (the zealot)		Simon (the zealot)
13	Judas Iscariot	Judas Iscariot	Judas Iscariot	Judas Iscariot (6:70-71)	Judas (Iscariot)
14			Judas (son of James)	Judas (14:22) (= Thaddaeus?)	Judas (son of James)
15				Nathanael (= Bartholomew?)	---
16				"beloved disciple"	
					Matthias (to replace Judas)

PAUL: Cephas (Gal 1:18, 2:9); James the Lord's brother (Gal 1:19, 2:9); John (Gal 2:9); Peter (Gal 2:7)

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5   In the future, Ascough plans to use a phone app such as Poll Everywhere to facilitate quicker voting, more accurate tallying, and to ensure that students are forming their own conclusions; cf. https://library.educause.edu/resources/2018/7/clickers-mobile-and-web-apps.
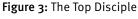
6   This is part of a wider issue of "unlearning" in biblical studies courses (see Ascough 2020). Students in The New Testament course often carry with them personal or cultural understandings of Christianity in the modern context, which they assume are grounded in biblical texts.

Student comments could often be expanded into more rigorous learning. For example, in the second iteration of the activity when Judas was nominated for expulsion one student raised the issue of what happens to "Christianity" if Jesus is not "betrayed" and crucified. This resulted in a lengthy conversation, led by the professor, on the church's struggle with the role of Judas in the Gospels and beyond, including a discussion of the recently discovered *Gospel of Judas* that tackles this problem directly.

After an intensive first season of Discipleship Survivor, students made their final choice, which was not voted on in class but appeared as the final question on the quiz in the last class:

> In Discipleship Survivor we have eliminated all but two disciples as contenders to be rewarded with the "keys to the Kingdom": Simon Peter and John son of Zebedee. Indicate your choice as the "*winner*" and provide at least two arguments for your candidate and/or against the other, *based on our discussions in class*.

This question was worth points and all students participated in making their choice and defending it.[7]

Figure 3: The Top Disciple

In keeping with Jesus's own decision (according to Matthew) and almost two thousand years of tradition (and to Ascough's displeasure!), Peter prevailed and retained the "keys to the kingdom" and his position as the top disciple (cf. figure 3). This delighted a block of students who were clearly interested in preserving Peter to the very end, almost certainly out of concern to reify the Christian tradition.

During the first season of Discipleship Survivor in Fall 2016, the order in which the disciples were removed was: Judas (for obvious reasons); Simon the Zealot (for being radical); Thomas (for the doubting); Batholomew/Nathaniel (for questioning the value of Nazareth); Matthew (for tax collecting); Thaddeus (for nationalist leanings); James the "Lesser" (for being Thaddeus' brother [!]); Philip (for being boring); Andrew (for being "meh"); James, son of Zebedee (for not being significant enough); and finally John, son of Zebedee (for not being as important as Peter).

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7   Since this was the last day of classes, students were invited to check the online course management system to find out who "won." The result was also announced on the department's website, which had been posting weekly updates about who had been removed from the boat. In the second iteration of the exercise, the updates were made on the department's Facebook page and not only became the most "liked" posts but also resulted in a number of students, including some not in the course, starting to follow the department on Facebook.

During the second season of Discipleship Survivor, which took place in Winter 2019, the results were very different and surprising. The disciples were removed in this order: Simon the Zealot; James "the Lesser"; Peter; John; James; Matthew; Phillip; Thaddeus; Andrew; Bartholomew; and finally Thomas. During round seven, after Matthew was voted out, a student suggested bringing someone onto the boat, noting, "Survivor is a reality show, and the producers do what they can to keep it spicy. I was thinking, instead of kicking someone off this week, how about we bring someone on, and bring Paul on the boat?" This comment was followed by Ascough's "Oooh," and lots of excitement and applause. Ultimately, four non-disciples were nominated, and Paul was chosen as the one to join (slightly beating Mary Magdalene in the voting [to Ascough's dismay]). In the end it came down to Paul and Judas; Paul was chosen to win, with sixty-four votes compared to Judas's twenty-one votes.[8]

This activity turned out to be much more pedagogically effective than anticipated. Many times the discussion about the disciples raised core methodological and hermeneutical issues explored in class, but in an organic way that was tied to preparation that the students had undertaken on their own. As a student enthused, "Loved the disciple survivor! So fun and challenged us to look at history and the text." The debates around which disciple should stay or go, particularly as it came down to the final four, also forced students to formulate and articulate evidentiary-based arguments to support their position and counter the positions taken by others, thus addressing the first and second learning outcomes of the course.

