

A New Learning Curve

Active learning encourages the engagement of the individual in the knowledge they're trying to acquire.



HOW TO HELP TEACHERS EMBRACE ACTIVE LEARNING

Why is there so much passive instruction in classrooms today where instructors are still giving traditional lectures rather than adopting active learning pedagogies?



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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 me at: lscottwe@steelcase.com

As an educator and researcher, I know that teachers can be reluctant to change. I also know that teachers can be flexible and adaptive because they are bombarded with changes: new laws and requirements, more demands on class time, new standards, directives, etc.

Overloaded, it's only natural that many teachers are wary of active learning. But if active learning is a genuine game changer, which I believe it is, and there's ample evidence to demonstrate that, how can we help teachers embrace active learning? How can learning spaces assist in the effort?

I find answers at teachers' colleges like the School of Education at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia.

Kris Magnusson, Ph.D., dean of the school, says colleges and universities should start by rethinking survey and introductory classes typical of a student's first two years of college. "They're considered weed-out courses. Usually they're in big lecture halls with tiered seats, a podium and a screen, so the instructor is limited to one mode of teaching. Students get droned in every class. If they survive and move on, they get smaller classes with more interaction and discussion. This is all wrong.

"We shouldn't be weeding out; we should be trying to draw students to our disciplines, and how we structure and present the material, and the environment the material is in, should be designed to engage people. If we engage people, they go deeper and they learn more."

For intro courses, with typically large sections to manage the costs associated with large numbers of students, Dr. Magnusson suggests a couple of different solutions. One is blended learning: "Lecture is not an inherently bad approach, but it's just one form of engagement. Use social media, the web and interactive experiences to create a powerful introduction to the content, followed by in-person experiences."

Active learning in large sections is both possible and necessary. "It encourages the engagement of the individual in the knowledge they're trying to acquire. That's where physical space is important: if the furniture is bolted down and inflexible, even if it's brilliant for one purpose, it's ineffective for others. Have furniture that's movable and comfortable, so students can lead discussions, engage with others, work comfortably in small groups."

TO BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE SOME OF KRIS MAGNUSSON'S SUGGESTIONS:

- believe in the disruptive power of active learning
- encourage and train instructors to use active learning pedagogies; flexibility is an attitude
- provide space that signals to students "This a place where students are active, engaged and take ownership of their learning"; i.e., lose the "row and column" seating, use mobile furniture, share the stage
- unbolt classroom seats from the floor so students can move, connect and collaborate
- use technology to create a web-based version of the course, and use lectures as "keynote addresses" at mileposts in

the semester

- punctuate the semester with small group discussions, breakouts, group projects

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