Learning Curve

As learning becomes more collaborative, it's even more important to provide places for individual concentration and focus.

HELPING STUDENTS FOCUS

As a university professor, I was often asked by students, "What advice can you give me for doing well in this course?"

Educators hear this question frequently and our response is fairly universal: manage your time, take good notes in class, stay focused. Yet focus requires a place for heads-down work, and these places are not always easy to locate.

They're scarce for several reasons. Active learning pedagogies require more collaboration and more spaces for interaction. Libraries are evolving from whisper-quiet book centers into team project workplaces. There's only so much real estate, and budgets are tight everywhere. Plus, there's been a steady increase in the cacophony of life today, due largely to ubiquitous technology.

A key point here: Active learning does not preclude individual, quiet study. In fact, as learning becomes more collaborative, it's even more important to provide places for individual concentration and focus.

In classrooms across the country you'll find teachers and students struggling with noise. Increasingly noisy educational environments are more than just distracting. As researcher Arline L. Bronzaft, Ph.D., points out, "Noises are not only hazardous to our children's mental abilities but to their overall wellbeing as well." Other research confirms the importance of acoustic control for learning spaces.

Buildings, classrooms and furniture that support focus and concentration should be an important design consideration for education places. Based on our research, here are some design strategies to support individual focus in learning environments:

PROVIDE A RANGE OF LEARNING PLACES TO SUPPORT VARIED PEDAGOGIES
AND LEARNING STYLES

Teachers with reconfigurable classrooms can be more creative in their teaching and provide more ways to keep students engaged.

For example, a classroom layout that supports collaboration can easily be reconfigured into a test-taking setup. Mobile tables with removable privacy screens help students shift between their own work, lecture mode, group work, etc. Libraries can include social, collaborative, and focus learning spaces.

RECOGNIZE THE NEED FOR OPEN, SHIELDED AND ENCLOSED SPACES

Open spaces (studios, study halls, etc.) give students little control over the space. Their ability to focus and concentrate depends on density, sound levels, protocols, and other factors. Shielded spaces allow students to work alone but remain connected to other students. They may have their ear buds in, but they're still aware of others.

Shielded space examples include a classroom corner workspace enclosed with low screens, or an alcove or niche inside or just outside the classroom.

Enclosed spaces are areas for quiet reflection, respite and study: private rooms, individual workspaces with privacy screens, and small enclaves. These spaces offer visual and acoustic privacy and help students focus and concentrate.

SUPPORT A RANGE OF POSTURES

We've all endured working in traditional study carrels. A fixed desk and hard chair quickly become uncomfortable. Instead, consider settings where students can change postures: sit, stand, lean, etc. Movement and changing postures help students stay energized, focused and more engaged in the learning process.

Instructors can promote quiet, focused study, too. Incorporate heads-down activities into learning plans, and help students understand the pitfalls of multitasking and the benefits of turning off smartphones during focused work.

Set the stage for student success with a range of spaces that support the rhythm of learning, including quiet, focused work.

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