Assessing Discipleship Survivor

While Discipleship Survivor proved to be popular, Ascough was unsure of its effectiveness. Unlike the use of an exam, which for all its faults can be a mechanism to measure student learning, it can be difficult to measure the effectiveness of active learning, especially in lecture-based classes. Did students learn through this activity and if so how and what did they learn?

D'Amico was a student in the New Testament course but was also in Ascough's course on Research Methods in Religious Studies. She enjoyed participating in Discipleship Survivor, and as a concurrent education student, she too was interested in whether it was pedagogically effective. A conversation in the Methods course sparked an idea for a collaborative research project on the impact of Discipleship Survivor as a learning strategy. After receiving summer research grants[9] and gaining ethics approval, D'Amico used four sources to gather data: recordings of in-class discussions, formal student evaluations, one-on-one interviews, and analysis of a Facebook messenger group discussion which she had created (set up at the beginning of the semester and not initially tied to the research project). Students who were enrolled in RELS 214 during Fall 2016 and Winter 2019 were sent an email inviting them to take part in a semi-structured interview regarding their thoughts on Discipleship Survivor.

It was clear from the start that Discipleship Survivor was *engaging*. One of the ways Queen's measures teaching and learning is through a University Survey of Student Assessment of Teaching (USAT) which includes at least eleven Likert-scale questions and two questions for qualitative responses: "What did you especially like about this course?" and "Do you have specific suggestions for improvements for this course?" In responding to these questions, thirty students made comments about Discipleship Survivor, with twenty-two of them using the words "fun," "entertaining," "liked," "enjoyed," or "loved." In their interview responses, 87 percent of the fifteen participants used these words, with comments such as, "We were learning but it was fun," "It was fun doing my own research," "[It was a] fun medium that served both to engage attention while still remaining informative," and "I loved how we were able to critically engage with the material in a way that was so interactive and fun." There were also multiple students who simply wrote on their USATs "Discipleship Survivor" or "The boat!" when asked what they liked about the course. Out of twenty-five positive comments, six of them directly used the words "interactive," "interesting," or "engaging." Similarly, when interviewed, 73 percent of the students

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8 Interestingly, Judas was the first disciple nominated to be voted off during week one, and was a nominee most weeks. However, a key argument that helped him to stay throughout the semester was: "If Judas wouldn't have betrayed Jesus, then Jesus wouldn't have been crucified, resulting in no Christianity." Although some students argued that God could have fulfilled his plan for Jesus with or without Judas, Judas made it all the way to the end.

9 A Queen's University Undergraduate Summer Student Research Fellowship (USSRF) and an Arts and Science Undergraduate Research Fellowship (ASRF).

used these words. Participant Three's comment reflects the reality of many of today's learners: "I learn best in interactive formats, not just being lectured at," and another said, "I really liked how [Discipleship Survivor] allowed some really interesting class discussion."

The element of "fun" that the students identify reflects a broader trend in higher education that uses games pedagogically: "Games are intrinsically engaging and provide a venue in which concepts are introduced to the learner or reinforced in a fun, low-fear environment" (Lester 2018, 265).10 By designing Discipleship Survivor on the basis of a popular television series and introducing it in a low stake setting of an opening icebreaker at the beginning of the class, students were able to engage without fear of "losing" points. Yet, in such moments of fun "complex knowledge is *situated* in an active, meaningful context of applying nascent knowledge" (Lester 2018, 265, his emphasis), in this case recently acquired data about the disciples being applied to forming critical judgement about the veracity and importance of the stories (addressing Learning Outcome 2).

