K-12
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Exploring Inner Space

toolkits

The Evolution of the Modern Classroom

A modern student's life is, in many ways, dictated and organized by their digital life: online, there are secret spaces to watch and observe; group areas to socialize and collaborate; publishing spaces to share and express; performance areas to play and experiment; participation spaces to work with others toward a common goal; data spaces to research and study; and "watching" spaces to absorb and reflect.

It would only make sense, then, that a classroom should reflect a student's interests, abilities, and the ways in which they learn and demonstrate knowledge the best.

Creating a space for learning to happen can be a tricky endeavor. It must accomplish many things with an invisible elegance. It must be adaptable: supporting students and activities while responding to the ebb and flow of learning styles and technologies. It must be social, supporting collaboration and interaction. It must be safe, ensuring the physical well being of students, teachers, and faculty. It must be resourceful, supporting efficient long-term use. And, lastly, the space must be stimulating so that it engages students and ignites creativity, inquiry and exploration.

But such multi-faceted places that effortlessly fuel study, collaboration, reflection, expression and inspiration are rare in today's schools. Even school libraries¬, the supposed bastion of academic study, are mostly organized with an adult's needs in mind. In today's world of sensory overload, sometimes the quiet of a library can be overwhelming distracting and unwelcoming to students.

So where to begin? Sometimes trying to find a design that works can be a question of first addressing what doesn't work. Observe your classroom spaces. Walk through them while noting "the flow." Are there areas of congestion? If so, identify those areas with sticky notes. How do students move in the space? How do they learn best? If they were in charge of designing the space, what would it look like?

IDEO—a design and consulting firm—has provided some general lessons for classroom redesigns in Metropolis magazine[1]. These lessons include:

- Creating environments that support inquiry

- Ensuring that the classroom engages children in relevant ways

- Encouraging creativity, collaboration, communication, empathy and adaptability

- Allowing for variation and customization

- Deconstructing the "teacher at the front" paradigm

- Building an environment where teachers are actively engaged in learning by doing

- Understanding what students and teachers care about and design with that in mind.

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Author David Bill has also compiled—in 8 Tips and Tricks to Redesign Your Classroom[2]—the principle strategies crucial to the success of a classroom redesign, regardless of budget or scope. First, Bill suggests that students must be involved. Not only can they identify the problems with the current space, but they can also assume various roles in building out or refining the classroom. Research is also important before embarking on a redesign, either in terms of reaching out to vendors or in digging deeper into issues regarding classroom flow. Managing volunteers, clearing clutter, obtaining support, identifying what to repurpose, and organizing tools and resources are some of the other helpful tips Bill offers.

But what are some of the specific ways that a classroom can feel less like a, well…classroom? These changes and additions may seem small, but they can make a big impact on student learning. For instance:

- By putting a teacher's desk on casters, the teacher is not only more "mobile," but the desk can be used by students when not is use by the teacher

- Chairs that offer storage underneath mean less clutter in the room.

- Chat boards eliminate paper

- Soft seating and light, easy-to-move tables are great for impromptu collaboration

- SMART boards are ideal for collaboration and presentations

- Whiteboard paint on the walls helps create more collaborative spaces

- Beanbag chairs give kids another space to work comfortably

For a full school makeover, though, many educators are understandably enlisting design firms with a deep understanding of learning spaces.

A Swedish school, Vittra Telefonplan[3], resembles a modern-day advertising agency or Silicon Valley technology company than a traditional school. The campus eschews rows of desks for open spaces and unusual furniture arrangements.

Designed by architecture firm Rosan Bosch, the classrooms—according to principal Jannie Jeppesen—are intended to stimulate children's curiosity and creativity through collaborative spaces as well as areas for independent study. Students can work alone at one of many "sitting islands," or together in spaces called "villages."

These and other active learning spaces can naturally stimulate a child's mind and encourage sustained attention, in addition to fostering crucial 21st-century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration.

[1] Speicher, Sandy. (February, 2009). *Ten Tips For Creating a 21st–Century Classroom Experience*. Metropolis.

[2] Bill, D. (August, 2013). *8 Tips and Tricks to Redesign Your Classroom*. Edutopia.

[3] Dwyer, Liz. (January, 2012). *Is Sweden's Classroom-Free School the Future of Learning?* Good Magazine.

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