

A Committee to Manage Innovative Learning Spaces: Balancing Committee Size, Cross-Campus Representation, and Decision-Making Power

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The growth in active learning classrooms represents a major shift in the pedagogy and built environment of higher education. While a robust literature exists to discuss the development, use, and evaluation of these innovative learning spaces, the practical considerations of managing innovative learning spaces has not received the same level of attention. This article describes the management model at Queen's University, outlining key workflow considerations: committee size, cross-campus representation, and decision-making power. The conclusion sets out future research opportunities related to the institutional dynamics of innovative learning space management.

Introduction

Over the last decade, higher education institutions have continued to design and implement plans for innovative learning spaces¹ in an attempt to create conditions for improved student learning and engagement. While these innovative learning spaces go by many names—including both general descriptors such as active learning classrooms, learning studios, or flexible learning spaces, and institution-specific examples such as SCALE-UP, TEAL, and TILE classrooms (e.g., Park & Choi, 2014; Tom et al., 2008; Neill & Etheridge, 2008; Beichner et al., 2007; Breslow, 2010; Van Horne et al., 2012)—they share a common recognition that careful attention to the spaces where learning takes place can pay dividends through improved student learning. In addition to some evidence of lower withdrawal/failure/D-grade rates (Cotner et al., 2013; Mooring et al., 2016), active learning classrooms have been linked to open-minded

thinking (Chen, 2015), instructor-student interaction (Park & Choi, 2014), and other positive effects, while challenging instructors (Phillipson et al., 2018), teaching assistants (Chen et al., 2014), and others to reconsider pedagogical practices. Debates over the design and deployment of these spaces continue to pose new questions about the implications of innovative learning spaces on pedagogical practice (Coprige et al., 2021; Murphy, 2020; Ralph et al., 2021)

Drawing attention to the importance of space and design, however, is not the same as proposing active learning classroom design as a pedagogical panacea. More recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of pedagogical development (Brooks & Solheim, 2014), classroom management (Chen, 2018), and institutional support (Murphy & Groen, 2020) to facilitate the benefits of innovative learning spaces. While a proliferation of literature relating to techniques and considerations for teaching in innovative spaces may address the first two necessities (e.g., Baepler et al., 2016; Petersen & Gorman, 2016; Sawers et al., 2016; Stoltzfus & Libarkin 2016), discussion of institutional support models and mechanisms has not developed to the same extent. This is not to say that the notion of institutional support has been absent from the literature, but—as a recent systematic review found—that these comments more often highlight the *importance* of institutional support rather than explaining *how* institutional support functions (Leijon et al., 2022).

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¹ We use “innovative learning spaces” as a catch-all term to describe non-traditional classrooms. The bulk of our institutional experience comes from active learning classrooms. For more information, see:

<https://www.queensu.ca/classrooms/active-learning/active-learning-classrooms>

This article approaches the question of institutional support to facilitate success in innovative learning spaces from the perspective of the management of learning spaces, drawing on the experiences of the Teaching and Learning Spaces Working Group at Queen's University. This model of learning space management balances committee size, cross-campus representation, and decision-making power to enable efficiency and effectiveness in responding to challenges, providing guidance, developing policies, and issuing renovation and renewal recommendations. The first section reviews references to learning space committees in existing literature, acknowledging that these discussions often appear as asides or contextual notes. The second section then introduces the Queen's model for learning space management (including committee composition, terms of reference, and workflow), and summarizes the key benefits of the model. The conclusion situates the question of learning space management in the literature and discusses future research directions relating to institutional support frameworks.

Management of Learning Spaces

As with other university initiatives requiring both a large capital expenditure for construction and ongoing operating expenditures (support, equipment, etc.), many innovative learning spaces fall under the purview of a specific committee. This committee may have an active role in designing the innovative learning space life cycle, building instructional capacity, providing support (technical or pedagogical) in-term, undertaking performance reviews, drawing lessons learned for future classroom construction or revitalization projects, or some combination of these and other tasks. However, the institutional perspective on the administration and management of learning spaces has not received the same level of attention. However, scholars have offered less detailed attention when it comes to highlighting institutional perspectives on the administration and management of learning spaces.

This is not to say that the component responsibilities have been overlooked, but that the bureaucratic context has largely been overlooked. While discussions of bureaucratic organization may be less exciting than analyses of the latest development in educational technology, the unchecked reification of bureaucratic practices can lead to rigid path dependency (Pierson 2000). Instead of a nimble group able to react to challenges in real time, committees can become stuck in their ways. This can be especially true when the committee composition itself is problematic. A committee

that is very large or composed of very senior administrators may meet less frequently and, therefore, may have fewer opportunities to revise composition or practices.² On the other hand, a very small committee, or a committee whose members lack institutional decision-making power, may be unable to enact the changes requested by members.