One way that engagement can be measured in a university class is by examining students' interest in going to class. When asked "Did Discipleship Survivor enhance your learning? Why or why not?" all fifteen interview participants said that it did. Participant Ten responded, "Yes! [it was an] incentive to go to class—you didn't want your favorite to be voted out!" Similarly, when asked "What did you like about Discipleship Survivor?" a participant replied, "It got me more engaged and wanting to go to class to see what happens (especially towards the end of the semester)." Interestingly, Participant Six explained, "I wasn't originally in the class, but my friend was. After the first class, she told me about Discipleship Survivor, so then I decided that I wanted to take the class, and I'm glad that I did!"

Another indication of student engagement is a Facebook group chat that took place during the semester. At the beginning of the semester, D'Amico created a Facebook messenger group with twenty-six of her friends who were also in the class (one quarter of the total class of ninety-nine students), most of them from a Christian campus group they attended together. The intention of the Facebook group was to discuss assignments and tests. After Ascough introduced Discipleship Survivor, however, the main purpose of the group switched to focus on this activity.11 The first message about Discipleship Survivor simply said, "We can dominate this competition guys," followed by discussion about group voting strategies and weekly debates about who to "kick off" the boat. Of the twenty-six people in the messenger group, twelve were actively involved in discussion about Discipleship Survivor while the others reacted to messages, showing that they were following the discussion without directly contributing. Overall, there were 227 messages sent about Discipleship Survivor throughout the semester. Some of the messages strategized about who to vote out. For example, at the beginning of the classes, messages included "Who do we want out?" "Who goes today?" and "What does the team want to do?" Further, comments such as "Guys! The people are speaking! Wow! United in one spirit!!!" and "Together we are stronger!" were sent after voting someone off of the boat. Other comments included, "Everyone knows you keep the bad guys on for at least a few weeks," "Okay time to defend . . . let's go people," "Make history," "We are playing into the system guys," and "Good voting block team."

Not everyone agreed during some votes, thus creating debates. The majority of debates in the Facebook group involved Bartholomew, Judas, Paul, Thomas, and John. In one instance, on a morning before class, Participant Six pleaded to keep John by relating him to her own faith, "I can't speak to why the others don't mention it but I will say again that it in fact shows humility on John's part that he put his own fear and safety second and was there for his Savior and friend when He needed him the most . . . (unlike the rest who stayed away in fright)." Other participants, however, disparaged John and questioned his humility, leading to a lengthy debate. Later, but prior to class, Participant Eight sent a link saying that all afternoon classes at Queen's were cancelled as of 3:00 p.m. due to poor weather, and participant Seven replied, "NOOO . . . wait but we start at 2:30 . . . just enough time to kick off John."12 Despite the cancellation, however, the conversation continued with a couple of students adding the hashtag "#NotMyBelovedDisciple." Participant Six, still wanting John to stay, jokingly wrote, "God sent this freezing rain to protect John from being voted off!" demonstrating her humor and investment in the activity.

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10 On gaming in higher education see Carnes (2014) and the essays in Whitton and Moseley (2012). For particular application to Religious Studies and Theology see the special issue of *Teaching Theology and Religion* 21, no. 4 (2018) on "Games and Learning."

11 The instructor was not aware of the existence of the Facebook group until after the course was over. That said, in this age of social media it seemed like it was a good way for (some) students to interact with one another around the activity, even during class, so in future Ascough would not make any rule against such groups (without encouraging them either; the key is that it was an organic process).

12 It seems that undergraduate students are not usually disappointed when a class is cancelled. Student Seven's comment shows engagement and interest in the class.

Like the way that the conversation concerning John shows students analyzing and evaluating John's actions and intentions, the Facebook chat demonstrates other ways that the students analyzed and evaluated the information. During another conversation that John happened to be featured in, Participant Four sent a picture of Matt 20:20–28, commenting that James and John's mother asked Jesus to give them a place of honor in his kingdom, saying "[they] don't even have the guts to [ask Jesus] themselves so they make their mom do it for them." Another time, Participant Seven sent a link to an article, adding, "Here's a lighthearted take on characters in the Bible falling short of perfection." By analyzing and evaluating the given information, students picked their favorites to stay, sending messages such as, "As long as Bartholomew is the last one, I'm game," "I am team John," "Don't let Judas go!!" "I kind of like Thomas," and "At all costs protect Judas, Paul, Bartholomew, and Thomas." Further, students in the Facebook chat connected the academic study of the disciples to their own Christian faith. For example, when the conversation was leaning towards voting off Thomas, Participant Three said, "I kind of like Thomas . . . let's keep him," followed by "He's relatable." At one point, Participant Seven commented that the group should start their own boat, followed by Participant One saying, "Where anyone can get on . . . 'cause God loves everyone." While Participant One was clearly joking, she likely subconsciously connected the activity to her own belief about God, making it personal. 13

