

What do students want from teachers right now?

Fostering active and safe learning environments

Renato M. Rodrigues, Margarida Fardilha

Department of Medical Sciences, University of Aveiro, Aveiro, Portugal

Abstract

The transition to active learning environments requires an understanding of what students truly value in their educational experience. A safe learning environment, including physical, psychological, emotional and psychological dimensions, is crucial for inspiring curiosity and increasing students participation.

This study aims to explore the characteristics students expect from a teacher and to define evidence-based strategies for developing active, engaging, and motivating academic environments. Institutional strategies for pedagogical innovation were analysed alongside a survey of 50 university students. The survey evaluated quantitative metrics regarding the importance of teacher-driven motivation and collected qualitative data on the fundamental qualities of impactful teachers, as well as the perceived advantages of their pedagogical approaches. Quantitative analysis reveals that the majority of students consider a teacher's ability to motivate them as highly important to their academic success. The most frequently selected essential traits for teachers were effective communication, empathy, technical knowledge, patience, and a genuine interest in the student. Qualitatively, students reported that teachers who simplify complex concepts and cultivate empathy directly increase student interest, facilitate autonomous study, and improve academic outcomes. Furthermore, strategies such as incorporating music, celebrating diversity and achievements, and promoting a culture of good humour and safety were identified as key drivers for establishing a sense of belonging. Students consistently described the ideal teacher using terms such as empathetic, dedicated, inspiring, and motivating. Students want teachers who balance technical expertise with strong interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. Developing an active learning environment requires teachers to be adaptable, empathetic, and highly communicative.

By integrating student-centred strategies, such as active feedback loops, the ethical application of AI to facilitate personalised study, recognition of student achievements, and empathetic engagement, teachers can enhance spaces where students are not only academically successful but also deeply motivated and emotionally supported.

Background information

The transition to active learning environments is supported by literature demonstrating its efficacy in improving critical thinking, student engagement, and academic performance compared to traditional methods. Furthermore, teacher-driven motivation and student-centred strategies are fundamental to foster self-regulation and strong intrinsic motivation in higher education. Creating these safe learning spaces across physical, psychological, and emotional dimensions is crucial for inspiring curiosity, requiring relational mechanisms that ensure students feel respected and supported.

This study explores the characteristics students expect from teachers to define evidence-based strategies for developing active, engaging, and motivating academic environments.

Methodological approach

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining institutional strategy analysis with student-centred quantitative and qualitative data collection to identify key pedagogical drivers.



Evidence-Based Strategies

• **Physical:** Adapting spatial layouts for active learning (e.g., World Café method) and promoting diverse teaching methodologies.

• **Psychological:** Cultivating trust by empowering students in decision-making, establishing active feedback loops, and showing vulnerability.

• **Emotional:** Fostering empathy by knowing students' names, celebrating achievements (e.g., playful awards), and integrating student-led music playlists for focus.

• **Technological:** Ethical application of AI (e.g., as a Socratic opponent or study buddy) to facilitate personalised and autonomous study.

Results of survey

• **Motivation is non-negotiable:** 98% of the surveyed students consider a teacher's ability to motivate them as "Important" or "Very Important" to their academic success.

• **The Ideal Teacher Persona:** When asked to describe a good teacher in a single word, the most frequent concepts highlighted were "Empathetic", "Wise", "Inspiring", and "Dedicated".

• **Academic Impact:** Teachers who simplify concepts directly increase class interest, facilitate autonomous study, and improve final grades.

The essential traits identified by students are summarized in Fig. 1

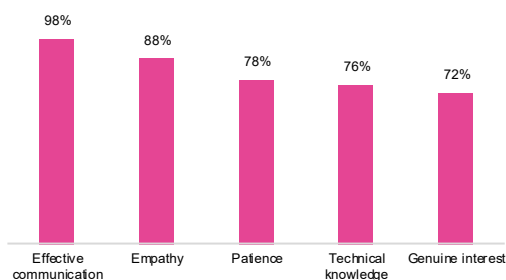


Fig.1 Essential characteristics of a good teacher, according to higher education students (N=50)

Conclusions

Developing an active learning environment requires teachers to be adaptable, empathetic, and highly communicative.

By integrating student-centred strategies, active feedback loops, recognition of achievements, and empathetic engagement, teachers can enhance spaces where students are academically successful, deeply motivated, and emotionally supported.

References

AERO (2023). Effectively managing classrooms. Cardoso et al. Collaborative online international learning. Turk J Biochem. Carlos et al. (2023). Engaging large classes. Frontiers in Education. Freeman et al. (2014). Active learning increases student performance. PNAS, 111(23). Jeno (2015). Encouraging Active Learning in Higher Education. IJTE, 5(1). Pinto-Pinho et al. The World Café method and active teaching. Innovations in Education and Teaching International. Prince (2004). Does active learning work? J. Eng. Educ., 93(3). Vella-Brodick (2023). Motivation in Higher Education. J. Coll. Stud. Dev. Wang & Chen (2025). Psychological Safety in Higher Education. LNEPPM, 109(1).



Aprendizagem em Engenharia baseada em Projeto com Consultoria Intercurso: Integração entre Projeto Eletromecânico e Projeto Industrial

Online Benchmarking for Active Learning: A competitive lossless data compression challenge in Algorithmic Information Theory

Da Sala de Aula ao Espaço Imersivo: O Potencial da Realidade Virtual e dos Jogos Sérios para o Desenvolvimento de Competência Emocional no Ensino Superior

What do the students want from teachers right now? Fostering active and safe learning environments

Da Maquete ao Protótipo em Contexto Real: aprendizagem baseada em projeto no ensino do design industrial

LINK-UA – Learning, Integration, and Networking for Knowledge: uma experiência de Aprendizagem-Serviço na Universidade de Aveiro

Da teoria à prática: Integração de empresas na UC do Plano de Marketing