



Active Learning Classrooms and Student Engagement Strategies

What is this Research About?

Active learning classrooms (ALCs) typically include round or curved tables, moveable seats, and large screen displays that students can project their computer screens to. These classrooms are usually designed to support small-group work and to promote student engagement. One type of student engagement is active engagement, which consists of three components: gathering information and ideas, direct or indirect involvement (doing or observing), and reflecting on learning. This research observed the active engagement strategies of ALCs across various undergraduate courses (STEM, non-STEM, lower division, and upper division courses).

What did the Researchers Do?

The researchers systematically observed student engagement behaviour in 23 different courses taught in ALCs, which included a mix of lower division and upper division courses, STEM classes and non-STEM classes. In each of these classes, an investigator noted primary engagement types (e.g., problem solving), secondary engagement types (e.g., writing on a board) and the amount of time spent with each. The investigators also debriefed with each professor after observing their class to discuss whether they were satisfied with the level and type of student engagement. The researchers carried out this observation process twice for each course, once in the first half of the semester and once in the second half.

What did the Researchers Find?

The researchers found that three engagement types accounted for 74% of the total observed time across all 23 courses: listening/processing, discussing, and problem solving. The most observed engagement type was listening/processing, which accounted for 36% of the total time. The distribution of engagement types was generally similar across all course types (lower vs. upper division, STEM vs. non-STEM). These study results suggest that the level and subject of a course using ALCs are not predictive of the type of student engagement strategies used during classes. In other words, students in lower-level courses were just as likely to engage in problem solving than students in upper-level courses.

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A synopsis of a scholarship of teaching and learning journal article

➔ How to Implement this Research in Your Classroom

Active Learning Classroom (ALC) environments themselves do not shape student behaviour, but they can invite student-centred engagement strategies. This research shows that instructors may not need access to ALCs to improve student engagement. Research shows that low-tech classrooms (e.g., classrooms with whiteboards and moveable tables to encourage group work) or non-ALCs are also effective for promoting student engagement. Systematic classroom observation of student behaviour can be used to gauge the types of student engagement. Instructors can use this information to reflect on their use of teaching strategies and the degree and type of student engagement present in their course.

➔ Citation

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➔ Keywords

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