In addition to being engaged during class, students demonstrated direct evidence of *effective* learning through their comments.14 Although the course did not include a formal or summative assessment of Discipleship Survivor until the final vote (which took place as a quiz question), many students did more than the bare minimum—that is, they took ownership of their own learning. Common in-class comments that demonstrated this were statements such as "I found an interesting passage that says . . . ," "I found a website that says . . . ," and "I was talking to one of my religious friends, and she was saying . . . " By looking into other sources and getting the opinions of people outside of the class, students analyzed the information and demonstrated interest in the material. While being interviewed, students also commented on taking ownership of their own learning. For example, there were many comments such as, "My friends and I would talk about it after class and try to decide who we all wanted to vote out each week," "[It] encouraged students to do research and learn about the class content outside of class," and "I enjoyed the opportunity to explore and research course-bolstering content without the pressure of academic grading." Participant Ten commented, "it was almost as if we were being rewarded for doing our own research . . . the class was controlling a part of what we learned rather than it being exclusively what the professor decided to deliver, which allowed us to pursue our personal interests," and Participant Five admitted, "To be honest, [doing research on Discipleship Survivor] was one of the only times that I have been thoroughly engaged in extracurricular readings." As with the case of the student that wanted to keep Paul on the boat (mentioned above), such emotional investment on the part of students is a critical part of constructivist learning.

While being interviewed, many participants also commented on how much they learned through Discipleship Survivor, not only from their own research but also from their classmates. Common comments included: "It was interesting to hear the thoughts of my peers," and "It was immensely helpful to critically examine the disciples with my classmates and explore their relationship to course content as a group . . . [Our conversations] raised points that I otherwise would have missed." Some self-identified Christian participants also commented on how they liked hearing their non-Christian peers' thoughts, saying things such as, "It was cool to see non-Christians contribute to the discussion," and "[It was interesting to hear] those who might not have been Christian speak to varying points."

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13 Naturally, the activity was not without its detractors. One USAT comment noted that the activity was offensive, and two interview participants expressed similar views. When asked, "What didn't you like about Discipleship Survivor?" Participant Nine commented, "It felt mildly sacrilegious. . . . I understand that the point of it was to learn about the disciples as individuals, especially beyond the biblical narrative, yet it felt disrespectful to be undermining the actual narrative of Jesus and his selection of the twelve." Adding to this point, when asked "Do you think this kind of activity is appropriate within a religious studies course?" Participant Five replied, "I think to some it may seem disrespectful to treat historical figures and religious heroes in a joking, tv-show manner," although then went on to note that as long as the instructor was clear that the purpose was not to offend but to promote active learning "then I think it's an awesome activity for a religious studies course!" Nevertheless, it is clear that Discipleship Survivor may be disrespectful to some Christians and, if used in a course in a theological context, perhaps runs a greater risk of being deemed hypocritical, since biblical texts suggest that people are not to judge others (e.g., Matt 7:1–5; 25:31–40; Luke 6:36–37; cf. Rom 2:1, 14:10–12; Jam 2:9, 4:11–12).
14 As explained by Watkins, Carnell, and Lodge, "All over the world effective learning means more knowledge generation (construction) with others (co-construction), and less independent knowledge acquisition (coverage)" and "effective learning has to be monitored by the student, not the teacher" (2007, 19).

Factors Contributing to the Effectiveness of Discipleship Survivor

Observations, interviews, and feedback all confirmed the authors' initial sense that the Discipleship Survivor activity was engaging and effective. Next, we turned our attention to identifying the factors that made it so and thus could be transferred by instructors to other lecture-based courses in religious studies and beyond. As it turns out, there were multiple factors contributing to the success of the activity.

