

Research Briefs

Active Learning Classrooms in a Hispanic-Serving Institution

South Texas College (STC) commits itself to innovative teaching that accommodates a multitude of learning styles, engages student learners, and meets learning objectives. A grant from the US Department of Education's Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program allowed STC to establish Active Learning Classrooms (ALCs), physical spaces that eliminate the "front end" of the classroom and promote collaborative learning. Through student focus groups and faculty interviews, this qualitative study examined student and faculty perceptions of engagement and learning in ALCs.

For students, ALCs engendered an identity as knowledge creators, developed a sense of community, and created a personal space. Faculty credited ALCs with cultivating independent learning, enhancing their own skills as educators, and providing a comfortable learning environment for students.

CONTEXT

Pedagogies and pedagogical spaces continually shapeshift to enhance students' learning experiences and outcomes. South Texas College (STC) has established six (6) Active Learning Classrooms (ALCs) across its campuses to meet students' varied needs and increase their engagement in the college classroom. The physical spaces include mobile furniture, multiple computer stations, numerous whiteboards, carpeting, and specific lighting, that together eliminate the "front-end" of the classroom and promote interactions for those involved. Instructors volunteer to teach in these classrooms and attend trainings that educate them on best practices, including use of the equipment and technology available in this setting. Furthermore, the trainings present specific instructional strategies which distinguish themselves from a lecture-based method of delivering content and emphasize collaboration between students.

METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological examination of student and faculty perceptions of ALCs was conducted between the Fall 2016 and Spring 2018 semesters. Students and faculty, representing multiple disciplines in academic and technical programs, were selected based on participation in ALCs. A semi-structured interview process was followed for 17 student focus groups and 11 faculty interviews. The following research questions guided the study: 1) What are student and faculty perceptions of student engagement in courses taught in ALCs versus traditional classrooms? 2) What are student and faculty perceptions of student learning in courses taught in ALCs versus traditional classrooms? 3) Which facul-

ty and student perceptions about courses taught in ALCs might influence their decision to participate in ALCs again?

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Knowledge Construction. Participants perceived themselves as knowledge creators and conveyed a sense of ownership of their learning in ALCs. Most participants noticed deeper engagement and learning in this environment. One student articulated, "The net result of the whole deal is that original idea that you had...turns out to be a much [more] beautiful thing because all of us are going to be contributing to the final product." The preparation time for the classes remained the same as in traditional classrooms, but participants gauged slightly greater amount of work in

"The net result of the whole deal is that original idea that you had...turns out to be a much [more] beautiful thing because all of us are going to be contributing to the final product."

the ALCs, however, with less pressure because of its collaborative nature. In general, participants expressed better performance in the ALCs and positioned themselves as vital components to the creation of knowledge.

A Sense of Community. A sense of community permeated the interactions in ALCs. Participants expressed openness toward their instructors. Describing the rapport with her instructor, a participant stated, "Sí, pos hay más confianza"—trust existed. Similarly, participants detailed more interactions and better rapport with their classmates. They attributed their friendly disposition with each other to the collaborative environment expected in the classroom. While they experienced an open disposition and more familiarity in ALCs, most participants felt they missed class meetings

at same rates as a traditional classroom and interacted at slightly higher rates outside of class.

A Personal Space. The setup in the ALC prompted students to perceive it as a personal space. The participants noticed the classrooms' colorful boards, carpeting, mobile furniture, and technology. They credited the setup for producing more discussions and fostering a dynamic environment. A participant contributed, "You have your own personal space." Because of these characteristics, participants perceived the ALC as an inviting space for them.

A "Room" for Improvement. A few participants suggested improvements to ALCs but articulated desire to re-enroll in courses taught in ALCs. As to be expected with unfamiliar equipment, on occasion challenges emerged with technological malfunctions. Few participants expressed hesitations the first couple of weeks in this environment but overcame these reservations. Several participants found themselves not engaging with keyboards in the workstations enough, so they identified missed opportunities. However, participants would enroll in courses taught in ALCs again because they expect instructors to teach in similar methods.

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS

Independent Learners. Participants conveyed independence in the learning process for students and independence in learning instructional strategies for themselves. Instructors determined that they interacted with students more through constant circulation in the classroom and perceived themselves as facilitators rather than "the fountain of knowledge," so they applied questioning strategies, collaborative assignments, discussions, and hands-on activities—prompting "work at the highest levels of [education psychologist Benjamin] Bloom's taxonomy." While engagement and in-class performance increased, attendance rates and grades remained constant.

Specific Populations. The classroom accommodated instruction for specific student populations. A participant noted that students with veteran status "feel more secure," and another participant noticed that students in wheelchairs more fluidly maneuvered through the class. Also, translators better positioned themselves for students with hearing impairments.

The Energy. The participants communicated comfort and freedom for students within the ALC. They described the

classroom as containing moveable furniture, boards, computer stations, and no "front" of the classroom. This setup prompted engagement, facilitated discussion, and reinforced collaborative learning among students. A participant discussing student interactions stated, "The space is freed up for the energy, the movement of energy." The "freed up" space corresponded to the mobility afforded by the furniture and the physical fluidity present in the ALC. These characteristics, in turn, nurtured movement of ideas and energy at an intangible level.

Toward a Better ALC. Participants identified challenges with technology, classroom management, and collaboration

between instructors but enjoyed and benefitted from the ALCs. At times, instructors struggled with work stations and their functionalities. A few participants described issues with classroom management. Additionally, a participant suggested creating a method to collaborate with other instructors teaching in ALCs so as to ameliorate "silos" between each other. However, when participants sought support, they received it from colleagues or technology staff.



Pictured: The furniture, technology, and layout in the Active Learning Classroom.

HARMONY AND DISSONANCE: FURTHER QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Harmony. Faculty and student participants corroborated responses in specific areas. They perceived increased engagement, mobility, and comfort in ALCs in comparison to traditional classrooms. Participants also noted higher-order thinking occurring more often. Moreover, a metacognitive awareness of learning styles and instructional strategies emerged in participants' responses.

Dissonance. A few participants conveyed sites of dissonance. One student participant stated, "Exams work exactly like any classroom, so it hasn't changed," which raises a pertinent question: What type of assessment practices should instructors employ in ALCs? Furthermore, while reflecting on the overall impact of the ALC, a faculty participant stated, "There's a piece missing."

Future Directions. Students and instructors can capitalize on these sites of harmony and dissonance, for the ALC presents a young and evolving classroom setting to the post-secondary context. With sentiments of ownership toward this setting, instructors and students can impact profoundly the development and direction of ALCs.