

A New Learning Curve

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MEASURING THE VALUE OF THE THIRD TEACHER

There’s an old Italian saying, “A tavola non si invecchia,” which basically means, no one grows old at the table. Surrounded by others we connect, share, and feel energized and alive.

I believe this applies to learning, too. When we sit side by side with others, it’s an intimate experience. We listen better and empathize easily. When students sit together at a table (or work in an active learning scenario) and engage with others about a topic, they are more focused, connected and invested in the learning process.

At this point, experienced teachers and designers of educational spaces are smiling; you understand. But you may also be asking, where’s the data? Where’s the proof that classrooms designed for active learning make a difference in student engagement? It’s one thing to experience this anecdotally in a classroom; it’s another to try to convince a school board or academic administration that it’s real and repeatable.

In recent years, studies have shown that the built environment can indeed affect retention, attention and motivation. The active learning classroom has even been called “the third teacher” for the impact it can have on students. But what we’ve needed is a reliable post-occupancy evaluation that measures how well a different (i.e., active) classroom design can affect student success. Now the wait is over.

Steelcase Education recently collaborated with academic researchers from Canada to develop a sophisticated tool and used it at four U.S. universities. The Active Learning Post Occupancy Evaluation (AL-POE) tool measures how a classroom affects student engagement, which is widely accepted as a reliable predictor of student success.

Lennie Scott-Webber, Ph.D.,

Director of Education Environments for Steelcase Education

I’ve spent years researching educational environments and have seen the insides of more classrooms than I can count. My passion, and my job, is helping people understand the behaviors that come from different environments, and creating classrooms that truly support new ways of teaching and learning. Email your ideas, questions or comments to iscottwe@steelcase.com or on Twitter to [@Lennie_SW](https://twitter.com/Lennie_SW).

Our results offer compelling data:

1. Compared to classrooms set up in a traditional fashion (row-by-column seating), classrooms intentionally designed to support active learning increased student engagement in multiple ways.
2. A majority (i.e., statistical significance) of students rated the new classroom better than the old classroom for collaboration, focus, in-class feedback and nine other factors.
3. A majority of students reported that the new classrooms contributed to higher engagement, the expectation of better grades, more motivation and creativity.

Our data shows that solutions designed to support active learning will create more effective classrooms and higher student engagement. One of the study participants, Gary Pavlcechko, former director of The Office of Educational Excellence at Ball State University, said the study revealed “a statistical significance in terms of student engagement between our Interactive Learning Space and traditional classroom layouts.”

Many educators and designers have seen how the built environment can make a difference. Now we can show exactly how much of a difference it truly makes.

Go Deeper

If you want to learn more about the Steelcase Education study, here is a menu of resources to choose from:

[How Classroom Design Affects Student Engagement](#)

[Effects of a Stimulating Learning Environment](#)

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