In their guide to studying religion, Northey, Anderson, and Lohr suggest that, despite the differences in how the discipline is taught, there are three important aspects that can be agreed upon: (1) the importance and pervasiveness of religion in everyday life; (2) the diverse nature of religious studies in content and approaches as well as in the commitments and motives of those who study religion; and (3) the awareness of religious presuppositions at play when religion is studied (2012, 4). This third aspect is captured nicely by Jacobsen and Jacobsen: "Religious or secular convictions and ways of life haunt everyone's thinking and action, and that means any comprehension of the place of religion in higher education requires a heightened self-awareness from everyone, along with more sensitivity to the ways in which various religious or religion-like frames of cognition, affectivity, and action (of which we are often only partly conscious) shape us as individuals, educators, and students" (2012, ix). Recognition of the various religious commitments, or lack thereof, in the classroom is a key part of *constructivist learning design*. Constructivist theory suggests that students learn best by connecting new knowledge to what they already know. As King notes, "In [the] constructivist view of learning, students use their own existing knowledge and prior experience to help them understand the new material; in particular, they generate relationships between and among the new ideas and between the new material and information already in memory" (1993, 30).

Students need not be Christian for the material in a course such as "The New Testament" to intersect with their own world views. In her comprehensive study of students and faculty in religious studies and theology courses in the United States, Barbara Walvoord found that one of the primary goals of students in such classes is the exploration and nurturing of their own spirituality (2008, 20–21). While not antithetical to critical thinking, the "highly-effective" faculty she interviewed "developed spaces and voices by which students can nurture their own religious and spiritual development and can address the 'big questions' of their lives" (2008, 12).

In Ascough's New Testament course it is clear that at least 25 percent of the class came from some form of Christian context, since this was the basis for the creation of the Facebook group where participants knew one another from a Christian campus group. These and other students could be presumed to have some knowledge directly pertaining to the disciples—either information that they learned growing up or information that they read in their own study of the New Testament and extra-biblical literature. They were able to connect the new information that their classmates shared about the disciples to their previous knowledge, adding to engagement and interest. For example, when asked if they thought that Discipleship Survivor enhanced their learning, Participant Six replied, "Definitely! It especially helped me to learn about the smaller disciples who I had heard of but who I didn't know much about . . . It also allowed me to connect the class to my own faith." In response to the same question, Participant Ten said, "I only knew the surface information of some of the disciples, but research allowed me to create my own opinion on a disciple rather than simply agree with what people have told me throughout the years."

Similarly, many non-Christian students seemed to connect the activity to their extant cultural knowledge as well. For example, many of them had at least heard of "doubting Thomas" or "St. Peter." This background sometimes manifested itself in the classroom debates around Discipleship Survivor with students taking a protective stance over a particular disciple, most obviously Peter. In both iterations of the activity, but particularly in the 2016 version, there was block voting that consistently protected Peter from elimination. The arguments used by students that year seemed to indicate their own Catholic background, given their emphasis on the primacy and the importance of Peter as the first Pope in Rome. In 2019, Peter was eliminated almost immediately, although a small contingent continued to press for his reinstallation on the boat, again with what might be characterized as typical Roman Catholic argumentation.

We noted earlier the research indicating the importance of active learning, but not all attempts at designing and implementing activities end well. Indeed, while many studies show that active learning is the most effective way to improve student learning outcomes, other studies indicate times when there is no difference in achieving learning outcomes

between active-learning techniques and lectures (Dorestani 2005, 1–20; Wingfield and Black 2005, 119–123; Andrews et al. 2011, 294–405). In such cases, the lack of differences may be attributed to the instructor's ability to incorporate and execute active-learning strategies. Perhaps more tellingly, instructors who have been teaching for many years are not always comfortable with changing their teaching strategies (Berry 2008, 150; Faust and Paulson 1998, 8). In our study, student comments seem to suggest that *instructor confidence* plays a large part in the success of the activity, both with the material and with facilitation of the process.15 Participant Twenty-one's comments point nicely to both these aspects: "If any other prof tried to do the activity, I don't think it would have worked as well, but with Prof. Ascough it was good, probably because he was light hearted, but at the same time had good balance and made people take it seriously while having fun." The student noted that "It's easy to be misinformed, but by presenting our views and then Prof. Ascough correcting us, it helped us to know the accurate information." From ' Ascough s point of view, such confidence comes from years of experimentation and, at times, spectacular failure, along with learning the constructivist theory. As Andrews et al. note, "it is possible that a thorough understanding of, commitment to, and ability to execute a constructivist approach to teaching are required to successfully use active learning . . . Without this expertise, the active learning exercises an instructor uses may have superficial similarities to exercises described in the literature, but may lack constructivist elements necessary for improving learning" (2011, 400). Over time, instructor confidence in the process can be developed.

