

Reclaim Classroom Attention with Active Learning



Learning begins with attention, but attention is not always easy to come by, especially in large university classes. Instructors deserve accolades for their efforts to maintain the attention of students. With the increased use of mobile devices in classrooms, there are more opportunities for students to be distracted.

During my visits to schools and universities, I see students attempt to multitask and become distracted with their personal devices. While the teacher is lecturing in the front of the room, it's not uncommon to see students text messaging, checking their Facebook account, or playing video games. In one extreme case, I saw a student watching a video of an NBA basketball game on their laptop in a large lecture hall!

Instructors share that it's important to deal with this distraction issue because the behavior can be contagious and distract other students. As a solution, instructors often try to police mobile device use. Some instructors have their TA's monitor students' activities or call out "texters," while others simply prohibit the use of mobile devices altogether. Other instructors might require students who want to use their laptops or tablets to sit in the first few rows of the classroom, so the instructor is able to keep a better tab on them.

Steelcase research has shown that these traditional learning experiences are not aligned with how the brain works, particularly as it relates to attention. There are more things vying for student attention today and that makes it harder to get the attention that leads to student engagement.

MAKE CLASSROOMS ACTIVE

While limiting mobile device use or dictating where a student sits can be helpful, [research from Diane M. Bunce et. Al. in 2010](#) suggests that leveraging [active learning](#) is another method to consider. Active learning occurs when students are engaged in activities and thinking, as opposed to listening passively to an instructor. Steelcase defines active learning as physical environment supporting a focus on engaging experiences for students and faculty. Bunce’s research compared a passive lecture approach and active learning methods including quizzes, demonstrations in a chemistry class. Researchers noted fewer attention lapses during times of active learning. They also found fewer lapses in attention during a lecture that immediately followed a demonstration or after a question was asked, compared to lectures that preceded active learning methods.

[The results of our own Steelcase studies](#) revealed that classrooms intentionally designed to support active learning increased student engagement on multiple measures as compared to traditional (i.e., row-by-column seating) classrooms.

With active learning, students don’t have time to be distracted by their mobile devices. Moreover, in group activities, students are held accountable by their peers, which can often be a stronger motivator than class rules. Another consideration for maintaining attention includes accommodating the natural rhythms of our brains and allowing for breaks. As we better understand [how the brain works](#), we’re seeing how the [classroom environment can hold student attention for student engagement](#).

Learn more about research around attention in learning environments by reading [“Class, Can I Have Your Attention?”](#)

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