Influence of Active Learning Spaces on Teaching & Learning

Scheduling Use of Active Learning Spaces

Active learning is a teaching and learning pedagogy based on student engagement and reflection. Purdue University dedicates resources to design and renovate classroom spaces to accommodate and promote active learning experiences. Through mixed-method data collection, the purpose of this study was to determine how the features and characteristics of active learning spaces influence student learning. This briefing summarizes select findings related to scheduling active learning spaces. Specifically:

How do scheduling policies and/or procedures affect instructors' use of learning spaces?

Misperceptions about Scheduling

Purdue faculty can access information about course scheduling, and the assignment of institutionally controlled spaces, through: https://www.purdue.edu/registrar/faculty/scheduling/class_scheduling.html

Based on this website, interviewed instructors possess incorrect perceptions such as “First come, first served.” or “The only people who had access to active learning classrooms were faculty who were part of the IMPACT program.” Space scheduling will affect instructors’ planning and facilitation and students’ learning experiences. From interviews with instructors, it seems the most likely cause of scheduling issues are misperceptions, ineffective or incomplete communication, or lack of understanding of all things considered during scheduling.

How Scheduling Affects Course Planning

Learning spaces possess different features, layouts, and capacities. Changes to course characteristics—such as enrollment, amount of scheduled in-class time, or learning outcomes—may affect the types of pedagogies an instructor can employ in a classroom. For example, the Wilmeth Active Learning Center (WALC) contains 26 classrooms designated for active learning in six different configurations. A section with 40 or less students using WALC might be assigned to a space with a “flexible” configuration, but if the enrollment increased to 50, this same section could be assigned to a space with a different configuration, which may or may not be conducive to the types of activities the instructor perceives as most beneficial to student learning.

Learning space configurations may affect which active learning strategies work best within a space. For example, STEW314 and STEW320 are nearly identical, except for the student furniture. In 314, an instructor could use the movable tablet arm chairs to form groups of any size, but the round tables in STEW320 force an instructor to use groups of up to eight, or the instructor may consider having multiple smaller groups share the same table. As reported separately:

- An instructor who designs pedagogy to fit in STEW314 may dislike STEW320, and vice versa, and
- Students report differences in their learning experiences, based on the furniture they use in a space.

These contrasts show it is not enough for instructors to request an active learning space, nor enough to promote only that a space is designated for active learning.

“I just request an active learning space and I get whatever I get. I'll keep requesting that because that's how I prefer to teach…I am curious, when there are more active learning spaces, how those get assigned and how big they'll be.”

Factors to Consider During Scheduling

According to the class scheduling website, the space assignments consider “size, location, type of seating, and special equipment, which can cover those small general purpose classrooms with collab/active learning equipment.” In varying ways, the interviewed instructors acknowledged these factors, and a scheduling process factoring “active learning equipment” likely accommodates many needs of the interviewed instructors currently using active learning spaces; however, the interviewed faculty who use active learning strategies also want:

- Size adapted to a lower “capacity” to leave space between groups of students and to accommodate additional instructors/TA’s and guests.
- Smaller sections, if section size does not fit preferred pedagogy.
- The same space for all sections of a course.
- Alternative spaces for exams. Based solely on the class scheduling website, it may not be clear to an instructor what are all the possible considerations made during scheduling by multiple university departments. A separate study listed more factors important to faculty, and showed instructors value these factors differently. We perceived the interviewed instructors to be adaptable to a reasonable extent; while they might vocalize concerns about spaces, they also try to maximize learning experiences within their given circumstances.

Conclusions

While space scheduling was not a targeted topic for these interviews, scheduling policies and practices clearly impact instructors’ pedagogical plans and their perceptions of students’ learning experiences. Continuous changes to courses, spaces, students, and instructors requires new promotion during every cycle of scheduling. Any improved understanding of the processes and policies, by any person impacted by space scheduling, increases the understanding and salience of the process.

Spotlight on: The Scheduling Deputies

According to the Office of the Registrar,

“The important role of the departmental schedule deputy cannot be overstressed. They are relied upon to represent their department in the building and maintenance of the master schedule of classes each term. As such, it is important that they have the support of their departmental administration when faced with making timely and informed decisions regarding course offerings.”

The interviewed instructors generally understand the responsibilities of their scheduling deputies, but each interviewed instructor uses their scheduling deputy differently. For example, one instructor might “provide input as to where we want to be, but we actually rarely ever get in the room we want to be in,” while another instructor “explained to [the scheduling deputy] what it is we really need, and then she advocates, and then she comes back and says, ‘We got pushback.’ [We] advocate again, and it's worked. It's always worked, but it does take a little proactivity.” These examples show the importance of communicating needs to a scheduling deputy. Additionally, these quotes demonstrate how faculty may not know or understand what happens between scheduling deputies and the Registrar’s Office that results in the final assignments of learning spaces.

Flexibility and/or persistence appear to be necessary when requesting learning spaces, but some instructors might have no voice in the scheduling process. One interviewee said, “I didn't actually know how to request a learning space, I just didn't select this room with purpose. I was assigned to this room.” Another added, “I actually don't choose my classroom. It's the coordinator.” Overall, it appears faculty experience the scheduling process differently, based on who is their scheduling deputy and/or how this person fulfills their scheduling responsibilities.

11 The six active learning configurations are: SCALE-UP, Boiler-Up, Eye2Eye, 6Round, Turn2Team, and Flexible. WALC contains a 27th space designed in a seventh “performance” configuration. For more information about WALC, see: https://www.purdue.edu/registrar/faculty/scheduling/wilmeth.html
12 See the briefing in this series named, “Facilitation Strategies Used in Active Learning Spaces” accessible from: https://www.purdue.edu/oirae/documents/White_Papers
13 See “Faculty perceptions of Learning Spaces” accessible from: https://www.purdue.edu/oirae/documents/White_Papers