Far from antithetical to active-learning techniques, lecture-based courses are a good place for instructors to begin implementing constructivist design into their teaching. Lectures are not bad in and of themselves, as the research shows (see Hackathorn et al. 2011). Barkley and Major explain, "teachers use lectures to present a synthesis of information from across multiple sources, organize information into a logical structure, share important background and contextual information and ideas, highlight similarities and differences, clarify confusing concepts, principles, and ideas, help learners consolidate information, model higher-order thinking strategies and skills, convey enthusiasm for the content, [and] communicate why content is worth learning" (2018, 7).16 Even Stephen Brookfield, a great promoter of discussion-based learning, talks about how important it can be at times to allow students to "luxuriate in the lecture" (1990, 61). He points out that students can be resentful or feel insulted by the overuse of activities such as group work: "They speak and write of their sense of relief at sometimes being able to occupy the role of attentive listener while an expert who has spent some considerable time exploring an area of intellectual concern lays out its conceptual topography for them" (Brookfield 1990, 61).

The challenge, however, is determining how the benefits of lecturing can fit together with the research in support of active learning. One way that didactic teaching and active learning can complement one another is through interactive lecturing. In fact, although most professors continue to use lectures to teach, not many completely rely on the lecture (Barkley and Major 2018, 3). Rather, they combine lectures with other teaching techniques (in part addressing Learning Outcome 1), such as group work, discussion, inquiry, and case studies. There have been many studies conducted on the efficacy of interactive lecturing in the sciences (see Ernst and Colthorpe 2007; Thaman et al. 2013; Wolfe et al. 2015; Welsh 2012). While the studies have differing results, they show that interactive lecturing is an effective way to enhance student learning. As explained by Mallin, "Interactive lectures. . . enable students to frame new knowledge in terms of what they already know. Lectures provide content and context for student reflection and can be tailored to students, focusing on areas of difficulty as well as areas that pique students' expressed interests. The activities students engage in during interactive lectures help them to check their understanding of subject matter and develop a deeper understanding in which they apply, analyze, synthesize, and critique course material" (Mallin 2017, 242). Another reason that interactive lectures are useful is because students have different learning styles, and by incorporating active learning into traditional lectures, instructors can cater to more of their students (Faust and Paulson 2017, 238). Further, studies show that when an instructor incorporates active learning into their lectures, students are more likely to consistently attend class, are more likely to report positive feedback, and are able to benefit from both types of learning (Barkley and Major 2018, 7; Revell and Wainwright 2009, 209–223).

Part of the constructivist paradigm, then, includes *instructor transparency* about the techniques being used in the course, particularly through "parallel processing" (see Ascough 2014). As part of the broad course outcome that students shall

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15 Michael (2007, 44–45) explains that some barriers to active learning relate to the instructor. For example, active learning is difficult to do if instructors lack personal and professional maturity, and if the instructor does not know how to properly do it.

16 Others disagree: "The 'job' of [teaching] is 'not for the faculty member to demonstrate her expertise'" (Jaschik 2019).

"comprehend how scholars use historical, literary, and archaeological evidence to understand and reconstruct the development of religious groups and movements in antiquity," Ascough often paused during the lectures and activities to explain both the design and the rationale for his teaching techniques. In the case of Discipleship Survivor, the purpose was not made explicit until later in the course and it arose naturally as a response to some student pushback. Up to that point, Ascough had consistently pointed out and affirmed students drawing upon a swath of different kinds of evidence and arguments to support their nominations. Often, these data would be incorporated into the course content. For example, when John was nominated and arguments were made that included his authorship (for better or worse) of the Book of Revelation, Ascough was able to organically give input not just on the authorship debate around that biblical book but also the broader issues of authorship of early Christian texts in general.

