Stretching Beyond Space Limitations

Though I’ve been deeply engrained in the instructional space re-design arm of Engaging Classrooms – QEP and in K-12 instances previously, attending the 2022 EDUCAUSE Annual Conference was awe inspiring. The opportunity to meet with innovative space planners passionate about removing physical barriers to active learning strategies in higher education helped clarify the work we have been doing at SHSU through the EC-QEP Space (re)Design Committee (S(r)D) since 2019 – and in my own instructional practices toward more active learning, regardless of the physical constraints.

At EDU22, my co-presenter and I had the opportunity to share the S(r)D projects and gather feedback from others. In one session, Adam Finkelstein from McGill echoed feelings that matched our own, that “learning is not about spectating, it is about involvement.” Involving students in the learning process is at the crux of much of what we allude to when discussing active learning strategies – in our own instructional practices and through Engaging Explorations, ACUE, and in our S(R)D work.

The conversations in the sessions and that along the poster session route included ways we can shape learning and student behavior by how we design (or configure) the learning environment. What message does the space communicate about learning? To the learner? To the instructor? Does it allow for cognitive inclusion that promotes engagement and equitable representation?

I am always challenged to consider ways we can imply flexibility and promote interaction in our fixed-component spaces (wired computer tables, auditorium seating, fixed tables/chairs, etc.) or large-enrollment classes. I was reminded by many in attendance at EDU22 that active learning doesn’t always require high mobility or removal of all physical barriers (because, honestly, that’s not always possible). Engaging students cognitively and culturally, supporting autonomy and fostering collaboration, and promoting meaning-making can transport students from the sit-and-get to active engagement in the scholarly conversation and learning process.

Sometimes I, too, am halted by the physical space and hesitant to make the lesson more engaging and interactive. Thanks to events like EDU22, the Teaching & Learning Conference, Engaging Explorations Summer Workshops, and similar events I have been able to pack my active learning toolkit with great ideas. The trick is to pick one or two and give them a try (or a couple of tries). Need ideas? Visit the active learning library in the PACE office or feel free to pick my brain anytime (I love to talk teaching strategy!).

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