

The Learning Space Rating System

Scenario

Daniel is a space planner at a small private college. Three classrooms are slated for remodeling as part of an initiative to create learning spaces that support an active learning curriculum. Today Daniel is chairing a meeting of the Space Allocation and Planning Committee in one of the classrooms. He distributes copies of the Learning Space Rating System (LSRS) and explains how the instrument can be used to rate a learning space's potential for active learning. He points to the single video projector mounted in the ceiling and the rows of traditional student desks. The classroom clearly needs IT upgrades and furniture more conducive to collaboration, but what else should be considered?

Committee members begin to discuss the LSRS criteria, trying to determine how well this room aligns with the Campus-Wide Active Learning Initiative, which calls for learning spaces to support collaboration, small-group discussions, and hands-on projects. The chair of the history department cites a push to create five-minute online video lectures to support flipped classes. The group walks through the space, talking about whether students can adequately see and hear the speaker. They discuss lighting, heating, and the comfort of chairs. Do students have access to adequate power and connectivity? Can presenters and audience interact via technology?

After renovations, Daniel walks through one of the classrooms. He admires the new lighting, movable tables, lightweight chairs, eight video screens for group work, and sliding partitions. Many updates are hidden, like the upgraded network service and the technology controller tucked away in the podium. Student computing is supported by power outlets and connections to built-in hardware. Daniel meets with senior leadership to talk about how learning spaces contribute to and align with the institutional commitment for greater levels of active learning, at least for some kinds of courses. In the coming weeks, the committee will use the LSRS to evaluate the majority of the campus classrooms, as a way of evaluating the classroom infrastructure. They will use the results to develop an overarching, strategic plan to renovate the classrooms and in that way broaden support for and encouragement of active learning in the undergraduate curriculum.

1 What is it?

The [Learning Space Rating System](#) is a tool developed by leading community experts for rating formal learning spaces to determine how well their design supports and encourages active learning. A “formal learning space” in this context is a classroom, designed to accommodate all members of a course in face-to-face meetings scheduled by a central office, such as the registrar. The LSRS provides a rubric for measuring the affordances of a classroom's design for active learning, but it does not measure how well instructors or students take advantage of those affordances. The LSRS functions much as a [LEED](#) certification in that it offers a way to determine how closely classrooms meet an ideal standard in support of face-to-face learning engagement. Unlike LEED, the LSRS is a self-assessment tool. Any institution or department can use the LSRS tool as a guide when assessing or designing classrooms that promote creative and collaborative learning.

2 How does it work?

The LSRS includes 50 questions organized into six sections: integration with campus context, planning process, support and operations, environmental quality, layout and furnishings, and technology and tools. Teams involved in the design (or redesign) of learning spaces evaluate those spaces, assigning points for criteria that are met. Because of the diversity of factors covered by the LSRS, teams often include representation from groups such as facility planners, space management, faculty, technology providers, and the registrar. Determinations for each factor need not be made on the spot; instead, the LSRS may act as a conversation starter about what constitutes active learning, collaboration, or student engagement, or it may suggest needs that require further research. Once a learning space is rated, campus officials can use that information to consider what changes, if any, to pursue. A [community input form](#) allows feedback on the LSRS tool and its use, and data from the form are used to improve future versions of the rating system.

3 Who's doing it?

Institutions of all types use the LSRS as part of updating existing learning spaces and building new ones. Because the tool was developed by the community, it provides an independent

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measurement of a learning space, which can help build support for active learning projects. The University of Southern California used the LSRS in a six-year, \$33 million initiative to transform the institution's 224 learning spaces. The LSRS was used for planning, design, metrics, evaluation, assessment, and communication. When it was complete, more than 80% of faculty and 85% of students felt that USC's learning environments better supported their teaching and learning. Mesa Community College uses the LSRS in its planning process to align classroom design with institutional strategic plans and academic goals. MCC also uses the tool to educate the campus community about active learning. Similarly, Iowa State University uses the LSRS to build awareness about the opportunities for active learning. The university uses LSRS results to compare classrooms across campus and design updates that can apply broadly to those spaces. At SUNY Buffalo State, teams from around campus use the LSRS collaboratively; in a recent project the LSRS helped the university determine how to get the biggest "bang for the buck" when upgrading 32 classrooms on a limited budget.

4 Why is it significant?

Design projects for learning spaces often generate high costs and high visibility. In cases where an institution chooses to pursue active learning spaces, the LSRS provides a clear-cut list of items to consider and measure. Using the tool, a campus can address such issues as seating density, temperature, lighting, the adequacy of writing surfaces, electrical power, and network capacity—any one of which can affect the learning environment. **The LSRS can foster collaboration and creative efforts**, inviting teams to consider learning approaches in initial phases to ensure that new designs will support the intended directions in pedagogy. The LSRS can open discussions internally and externally regarding various approaches to learning and the ways in which spaces can be designed to support those approaches.

5 What are the downsides?

In its current version, the LSRS is designed to measure only formal learning spaces. Because it is not intended for the analysis of informal or specialized learning spaces such as libraries, maker spaces, labs, practice rooms, meeting rooms, or studios, teams looking to evaluate such spaces must adapt the tool or use other approaches. Institutions must communicate clearly that **the LSRS is not designed to measure the performance of students or instructors within a learning space**. If that kind of measurement is desired, some other

means would be needed to accomplish it. Finally, the score-sheet was built for self-rating, and because no third-party rating service exists to offer objective analysis, there is no reliable basis for cross-institutional comparisons.

6 Where is it going?

The LSRS provides scoring criteria for innovations yet to be made. Each section of the LSRS assigns one credit for innovation to encourage creative thinking that explores future use of classroom space. The current LSRS is Version 1. Trials in 2015 with a number of participating institutions will allow the LSRS team to investigate the practical issues of how credits are applied at various institutions. These studies will provide the basis for a second version of the rating system. **The LSRS team is coordinating with the FLEXspace project** (Flexible Learning Environments eXchange), a large-scale community database where detailed information about noteworthy and exceptional learning environments is captured and made available. Eventually the LSRS may feature a broader scoresheet, providing tools to measure the effectiveness of informal learning spaces. Perhaps, in time, a network of third-party certified scorers may be established, and the issuance of badges or certifications may emerge as a part of the LSRS project.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

The LSRS upholds two important premises: that the physical environment can impact learning and that institutions can build capabilities into spaces to support active learning. The LSRS seeks to embed classroom planning, building, and renovation fully in the campus culture by encouraging coordination with master planning, community consultation, faculty support, and human-centered design. **Intentional learning space design can promote a wide array of activities**, including small-group discussions, online searches and backchannel discussions, interactive technologies, assistive technologies, and project-based learning. Where the LSRS tool promotes productive cross-unit discussion about classrooms, there is likely to be wider support—including financial support—for appropriate redesign and reconsideration of these areas. This, in turn, may lead to further exploration of ways to integrate active learning and innovative pedagogy with learning spaces that can support both.