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From Passive Lectures to Active Learning: Changing Teaching Methods in Higher Education Classrooms

Shivangi S Bhasgi

Lecturer and Module Lead – Department of Construction Global Banking School, London, United Kingdom

Abstract

For most of the last century, the default way to run a college course has been to stand at the front of a room and talk while students take notes. That model is now hard to defend on the evidence. This paper looks at what happens when instructors replace some or all of that lecture time with active learning: peer instruction, problem-based work, flipped classrooms, and structured in-class practice. It starts with the strongest data point in the field, a 2014 meta-analysis of 225 studies showing that STEM students in straight-lecture courses fail at rates 55 percent higher than students in courses with any active learning component. It then works through what active learning looks like in practice, what the more recent and more mixed flipped-classroom research says, and why, despite two decades of consistent findings, most college teaching still runs on the lecture. The barriers turn out to be less about evidence and more about time, training, and incentives, and the paper closes with what has actually helped institutions move past them.

Keywords: Active learning Higher education pedagogy Passive lecturing Student-centered teaching Flipped classroom Secondary / supporting keywords Peer instruction Problem-based learning Team-based learning STEM education Faculty barriers to teaching reform Course redesign Learning outcomes Student engagement Instructional design Evidence-based teaching