One case where the bureaucratic context is explicitly discussed is in the University of Minnesota's active learning classroom implementation. At UMN, the Office of Classroom Management (OCM) was tasked with the construction of two classrooms (Whiteside & Fitzgerald, 2009), then formed the joint Active Learning Classroom Pilot Evaluation Team with the Office of Information Technology's (OIT) Digital Media Center (DMC). This partnership drew on the built infrastructure capacity of the OCM and the strength of the DMC in faculty development and program evaluation, and was supported through the OIT providing computer technology as needed to faculty and students in the classrooms (Whiteside et al 2009). Subsequent years saw a broader research team continue program evaluation efforts (Whiteside et al 2010). This partnership-based model is effective in bringing together two relevant organizations within the university bureaucracy to bring focused attention to research efforts as the active learning classrooms were implemented. It is unclear based on published research the extent to which these connections enabled other institutional troubleshooting at UMN.

A second model of a purpose-built committee can be found at Central Michigan University, under the auspices of the College of Science and Technology (CST). This committee includes an associate dean, five professors, the CST's director of information technology and student services, and the assistant director of the innovative teaching center (Drake & Battaglia, 2014). While this committee has the benefit of also being focused specifically on the active learning classrooms and includes a large contingent of faculty representation, the underweighting of institutional services may limit the rapidity of service or maintenance requests.

In the case of Michigan State University, an existing cross-campus committee called the University Classrooms Committee was tasked with the creation of Rooms for Engaged and Active Learning (REAL). Although it is perhaps worth noting that the committee is responsible for other facilities management issues on campus, the breadth of coverage is notable:

² Meetings can also become unwieldy in the context of large groups, and a larger committee may be too slow to respond to important issues in a timely manner.

IT Services, Facilities Planning & Space Management (FPSM), Infrastructure Planning and Facilities (IPF), Office of the Registrar, and faculty. FPSM was instrumental to identifying the suitable location and securing the budget; IT Services to the technology design of the rooms; IPF to construction of the rooms and installation of furniture; and Office of the Registrar to scheduling and coordination of the classes and the rooms. (Lee et al., 2014, p. 58).

While there may be downsides to adding the active learning classroom portfolio to an existing committee’s workload, the MSU model provides good coverage of actors who play pivotal roles in the management of learning spaces.

While the literature on active learning classrooms largely brackets the role of committees in the design, implementation, and management³ within the process, these clearly-defined examples offer a spectrum of possible arrangements. Committees can be created for the management of innovative learning spaces, or that responsibility can be added to existing committees. Faculty can play a small role, a large role, or none at all; likewise, service units can similarly vary in their level of involvement. While a “whole-of-university approach” to managing innovative learning spaces may “help to mitigate and respond rapidly to issues” as they arise (Murphy & Groen, 2020, p.46), there is no single best practice held as consensus in the field. However, this lack of consensus is at least partly attributable to the lack of scholarly discourse on the issue of management practices. The next section turns precisely to that topic, introducing the Teaching and Learning Spaces Working Group at Queen’s University, which has worked in the design, implementation, management, and evaluation of active learning classrooms for the last decade.

The Queen’s Model for Learning Space Management

To support the design and function of innovative learning spaces at Queen’s University, a Teaching and Learning Spaces Working Group (TLSWG) was established. This section will highlight the membership on that committee, the terms of reference, and describe committee workflow, as well as situate these considerations in context of the benefits provided by this model of learning space management.

The TLSWG includes representation from the Centre for Teaching and Learning, Information Technology Services, the Facilities department, Events Services, the Office of the Registrar, and the Office of Planning and Budgeting. This

membership provides a breadth of cross-campus connections to relevant units that help support the success of the innovative learning spaces. To provide further detail on committee membership, Table 1 provides the titles of committee members.

Table 1: Committee member titles and units	
Role	Unit
Core Members	
Educational Developer	Centre for Teaching and Learning
Educational Development Fellow	Centre for Teaching and Learning
Departmental Assistant	Centre for Teaching and Learning
Manager of Digital Classrooms/AV Technology	Information Technology Services
Project Manager (Classroom-Related Projects)	Facilities
Assistant Project Manager/Designer	Facilities
Director, Campus Planning and Real Estate	Facilities
Manager, Client Service Operations (FIXIT)	Facilities
Operations Manager	Event Services
Manager, Timetabling	Office of the Registrar
Associate Director, Finance and Operations	Office of Planning and Budgeting
Additional Members	
Associate Director, Project Management	Facilities
Associate University Registrar, Student Information Systems	Office of the Registrar

³ While research teams are visible, this may be more an artefact of the inclusion of author lists and methodology sections in academic articles.

