The Architecture of Attention: Social Connection as an Engagement Intervention in Higher Education

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Abstract

When evaluating my own student success data, I have noticed a significant shift over the years: apathy is rising. Educators across higher education report the same pattern of shortened attention spans and passive watching behavior taking over lecture and hybrid classrooms. Meta-analytic research confirms that active-learning approaches meaningfully improve outcomes over traditional lecture. A synthesis of 225 STEM studies (Freeman et al., 2014) and subsequent work extending those findings into the humanities and social sciences (Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2022) found that students under active instruction outperformed lecture-only peers by roughly half a standard deviation on assessments, while facing substantially lower failure rates. This session offers three low-prep, high-impact classroom structures any educator can implement immediately. Complementary research on classroom relationships shows that instructor-student rapport is not a soft add-on but a measurable driver of participation, motivation, and course evaluations (Frisby & Myers, 2008; Frisby & Martin, 2010). Drawing on cooperative-learning and formative-assessment literature, the presentation will demonstrate how these techniques work together across a single class session to counter apathy, increase equitable participation, and give educators real-time insight into student understanding, without requiring a full course redesign.

Attendees will Leave with:

- A research-backed rationale for prioritizing structured social connection alongside content delivery.
- A ready-to-adapt attendance-question bank and pairing protocol for think-pair-share.
- A formative, low-stakes exit-activity template that surfaces both content understanding and student affect.
- Discussion of how to scale these structures across a semester to build a durable, engaged classroom culture.