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CTTL Try It! Mini-Grant
Final Report
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For my CTTL Try It! Mini-Grant, I procured 4 mobile group seating tables and used them to replace one column of seating in my AHP classroom for my Fall 2013 OCS 332 course. Traditionally arranged with 3 columns and 5 rows of tables, the classroom utilized 2 outer columns of standard tables and one middle column of randomly-arranged group tables. For each class session, I entered the classroom early, moved the standard tables out of the center column, walked down the hall to retrieve the group tables from our storage closet, and set up the group tables with chairs in the middle of the classroom. I allowed students to freely choose their seating (with a reminder to sit at the group tables if they had not yet tried them) and classroom activities otherwise proceeded as normal.

At four points in the semester – weeks 1, 4, 8, and 12 – students completed a 3-question anonymous survey. Questions 1 and 2 on the survey asked students to rate their ease of achieving learning objectives (Q1) and working with other students (Q2) on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). Question 3 (Q3) asked for an open-ended response regarding the one classroom aspect (including but not restricted to discussion, reflection, classroom arrangement, and lecture presentation) that most influenced the student's learning that day. In addition to these surveys, I collected information from anonymous 5-week course evaluations, mid-semester feedback (obtained by the CTTL), and final course evaluations, none of which inquired specifically about the tables' use. I also received permission to have two representatives from the CTTL conduct an end-of-semester focus group with the students regarding their perceptions of the tables relative to their learning styles.

My research objectives for this experiment included the following:

- 1) to determine whether or not mobile group seating facilitates students' engagement with course material, as compared to a traditional classroom setup;
- 2) to determine whether or not mobile group seating facilitates increased peer interaction during classroom activities, as compared to a traditional classroom setup; and
- 3) to provide a baseline understanding of which classroom components are most helpful for active learning.

I hypothesized that, across course sessions, students who sat at the mobile group tables would report greater ease in achieving learning objectives and participating in group work than their peers who sat at standard classroom tables. I also hypothesized that students would frequently mention the mobile group tables in surveys, framing them as an asset for their classroom learning.

For 2 of the survey weeks, the average ratings for ease of achieving the learning objective were higher for the students seated at the group tables, whereas for the other two weeks, the average ratings were higher for the students seated at the traditional tables. Ratings relative to the ease of participating in group work more clearly showed a preference for the group tables, which had higher average ratings

than those of students at the traditional tables for 3 of the 4 survey weeks. Thus, hypothesis 1 (that students at the group tables would give higher ratings on Q1 and Q2 than their peers at traditional tables) was not supported. Students who sat at the group tables did reference the seating arrangement in Q3 more than the students seated at the traditional tables; however, those references were not as frequent as I had anticipated, so hypothesis 2 was also not supported.

On balance, the results of the focus group suggested that the students saw the middle tables as good for group work but not for watching the professor or taking notes. The students felt that the tables made it easier to interact with and get to know classmates, easier to form groups for in-class work, and made them more inclined to participate. However, students also noted that the tables did not seem to clearly facilitate learning objectives or relate to their particular learning styles. Some students voiced discomfort or a feeling of exclusion related to the group tables, and most students said they chose to sit at the group tables when all the seats at the traditional tables had been taken. Some students also comments that they were more inclined to sit at the group tables if they had done the reading prior to class.

While the process of making sense of these data is only just beginning, a few thoughts come to mind regarding “what worked,” “what didn’t work,” and “lessons learned.” It appears that students did perceive a benefit to the group tables for in-class group activities: per their own report, students were able to form and participate in groups more easily when seated at the middle table. Thus, it seems that the tables did support peer interaction (Objective 2). However, it is much less clear whether the group tables helped students achieve learning objectives in each of the surveyed class sessions (Objective 1). Part of this may be due to an unclear articulation of the learning objectives or the fact that the objectives were not listed for students while they were completing the surveys. The most surprising finding was that students felt excluded or had negative associations with the group tables. In reflecting on this point, I see that I underestimated the power of students’ seating habits and preferences. While I knew they would compare seating in my course to the two other concurrent OCS courses, I had no idea that they would compare themselves with students within my class itself. Hence, one of the biggest “lessons learned” is that I should have better anticipated desires for conformity within my classroom. In addition, students’ preference for (and near-dependence on) PowerPoint slides seemed to color their perception of the group tables: several comments mentioned that the group tables made it difficult to watch me or see the board. Despite the fact that I used PowerPoint slides in less than 50% of my class sessions, student comments in this vein may illuminate a larger problem with my experiment: while I changed one aspect of the learning environment (seating), the classroom was still physically designed to support a forward-facing traditional lecture format (with the board and projector screen at the front and the clock at the back). On a more practical and personal level, while was relatively easy to rearrange my classroom each session (and was a necessity for the experiment), it took more time and effort to set up and take down the tables than I had anticipated. Without the help of students and other staff members, that job would have been quite onerous.