As the member roles indicate, the committee includes a number of upper-middle managers from many different departments. As will be discussed below, this provides for a balance of decision-making authority and availability for meetings. The committee is chaired by an educational developer from the CTL who not only provides the instructor lens and student-focused orientation, but also acts as the central coordinator among the units involved in the committee. Every member of the committee has his or her own specific role; therefore, each member brings unique insights to the table and there is minimal overlap in responsibility. No one person (or their role) is more important than others on the committee--they are different and work synergistically. Each individual member (and their role within their home unit) has a perspective that the others will not have. This membership brings a deep knowledgebase to committee deliberations, as well as decision-making authority to submit maintenance requests, develop teaching support resources, implement timetabling changes, and forward other initiatives.

When the TLSWG was established, terms of reference set out the primary and secondary foci for the committee. Regarding the university's new active learning classrooms, the committee was tasked with the development of a best practice profile, a priority list for distributing courses to ALCs, a readiness list for teaching in ALCs, and the determination of how to manage ALCs to meet demand and opportunities for courses in the spaces. For existing innovative learning spaces, the committee was asked to develop a plan for ongoing technology maintenance and upgrading, and to similarly determine how to manage demand and opportunities for the spaces. Given the delays that sometimes occur over the course of capital projects, the committee plays an important risk mitigation and contingency management role, facilitating the reallocation of room assignments when renovation or construction plans are not completed by the start of the semester (considering capacity as well as technological and room capacity needs). A second set of primary foci consisted of the development of best practices for different classroom profiles on-campus, including a cataloguing of classroom types, features, scheduling requests, and maintenance needs. Secondary foci tasked the committee with oversight of informal and outdoor learning spaces (for example, recent work has also addressed student study spaces on campus). As the terms of reference reveal, while the TLSWG has a primary focus on managing the innovative learning spaces on campus, this responsibility is put into context with further connections to traditional, informal, and outdoor learning spaces. This

breadth permits the committee to situate the active learning classrooms within the 'big picture' of learning on campus.

The TLSWG meets once or twice per month as a group, with further project-specific meetings between assigned members as needed. This frequency of meetings is in part made possible through the seniority of decision-makers who are members of the committee, striking a balance between swift implementation and scheduling flexibility. When responsibilities for innovative learning space management was held by a committee consisting of senior administrators, scheduling inflexibility limited the workflow and scope of the committee, but the current arrangement sees the working group report and submit recommendations to the Classroom Renewal Committee (chaired by the Vice Provost Teaching and Learning).⁴ In total, the committee has overseen 16 complete transition projects, with five further in progress, in addition to major renovation in other central classroom spaces on campus. The TLSWG has produced a number of other outputs, including a new website highlighting centrally managed classrooms, a document providing guidance for the design and use of new classroom spaces, and a number of specific recommendations for refresh, renovation, and redevelopment projects.

Conclusion

The development of innovative learning spaces over the last two decades has marked a major shift in teaching and learning in higher education. To ensure that these spaces are used to their maximum benefit, it is important that wraparound supports are developed to provide training (both pedagogical and technological), troubleshooting, and risk mitigation. While previous interventions into scholarly debates on innovative learning spaces have discussed such support efforts from the perspective of educational development and the sharing of pedagogical best practices, this article has addressed the management practices related to innovative learning spaces. By balancing committee size, cross-campus representation, and members' decision-making power, the "Queen's model" for a Teaching and Learning Spaces Working Group provides a management model that includes sufficiently senior representatives from relevant departments with an eye to mitigating scheduling conflicts and large-committee inefficiencies.

This first intervention into the institutional management of innovative learning spaces opens a number of opportunities for future research. Comparative studies of different institutional management models, in-depth

⁴ For example, in the case of large capital projects that require approval at a more senior level, the working group will submit recommendations to the committee of more senior decision-makers.

research into the workflow and perceptions of management committee members, and dialogue with best practices in related fields of management and public administration may provide rich and relevant answers to the question of how to manage innovative learning spaces. The continued development of this literature promises to complement continued pedagogical support development with robust institutional management frameworks.

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