

Active Learning

CATS College Cambridge Flexible Spaces

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CATS COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE: WHERE INNOVATION MEETS TRADITION

Long known for its 800+-year-old university namesake, the city of Cambridge of today is often described as Europe's equivalent of Silicon Valley, a center for science and research. Just a short bicycle ride away from the university's history-steeped campus is a much newer and also celebrated school: CATS College Cambridge, where the city's inspirational setting is the backdrop for an innovative, forward-facing high school program for international students.

One of the best educational facilities in the United Kingdom, CATS Cambridge has attracted thousands of students from all over the world who aspire to progress to prestigious UK universities and meaningful futures in a globally connected world. Today, 420 students from 60 nations are enrolled, ranging in age from 14 to mid-20s.

The CATS Cambridge faculty and staff strive to combine exceptionally high-quality teaching with a deep understanding of each student's individual needs. With a focus on both academic and personal development, the school offers students a supportive yet challenging learning environment, allowing them to thrive within the classroom and beyond. Central to CAT's mission is a student-centered, active approach to learning.

"There are many different ways and styles of learning, and that's doubly true at CATS where our students come from all over the world," says CATS Cambridge Principal Stuart Wilson. "Our students aren't just learning subjects. They're learning to learn. For many, that's the key. So we try to create situations that get students thinking, get them talking to each other, get them working with each other. If they're just listening to a teacher, they're not thinking."

Recognizing the critical interdependency of pedagogy, technology and the spatial environment for successful active learning, in 2013 CATS Cambridge began planning for a brand-new, state-of-the-art facility. The overarching intent was to create an inspiring, innovative learning environment that would spur each student's success. "We wanted a building that would genuinely express how we felt about teaching," says Wilson. "There's nothing worse than a situation where we want to accomplish something but have to compromise what we want to do."



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A BIG SHIFT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the UK as well as much of the Western world, important changes have been underway in education since the turn of the new century. Before then, educational models emphasized rote memorization — an easy-to-measure type of learning that is essentially a teacher-centered approach. "Since about 2001, educators have been focusing on what actually happens inside a class and what makes for real learning," says Wilson. "The big shift has been to move from teacher-led learning — the sage on the stage — to student-centered learning, where the teacher's role is to be the guide on the side."

Active, student-centered learning is now a popularized topic among educators. "It's almost become cliché because people talk about it so much," reports Wilson. And yet, it's still not encoded in how many schools actually operate day-to-day. Too often, classrooms and teaching styles reflect Victorian-era norms versus present-day imperatives — i.e., students spend most of their time sitting in classrooms optimized for group lectures versus personalized, active learning.

A POWERFUL CONVERGENCE OF POSSIBILITIES

As educators at CATS Cambridge began planning for their new facility, they had big ideas for what they wanted to accomplish. “One of the things that students need if they’re to be comfortable and in control of their own environment is choice,” explains Wilson. “So one of the things we wanted to do with our new campus was to create opportunities for students to choose where to work. We were really lucky because we started with a blank canvas.”

Although the planning team at CATS had well-defined goals and ideas, they also wanted to gain new insights from experts who could expose them to a wider range of possibilities and successfully partner with them to realize solutions. They brought their aspirations to Steelcase UK dealership Hunts Office Furniture & Interiors Ltd. Working collaboratively over the next two years, their efforts resulted in a new campus, opened in September 2015, where every learning space was designed to meet the needs of a diverse student body.

PURPOSEFULLY DESIGNED FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

At the new CATS Cambridge, classrooms are informal, flexible spaces that emphasize doing and learning in small groups, whether it’s collaborating around a table, a microscope or a whiteboard. A sophisticated environmental control system brings in fresh air to help keep students alert and engaged. Comfortable chairs on casters are easily arranged and rearranged for various scenarios, and integrated technology improves both the scope and efficiency of learning.

Nearby, a spacious reading room meets students’ needs for focused study time, alone or in small groups. A variety of settings accommodates various preferences, and windows bring in natural light and views, a proven way to rejuvenate tired eyes and overloaded minds.

Recognizing the positive impact of relaxation and social encounters, the facility includes a well-equipped common room where students come and go, whether for a few minutes of individual study between classes, working together on a group assignment or simply relaxing, alone or together, often over coffee.



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As students transition between classes, casual “touchdown” spaces are threaded throughout corridors. These are ideal sites for a few minutes of individual work or informal encounters with classmates or teachers.

Deliberate informality is an important part of the CATS Cambridge philosophy because it encourages spontaneous conversations, which often lead to unexpected insights and deeper appreciation for others. “The difference between a great student and a good student is fundamentally what happens outside the classroom,” explains Wilson. “The most successful students are the ones who take what they’ve been doing in class and go and talk about it with other people. So the spaces where they do that are important.”

In addition to furnishing learning spaces, Hunts provided Steelcase Inc. products for other areas throughout the new campus, including faculty offices and staff rooms, canteens, breakout and meeting areas.

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ACHIEVING MEANINGFUL RESULTS

It's been a great few years for CATS Canterbury, with the campus consistently achieving excellent outcomes for inspections and recognition through several national awards, including the highest possible rating from the government-approved Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI).

For Wilson and the other teachers, however, the most meaningful measure of the school's success is the success of graduates who regularly achieve more than they ever thought possible.



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"We're trying to take our students from a position of many different styles of learning and get them to a position where they can be really successful in later careers and later life. A key lesson we try to impart is that intelligence isn't fixed – in other words, smart isn't something you are, it's something you get," says Wilson. He believes it's important for educators to focus on lofty goals versus more narrow, easily measured outcomes such as preparing for exams. "We're in the business of building futures and shaping destinies," he says. "That's what we do."

CREDITS

Steelcase Dealer: Hunts Office Furniture & Interiors Ltd.

Architect: Clague Architects, Canterbury

Designer: Russell Emmett, Hunts Office Furniture & Interiors Ltd.

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