At the beginning of week ten, a student raised his hand during the nomination process and, in a clearly frustrated and angry tone, said, "Do you see what this game is doing? Now we're having prejudice and judgement on other people," to which another student added, "Maybe we should just create an ark, where you add people onto the boat instead of taking them off." These comments caught Ascough off guard, in large part because this same student had, to this point, been a frequent contributor to the activity. It seems that the student had decided that the process of negatively judging the disciples would encourage a broader culture of judging other people, something that ran counter to his (Christian) convictions. Although this pushback seemed to come out of the blue, it had started somewhat earlier in the Facebook group when students commented on the problem with the activity and Participant Three sent a message that said, "Next week let's boycott . . . nobody vote," to which Participant One added, "We're [definitely] boycotting this dumb game . . . #SayNoToBullying." Participant Seven then said, "Let's start our own boat," to which Participant One added, "Where anyone can get on . . . [because] God loves everyone." In this case, emotional investment on the part of some students interfered with their learning from the game, and during the next class, those comments were furthered in the group, with Participant One writing, "I'm boycotting. . . like actually let's not vote" until the student verbalized the frustrations to the entire class. Although taken by surprise, it provided Ascough with an opportunity to step back and describe the pedagogical principles behind the activity and how it was designed to be an integral part of the learning, tied to the outcome of students being able to marshal historical evidence to form arguments (Learning Outcomes 1 and 2). In the end, the majority of students seemed to understand that the key was learning; as one student observed, "It's not offensive, because it's a game—we weren't trying to 'play God' or saying that Peter wasn't worthy of the keys or anything. We were just having fun and using it as an opportunity to learn."

Another important factor that contributes to the effectiveness of active learning is that students must come to class prepared (Michael 2007, 44). *Student preparation* for Discipleship Survivor required minimal work, which likely contributed to broader participation. Demonstrating this point, Participant Nineteen commented, "[It] was a good way to learn on your own, but it wasn't too much extra work—if you wanted to, you could just Google the disciples." When a class is large, however, it is unrealistic to expect that every student will do the necessary preparation, even when it does not require a lot of work. In the case of Discipleship Survivor, while students were encouraged to do their own research, it was not actually necessary for everyone to do their own part for the activity to run smoothly. Rather, since not all students shared their arguments in each class, the activity was not compromised if only some students prepared. As seen through the use of the Facebook group chat, since students stayed in their seats during the activity, they were also able to look up information on their laptops as the discussion progressed; this gave students the opportunity to participate even if they did not prepare in advance.

This leads to an even more important factor in the success of the activity: *student collaboration*. While a minority of students would have the chance to verbally argue against or defend a disciple during the class, the whole class was still involved, as everyone had to listen to arguments in order to know who to vote out of the boat each week. This point is demonstrated through Participant Fourteen's interview comment: "Even though I never did any research for the activity, a lot of other people did, and those people saying what they discovered in class actually taught me things that I didn't know." By learning from their peers, students stayed engaged and were all able to participate through voting at the end of each week's discussion. It is a form of student-to-student collaboration, which is particularly effective in enabling deep learning to take place (see Dede and Frumin 2016, 6; Fullan and Langworthy 2014, 2). And since the instructor did not have

control over the evidence and arguments that students would use or the order in which the disciples would be removed from the boat, the activity is also an example of a "subject-centered" activity in which everyone in the room, including the instructor, is working together on a problem (see Parker 1998, 116–117).

This also raises a problem we found with the activity. While being interviewed, some students commented that they did not like the way that people participated (or did not participate) in the activity. For example, four interview participants noted that they would have liked if more people contributed to the discussion. Participant Eighteen said, "It's difficult to encourage everyone to participate and share their thoughts." Likewise, Participant Twenty-one said, "Near the end [of the semester] it was a lot of the same people contributing so we didn't hear as many different opinions," and Participant Nineteen rightly noted, "Input equals output, so when people don't participate the activity isn't as effective as it could be." One way this might be addressed in the future is to have students break into dyads or small groups and discuss evidence together in order to establish one or two key points to make in the debate.

