

Engaged Learning Beyond the Bounds of the Classroom

"A commitment to active learning requires professors who see teaching as a form of conversation and collaboration . . ."

The idea of engagement — conversation and collaboration — cannot be successful if the conversation does not occur. Even in the age of cyber-communication, face-to-face dialog is difficult to surpass for speed, content, and certainly nuance. The concept is ancient and linked irrevocably to time and space. If one doesn't make the time or have the place, the conversation may not occur. A more subtle axiom supported by behavior-environment research is that if one doesn't have a supportive place, a place in which conversation can occur comfortably, meaningful exchange may be hampered or curtailed.

There are reasons some architects provide benches outside classrooms. Obviously they are places for students to gather while waiting for a class-period to end in order to get into the room where their own class will be held. It is an act of design considerateness to make people comfortable.

Benches outside classrooms serve also as a venue for what my colleagues call the teachable moment. The teachable moment is an elusive concept, though nonetheless important to many a student's education. It occurs at the end of a conversation, or quite typically the end of a class period, when one last question is explored or one more observation is shared. Placing benches outside classrooms permits intensely interested students and professors to pursue conversations to their logical, comfortable conclusion when they



must vacate the classroom scheduled for the next gathering of conversants. The environment (the bench) supports, and in a way encourages, the activity.

This engagement need not be limited to the classroom building. Free-flowing conversations, meaningful exchanges, often take place in more casual circumstances. Opportunities to talk, to follow a line of inquiry, can and do occur in passing, on the way from one place to another. That is why campus pathways should be wide, to encourage those actively engaged in conversation to see and hear what each other has to say — to walk side-by-side, to address each other fully.

By extension, the campus landscape too can be made more supportive. Benches along pathways and at outdoor gathering places will support and (dare we venture) encourage conversation and a fuller engagement in learning.

Charles A Craig

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