Learning to Learn: Instructors Test-Drive Teaching Techniques, Technologies in Collaborative Faculty Room

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This story is part an occasional series highlighting UA initiatives and efforts aimed at optimizing teaching and learning.

Zoe Cohen, an assistant professor in the Department of Physiology [1], says she once taught her classes as “a sage on a stage,” delivering traditional lectures to a roomful of undergraduates.

These days, however, her courses in cardiovascular and immune system physiology look quite different: Her students sit in groups at tables. Cohen moves freely about the room; there’s no stage here. How she delivers course content has changed, too. Instead of lengthy lectures, her instruction is intermixed with small-group, problem-based discussions. She goes over a topic, then asks each table of students to discuss with one another a question or scenario related to the material.

Cohen is one of a growing number of UA instructors who are reimagining traditional lecture courses to be more collaborative and interactive ? part of a move toward a more student-centered, active classroom experience. Evidence suggests this kind of active learning environment significantly improves student outcomes.

It also has improved Cohen’s experience as a teacher, she says.

"It’s changed how I get my students to think about the concepts, and not only do my students enjoy it, but my enjoyment of teaching has increased 110 percent,” said Cohen, adding that her classes of 150-200 students now feel much smaller and more personal.

Cohen, who has been with the University for 10 years, was among the first instructors to teach in the UA’s original and largest collaborative learning space, located in the Science-Engineering Library. Twenty such rooms now exist across campus, outfitted with movable furniture for more interactive seating arrangements and a variety of low- and high-tech tools — ranging from whiteboards to electronic clickers — designed to support a collaborative classroom experience.

Collaborative learning spaces continue to grow in popularity campuswide, as more instructors in varying disciplines redesign their courses to be more interactive. Yet, teaching in such a nontraditional space can be daunting, especially the first time. That’s why University Libraries created the Collaborative Faculty Room [2], with underwriting support from the Research Corporation for Science Advancement, a Tucson-based foundation that provides funding for science and academic development.

The Collaborative Faculty Room is a place where faculty can come together to share ideas
with colleagues, test out technologies and even "rehearse" classes in front of their peers.

Located just upstairs from the collaborative learning space in the Science-Engineering Library, the room is equipped with many of the same technologies found in collaborative classrooms across campus, including, but not limited to the following, with additional technology tools available for checkout from University Libraries [3].

- 70-inch display monitors with audio/visual inputs.
- Doceri software, which essentially transforms an instructor's iPad into an interactive whiteboard, on which they can create hand-drawn lessons, presentations and graphics and share them as images, PDFs or screencasts.
- A document camera, or digital overhead projector, and controllable webcam.
- A Kubi telepresence device, which allows people who are attending meetings or class sessions remotely to control the position of the iPad on which their face appears. When the iPad is connected to the swiveling robotic Kubi device, users can control its position and view of the room from their personal computer.

Faculty members can reserve the Collaborative Faculty Room ? individually or as a group ? to experiment with technology, run through course materials or exchange ideas and teaching techniques. Reservations, which can be for up to four hours at a time, can be made online [4]. The room is accessed with a CatCard.

Many faculty have used the room since it opened in fall 2016, and demand continues to rise, with the number of reservations tripling between spring and fall 2017, said Robyn Huff-Eibl, head of access and information services for University Libraries, which manages the space.

"Having a central place to come and experiment with technology helps take the edge off, so they're not going into the classroom cold," Huff-Eibl said.

The Collaborative Faculty Room also serves as a primary meeting space for the UA's faculty learning communities, small groups of faculty members who meet throughout the academic year to discuss teaching practices and learning methods, as part of an ongoing Academic Affairs initiative. (Those interested in participating in a faculty learning community can get more information here [5].)

The sharing that takes place in the Collaborative Faculty Room has been a game changer for faculty members like Cohen, a faculty learning community facilitator.

"Having this faculty community that cares deeply about education, educational research, being the best teacher possible and teaching the best learners possible ups my game as a teacher," she said. "I learn new things and ideas every time we meet, and I don't want to let my fellow faculty down."

Online reservations [4] for the Collaborative Faculty Room, Room 313 of the Science-Engineering Library, are accepted as far as 120 days in advance. Faculty can hold multiple reservations each week, not to exceed 24 hours of total reserved time.

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