Continuing with the theme of participation, four interviewees commented on not liking the obscure reasons that students gave in opposition to certain disciples. For example, Participant Two said, "People who gave dumb reasons for getting people out were funny at first, but it was a little annoying." Similarly, Participant Fifteen said, "I did not like it when arguments for or against a particular disciple became arbitrary, rather than based on actual research." Student Eighteen also brought up an important issue, saying, "Serious thoughts that came up couldn't be talked about because there was only so much time to share." One way of addressing this is to use a week perhaps part way through the semester and assign particular standpoints to groups of students who will research their role (e.g., merchant, peasant; Roman administrator) and form arguments for and against particular disciples based on this position.[17]

In a class of seventy to one hundred people, there are evidently going to be different interests and different levels of investment in the activity, which could lead to concerns about seriousness. Participant Nineteen spoke to this, saying, "If there's only a couple people who are majors, compared to others who are taking the class as an elective, it causes there to be a lot of differences in knowledge and interest. It would probably be a better activity in an upper-year course (such as a fourth-year seminar class only for religious studies majors), because people would be more equal."

Sometimes active-learning exercises are not interesting enough to engage and motivate students (Andrews et al. 2011, 401). And if students are not thoroughly interested in the active-learning exercises, they may not be effective. Further, some students simply do not want to participate in active learning (Michael 2007, 45).[18] If they are not used to active-learning activities, they often report not knowing how to do them, not liking them, and not wanting to do them (Michael 2007, 45).[19] Passive learning is easier for students, as active learning often requires student preparation; this makes it more risky for instructors, as they have to assume that students will do their part prior to attending class (Gleason et al. 2011, 5). For this reason, *institutional and disciplinary context* can play a vital role in the use of active learning in large lecture courses. That Discipleship Survivor took place in a religious studies course seems to have contributed to its effectiveness. First, there are other religious studies classes at Queen's University that incorporate active-learning activities. As such, many students in the class were likely used to participating in active learning, making them more comfortable with participation during the activity.[20] Similarly, Ascough has incorporated active learning into his other classes, making him more comfortable with facilitating the activity. While being interviewed, multiple students commented on Ascough's importance. When asked "Do you think that this type of activity is appropriate within a religious studies course?" Participant Seventeen replied, "Prof. Ascough made sure. He was very respectful and supported the class discussion well."

More importantly, most interviewees suggested that not only was it appropriate, but that activities like Discipleship Survivor *should* take place in religious studies. As explained by Participant Sixteen, "One of the core tenets of religious studies that

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17 We are grateful to one of the anonymous *Journal on Teaching* reviewers for this suggestion.
18 There were a few USAT comments that Discipleship Survivor took up too much time, and it is possible that these students thought the activity was a waste of time, as it is not traditional learning. As explained by Michael, one of the barriers to active learning is student expectations of what learning is (2007, 44). If students feel that they are wasting their time playing a pointless game, it is understandable that they would be against it.
19 These are common initial (not long-term) student objections to active learning. Elementary and secondary school systems are also changing traditional learning environments by incorporating their versions of Active Learning Classrooms into their schools, called "flexible seating classrooms" (Paterson 2019). It can be expected that in the future, as students begin to graduate from high school with experience in flexible seating classrooms and having participated in active learning, they will be more open to it in a higher-education setting.
20 Michael (2007, 44) explains that one of the barriers to active learning is that students do not know how to undertake active learning.

we are taught in first year is to view all religions agnostically through the lens of our academic study." Participant Thirteen furthered this point, saying "In religious studies you're supposed to learn how to be respectful of other people's thoughts, and with this we had to be . . . [it is] a good reflection of how religion should be studied in academia."

CONCLUSION

Although Discipleship Survivor is a fun way to open each class of a course in New Testament, much more importantly it engages students and is effective in helping them learn how to deploy historical evidence in argumentative reasoning. Although first conceived as an icebreaker, it is now scaffolded into the course design insofar as the instructor uses the student comments and observations to review and/or anticipate material that is part of the core teaching. Designed with constructivist learning principles in mind, the effectiveness of the game also relies on instructor confidence and transparency, student preparation and collaboration, and a broader institutional context that supports and enables active learning. It is a good demonstration that deep student learning can take place when we open up space for students to engage the subject matter in new and creative ways. As such, the activity serves as an exemplar for other instructors to make lecture-based courses more interactive and engaging.

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