Learning

University of Florida Focuses on Active Learning

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Read 7 mins

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA – GAINESVILLE

Steelcase Education

“There are two sides to education. An objectively driven pedagogy presents the world to the learner, with a focus on acquiring information. There’s also a developmentally driven education that positions the learner within the world, with a focus on self awareness, observation and the ability to synthesize and construct knowledge. We need to balance those two approaches so students not only acquire knowledge but learn to be problem solvers, to be able to innovate and operate when they don’t have all the information,” says Jason Meneely, associate professor in the Department of Interior Design at the University of Florida (UF).

UF’s philosophy on education is transparent in its learning environments. Two active learning spaces which showcase this thinking and break down the physical and social barriers between students and teachers, information and peers, while fostering communication, collaboration and problem solving are:

- media:scape LearnLab, which was converted from an existing classroom in the College of Design, Constuction and Planning (DCP)
- AHA! Colab, an open classroom and collaborative suite of breakout rooms which was converted from an enclosed classroom, break room and elevator lobby in the College of Journalism and Communications

ENRICHING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT — AND STUDENT LIFE

The LearnLab was the first of the two spaces to be created and it helped pave the way for the AHA! space, but it faced an initial challenge: UF’s need — as at all institutions of higher education — to hold down the amount of real estate allocated per student.

“Such quantitative assessments are important but only half the story,” says Meneely. “Beyond student headcounts you also have to measure the quality
of the learning environment: how well students connect with their instructors and peers, how engaged they are. Does the space allow instructors to teach in the way they need to for the course? Can students work collaboratively or does the room force them to sit passively in fixed rows of seating? If you only have lecture rooms, you’re not addressing a critical need for active learning.”

Four media:scape settings gather students around tables, each with connections for up to six digital devices and dual flat screen monitors for displaying content. With full- height magnetic whiteboards on the walls and four different projection surfaces, content is readily accessible to everyone in the room. Discussion flows freely around the table, between students and the instructor, even if that

instructor happens to be a student presenting material to the class.

“Students are coming on to a campus with 50,000 students, so when they can work in small groups in the LearnLab, they’re more engaged, they’re communicating right away, and you can have more impact as a professor and create the kind of learning environment everyone wants to be in,” says Margaret Portillo, Ph.D., professor and chair of Interior Design.

“The classroom exemplifies a long- term effort to provide a better learning experience in our college, one that reflects how design professionals practice,” says Christopher Silver, Ph.D., professor and dean of the College of DCP. “The architecture and design profession is a collaborative business and we want our students to learn that way.”

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The DCP LearnLab hosts five different regularly scheduled courses, is frequently used as an impromptu breakout room for studio courses, and is booked for seminars and other events when available. Officially it’s scheduled 26 hours a week, but rarely goes unused.

“I’m starting to hear from faculty, ‘I can’t get in there; it’s always full.’ We could probably use two more LearnLabs,” says Silver.

REPURPOSING ‘OLD SCHOOL’ SPACE

The LearnLab also helped inspire the learning space Meneely designed for the College of Journalism and Communications. “Students today need to learn more skills, and the challenge is, how do you do that without increasing the number of credit hours? The answer is collaboration,” says David Carlson, professor in the college.

The college took 2,500 square feet of space on the third floor, beginning at the elevator doors, and created an open classroom and four smaller enclosed rooms with media:scape collaborative settings.

“When I arrive to teach at the AHA! Colab, the students are already there, meeting, working together, studying. The nature of the space changes students and learning,” says Juan- Carlos Molleda, Ph.D., a professor in the Department of Public Relations.

A CLASSROOM WHERE STUDENTS WANT TO LINGER

“The class period just ended, but did it really?” asks Meneely, as students continue working in the AHA! Colab, equal parts classroom, study hall, commons area and project space with a kitchen, coffee machine, and workspaces that range from a standing height group table to booths and small tables, all outfitted in untraditional colors and materials.

“I’ve taught courses in many different places at the university, but I’ve never seen the results I get in this space,” says Ann Christiano, a professor in the Department of Public Relations. “I wish every classroom was like this.”

She points out that students are not only learning how to collaborate and solve intricate problems, but are building key professional skills and relationships that will last long past graduation. “Here students meet, collaborate, talk, group, regroup, and it all happens naturally because this space helps create a community. And that sense of community will last them all of their lives. Their friends and future colleagues will be around much longer than I will.”

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HOW SPACE CHANGES TEACHING AND LEARNING

Despite sophisticated technology in both the media:scape LearnLab and the AHA! Colab, students and faculty comment less on the tools than on how effectively students work with their content and each other, perhaps because the technology is so well integrated into the learning space.

Meneely tells his students to work on the wall as if it was their desk. “I ask them not just to display their work but to use it as a primary thinking space, a vertical extension of their desk. Since work on the wall continuously morphs, I get a quick read on how they’re approaching a project each day, what needs more discussion or more focus, and which students require some extra guidance or support.”

PROOF IN NUMBERS

Each week, Pam Driza, graduate teaching assistant and dissertator, teaches two sections of IND1020: Design Innovation, a course in understanding creative problem solving and human- centered design. Students include interior design majors but also those in the sciences and the arts. Each Tuesday the class meets in a traditional, standard issue classroom: rows of wood desks with tablet arms, chalkboard in front, off white walls. Then every Thursday the class meets in the media:scape LearnLab. Same instructor and students, vastly different results.

“For starters, there’s a difference in attendance. Out of 42 students, an average of three to five don’t show for Tuesday’s class in the traditional classroom. I’m the same teacher, same teaching technique.”

“But for the Thursday class that’s held in the LearnLab, there’s almost perfect attendance.”

Driza assesses the LearnLab from her experience as both teacher and designer: “Ideally, you want a classroom that’s flexible, that can grow and change as pedagogy changes. You want to create opportunities for spur of the moment conversations, where people can bounce ideas off of each other on whiteboards, screens, and where students feel they have a license to really use the space. That’s what we have in the LearnLab.”

COLLEGE OF DESIGN, CONSTRUCTION + PLANNING MEDIA:SCAPE LEARNLAB — BY THE NUMBERS

800 square feet

24-32 student seats

4 media:scape settings with 72″ x 60″ tables and dual monitors

24 media:scape PUCKs (6 per setting)

4 walls with floor to ceiling magnetic whiteboards

4 short-throw projector locations

1 ēno interactive whiteboard for digital sketching and annotation

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COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATIONS AHA! COLAB — BY THE NUMBERS

2,500 square feet

30 student seats in the open classroom/study/break space

4 media:scape settings in enclosed spaces with seating for 6-8 in each

1 collaborative kitchen with coffee vending

1 standing height table with seating for 10

2 short-throw projectors

9 magnetic whiteboard surfaces

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