Training Faculty for Active Learning

Ball State University has long believed in giving its students immersion experiences. Now faculty practices are undergoing transformation through immersion in a learning community dedicated to the precepts of active learning.

EVEN THE MOST cutting-edge classrooms are ineffective if nobody knows how to use them to enhance learning. Case in point: When **Ball State University** (IN) upgraded a couple of classrooms with Steelcase "Node" chairs as part of experimentation in "active learning," the faculty response was less than enthusiastic. The chairs are designed to facilitate a pedagogical shift from lecturing to collaboration and problem-solving — but without training, faculty were ill-equipped to recognize the potential of movable furniture.

"People hated them," recalled Marilyn Buck, associate provost and dean of Ball State's University College. "In fact, when I saw them, at first I thought, why would anybody do this? [Faculty] were just thrown in there. All they saw was that students could roll [the chairs] around and they had no idea how to use them."

That sentiment could characterize instructor response to much of technology introduced in the classroom: Why do this?

To help answer that question, in 2011 Ball State launched the Interactive Learning Space (ILS) Initiative, a two-year, six-semester faculty development program from the Office of Educational Excellence (OEE). The initiative is designed to teach faculty how to blend active learning pedagogies with new forms of learning spaces and collect research on the outcomes.

New Learning Spaces

Two classrooms in the Teachers College building were renovated for the program. Each room was given funding for a $90,000 makeover to turn them into new kinds of learning spaces, one called the "Node Classroom," and the other called the "Media:scape Classroom." Both have raised floors to expedite future

Ball State University's "Node" active learning classroom

infrastructure updates, and both draw heavily on Steelcase's equipment catalog.

The Node Classroom is outfitted with the infamous

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chairs, which can be wheeled around for quick classroom reconfiguration. The space also includes three interactive whiteboards, Apple TV, a document camera and "Huddle-boards," lightweight portable whiteboards that can be filled up by users and hung around the room.

The Media:scape room has four tables, each seating six people, which integrate technology into the furniture. A student can walk up to the table or "station" and access a "puck" controller to display whatever is on his mobile device to the flat screen at that station. An integration panel allows content from any station to be shown at the other stations. The space also includes one interactive whiteboard, Apple TV, a document camera and Huddleboards.

A Round-Robin Approach

In order to use the active learning classrooms, faculty now must progress through the ILS training program — a two-year process based on the cohort model.

"We don't just throw people into situations with technology without strong training and support," Buck explained. "Otherwise, we've wasted our money and frustrated the faculty who are involved."

Semester one of the program starts in the spring with a cohort of contract, tenure-track and tenured faculty across departments and colleges. Some are active learn-

ing "pedagogues," said Kathleen Jacobi, assistant director of faculty development, "and this gives them an opportunity to be in a space that fully supports the way they believe they should be teaching." Others are more traditional and stuck in the lecture groove. "They know they have been in that lecture mode, and they just want to try something different."

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In semester two, which takes place during the summer, participants go through a faculty development week with afternoon sessions that have been planned and are facilitated by the previous year's cohort. Then they begin their course redesigns; contemplate what research scholarship will come out of the experimentation; and hold "learning community" conversations among the two cohorts.

The third semester of the program takes place in the fall. The previous cohort is teaching its final semester. The newer cohort is able to observe what teaching looks like in the spaces. When the second spring comes around — considered the fourth semester of the program — the newer cohort begins teaching in the spaces and starts up

research projects. The participants get the chance to use the special rooms for their redesigned courses for two semesters.

By the second summer of this round-robin structure, these instructors have evolved into the mentors. They are redesigning courses and facilitating the latest faculty development week for the newest cohort. Faculty are

learning from faculty, a crucial ingredient in the success of the program.

Not surprisingly, clamor has grown for the specially outfitted spaces. The university intends to add new ones "but the only ones who will be in it are those who go through this cohort model and are trained," said Buck.

Supporting the Research

When Ball State President Jo Ann Gora was shown the active learning spaces for the first time, recalled Buck, "One of her first questions was, 'So, how is student learning improved?' From the very beginning, she wanted to know, 'What's the research you've come up with? What's

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the information you've got? We've got to know if this is working or not.'"

As ILS cohorts approach their fourth semester, these individuals are expected to participate in a rigorous research program that measures the student impact of the changes being introduced into the classroom.

One of the most important research projects underway right now is to examine courses that have a high number of students getting D's or F's or withdrawing. Those courses affect the university greatly, said Gary Pavlechko, director of teaching technology for the OEE, because many who are failing in their first year tend not to return for a second year.

Currently, four Math 125 courses with 24 students each are being taught in the Node classroom by instructors who are also teaching the same courses in traditional spaces that hold 30 to 33 students. That setup will allow Ball State to do a comparative study on student achievement

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and the efficacy of active learning spaces to improve those outcomes. The two types of classes are of fairly comparable size in that study.

Other courses with high failure rates often have larger class sizes — closer to 75 students — making it difficult to draw comparisons between active learning and traditional spaces, since the current active learning spaces

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accommodate far fewer students. Buck continues to lobby for new funding that would allow her to build new active learning spaces that could accommodate larger classes.

Going for Lasting Effect
Whether or not active learning spaces turn out to have the effect on student success that Ball State is hoping for, the institution has certainly seen an increase in faculty engagement thanks to the ILS program. Through the end of 2013, participants had made 14 conference presentations and received approval from Ball State's Institutional Review Board for six faculty and three OEE research studies. On top of that, several faculty manuscripts are being prepared

for publication, and Pavlechko and Jacobi will be contributing to a new anthology on learning spaces. About 2,000 students have gone through the newly designed courses.

Still, Pavlechko isn't concerned about the number of instructors who apply for the ILS training program. For the most part, he expects the members of cohorts one and two to do the heavy selling to prospective applicants. His

measure of success will be when every academic building on campus includes active learning spaces — and both students and teachers demand to use them.

"We still have faculty from cohort one coming back to our learning communities right now — voluntarily — because they want to be with like-minded teachers," he said. "That truly is when you're going to see a cultural shift in teaching in higher ed, and that's what we're after. We're doing it on a small scale, but we know it's going to make a lasting effect." **CT**

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