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STAFF RESOURCES

LEARNING SPACES

ENGAGING STUDENTS

Have you ever thought about how the classroom where you teach might enhance or hinder learning? Are there spaces across the university where you love to teach, and others where you feel uninspired and loathe to enter? The spaces where we teach and where our students learn are becoming more and more important.

In the face of competing fully online degrees, how can we ensure that students want to keep coming back to our campus, and are engaged in their learning, rather than passive recipients in a lecture hall filled with hundreds of others? This guide has been designed for you to think about how various classrooms across the university might be harnessed to their full potential. The examples are drawn from real life scenarios of academics from UCC.

SOME GENERAL TIPS

- Make lectures more engaging by asking students to participate. Students can be hesitant to ask questions but online tools such as Socrative, Sli.do and even Twitter can be useful ways to engage interest and harness interaction.
- Short break-out sessions can also be useful – this can be difficult in a traditional and inflexible space in a lecture theatre so pair work can be a better option.
- Utilise rooms where the furniture can be moved around to their maximum potential – students can move the furniture into various layouts, and are often more than happy to assist. Even something as simple as turning their chair around to talk to the person behind can facilitate an easy group work set up.

Fixed Furniture

BOOLE BUILDING

“ I currently teach class sizes of 260 to 280. A lot of my teaching takes place in the Boole 3 Lecture theatre. The class size is a huge challenge. It is primarily a one-way interaction. Ideally, students should be engaging with the content, working with each other in groups and asking questions. Ideally, I would like to see swivel seats in operation, this would help with the group interaction. As a result of the class size, it is also difficult to get to know the students.



Boole 3 Lecture Theatre

I make myself available to students during the week and also before and after class, this helps.

I do try to facilitate group activities and walk around the room making myself available.



KANE BUILDING



Kane Building, G19

“ This is an image of Kane G19, a theatre style lecture room at UCC. It is a large room with seating for 212 students. Facilities in the lecture room are very good with a variety of options (data projector, whiteboard, PC, sound system, overhead projector, DVD player, adjustable lighting etc.). The lecture space is old but the interior was updated several years ago. My teaching topic works best for students in

this space when a concept is first presented to the group and then they are given time in class to practice that technique.



These class activities are the most beneficial for students when they complete them as part of a small team rather than individually.

The fixed, tiered seating in this space is not very accommodating of this type of class activity. **While team activities are challenging, they are still possible.**

In-class teams, as a necessity, always comprise of the students seated in front, behind and to the side of the student.

In addition, exercises that are used in this space are shortened and focus more on the design side of the topic than analysis (which allows the students to stay seated but circulate their design ideas to the team).

This allows the students to interact with each other and learn via class activity.

Periodically, we also make use of the stage-like environment of the space to have student presentations

I have also managed to draw on the benefits from virtual environments to overcome the physical limitations of learning spaces such as this one. Something like Padlet or sli.do allows team work and short discussion in a way that wouldn't be restricted by the space.



Large Rooms

FOOD SCIENCE BUILDING

“ This a flat room with a raised teaching platform. I think the raised platform, while useful, separates the lecturer from the students in a very physical way. Also, while there is a central aisle to move up and down, the sides of the room are not accessible, and this seems to be where most students try to "hide"!



A1 in the Food Science Building

I like to interact and move to the student's level so I have a slide changer [clicker] in my hand to allow me to move around during the lecture and not be stuck behind the podium, which I see as a barrier between me and the students.

I also sometimes ask the students to move towards the front and move a single row of tables to make the group more accessible to facilitate small group discussions and a more personal level of interaction so that students are constantly engaged with me during the lecture.

I also try and incorporate some sort of group work or activity within the lecture to ensure students are physically active at some stage during the lecture in an attempt to engage them and keep them motivated.

I think that some form of movement, physical and intellectual (group work / discussion / debate), simulates the students to participate in and reflect on lecture content more than purely didactic teaching.



PHARMACY BUILDING



This is a large teaching space on the upper ground floor of the School of Pharmacy, which can be split into two separate rooms. When the partition is opened out the two rooms become one teaching space, a full pharmacy class (approximately 70 students) can sit in the room for a didactic style lecture. The full room is most often used for workshops and peer-assisted learning for which we facilitate a maximum of 35 students (half the class). The room is equipped with two computers, two projectors, two whiteboards, one blackboard and also has a 'pharmacy consultation room' and the 'model pharmacy' within.



UG 22/23, School of Pharmacy

I find it challenging to use this space optimally. As it was designed as two separate rooms, it is a little awkward from a presenter's point of view to ensure that all students are engaged and able to see and hear everything. As the computers and projectors are not linked, any presentation can only ever be shown on one screen at a time. This may

lead to students at the opposite end of the room becoming disengaged. Also, if the room is used for small group teaching, the facilitator has to sum up for each group to ensure that all of the students can hear the summary.

In my opinion, this space is best used as a place for workshops or small group teaching. It is not ideal for the traditional didactic style lecture, due to its layout. If the students arrange themselves around a table in groups of 5 or 6 and work through case studies together, I find this to be the most optimal use for this teaching space.

In this type of setting, I act as the facilitator or guide-by-the-side, allowing the groups to make the clinical decisions together (peer assisted learning).

I can then use the projector and the microphone to sum up the outcome of the students' case studies so that all students in the room can learn from each other.



Small Classrooms

HEALTH SCIENCES



HS11 School of Health Sciences

“ This is a relatively small room, with a maximum capacity of 30 students. The tables can be arranged in several ways, the most common of which is that depicted in the photograph, arranged in clusters of 4-5 students per round table. The room is equipped with a projector and whiteboards for visual aids. The room has many power points embedded in the flooring for student to plug their computers into.

The way this room is set up can be somewhat chaotic at times. As students sit around round tables, sometimes their attention can be focused elsewhere rather than towards the front of the classroom when the presenter is trying to get a point across. While I would like to be able to overcome this by walking around the room and discuss topics with each individual table, as well as ask questions to each table and facilitate

discussion, this can be a major challenge with the amount of cables attached to the technology the students bring into the classroom (computers/tablets/phones etc). As these are all plugged into the floor sockets, sometimes the safer option is to stand at the front of the room, which unfortunately creates a more 'didactic' environment for classes.

Due to the set-up of tables in this room, I find the best way to engage the students and get the most out of them is to introduce topics and set the students a task, and then to get each table to discuss and try to come up with an answer, with one table chosen to present to the entire class.

In this way, the classroom is flipped, with the majority of the learning points coming from the students themselves, rather than from a lecturer preaching from the pulpit. I find this method tends to produce more collaboration among the students, and tends to allow the students to learn at a comfortable pace for themselves.

Any important points can then be highlighted by me, or gaps in the students' knowledge can be filled, rather than trying to present all the information myself from start to finish which can be very monotonous for the students, and hard for some of them to turn for so long towards the front of the room



Further Resources

A wonderfully inspiring talk by Adam Finkelstein from McGill University, Canada, "Supporting Active Learning Anywhere":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkSTJ-apGlc&feature=youtu.be>

Learning Spaces, the Fourth Corner of Third Level Learning: RTE Brainstorm piece written by Katie Power: <https://www.rte.ie/eile/brainstorm/2018/0312/946866-how-learning-spaces-can-meet-the-demands-of-modern-students/>

Evaluation of Learning Spaces at a UK University:

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/lli/staff-development/docs/academic-prac/developing-learning-spaces-he.docx/view>

Learning Spaces and evaluation: Why is it important? Document from UCL:

<http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/libnet/files/2013/12/UCL-Learning-Spaces-Report.pdf>