



The Power of Adaptive Learning Spaces in Schools

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Not every student learns the same way. So let's make classroom environments flexible and purposeful.

Connected and Purposeful Learning Spaces

Let's imagine a hypothetical student, James, a student who likes to challenge authority. Although teachers hesitate to have him in class, they don't doubt his capabilities. James excels at finding loopholes and crafting convincing excuses. He effortlessly argues why his homework is late, why he parks in the teacher lot, and why his school projects are delayed. He gets bored in class, and his mind wanders off. Instead of contributing to discussions on the overarching themes in Hamlet, he's fidgeting in his wooden desk and counting down the minutes until he can walk around and engage with peers.

James, however, is lucky. Despite his apathy for the classroom, he continues onto college and soon discovers his true academic passion—engineering. From his first day of college, he finds the environment collaborative and stimulating. Some days he works

with peers in swivel chairs at a high table. Other days, he hunkers down on a problem set in one of the library's many armchairs. In his free time, he works on extracurricular projects in the school's engineering lab, and takes advantage of chalk walls to sketch out ideas on a larger surface.

School now captivates James. His teachers notice he doesn't stop talking, engaging, and brainstorming. Learning within an open collaborative atmosphere and within an active classroom environment invigorates him. Transitioning from a rigid physical classroom structure where students sat in distinct rows, to a loosely structured studio environment, gives him freedom. In this new environment, James completes tasks ahead of schedule. He stays up late and works in class after hours because he enjoys what and how he learns.

What changes made such a noticeable shift in James' work ethic and drive? One factor is his physical environment: the flexible structure allows James to connect more deeply with his peers and teachers.

The Power of Physical Space

The physical space is a deeply impactful tool for fostering connections between students, teachers, and the larger world of learning. A space that encourages movement accelerates learning and inspires passion in students. [In the words of Harvard Associate Professor John Ratey](#), "Exercise itself doesn't make you smarter, but it puts the brain of the learners in the optimal position for them to learn." As in the case of James, the physical environment around him provides [a sense of empowerment by giving him the opportunity to learn, explore, and study in whichever way works best for him](#), be it on the floor, on a couch, or at a high table. By breaking down rigid classroom barriers and opening a space with free movement, James has more opportunities to connect with his peers and learn from other perspectives. The aesthetically-pleasing environment also gives him a sense of relaxation, and contributes to a positive feeling he associates with the class.

By providing places for students to foster connections with peers and with subject matter, we have the opportunity to help elevate student engagement. To do this, [the furnishings and tools used in these spaces must be flexible, support a variety of postures](#), and adapt easily to the students' needs. More importantly, students must feel empowered to have control over how and when to use them. When students feel autonomous and have the ability to adapt their environment and make it their own, they are also taking charge of their learning.

This can also have a huge impact on how time is spent and used in the classroom. Furnishings and tools must be student-friendly, simple to use, and quick to adopt. When furniture becomes mobile and promotes flexibility, moving and adapting the learning space becomes second nature to students and teachers alike, reducing the time and energy required to change learning settings.

As many schools adopt new learning approaches such as problem-based learning, active learning, and design thinking, the connection between pedagogy and the physical space becomes even stronger. For example, flexible furniture helps convey the message that the learning environment is malleable and can be easily manipulated by students. This directly aligns with the insights behind the Maker Movement and the ability to see the world as something that you can change. If a grouping of furniture isn't supportive for a particular learning task, flexible furnishings give students the permission to change their setting or to prototype something new—something that will better address their needs. The rigid classrooms of James' high school experience, for example, conflicted with his assertive and rule-challenging nature, while his later classroom experiences made the most of his natural tendencies.

Four Steps to a Connected Learning Space

Create learning spaces that inspire a sense of connection and empower students by adopting the following [four guidelines developed by the innovative workspace leader Steelcase](#) to best develop your own ways to foster connected and purposeful learning spaces.

1. Power of Place:

Where are your students encouraged to “learn”? Are they secluded to four walls with one small window and bad artificial lighting?

Use your space as a teaching tool. Allow students to change their environment based on how they'd like to best learn. Encourage your students to wonder “what if,” take autonomy, and change their environment to best suit their needs. Let them explore what learning might be like in the hallway, cafeteria, or outdoors. If they must stay within the classroom, see if you can provide yoga mats, rugs, bean bags, or exercise balls as [alternatives to the rigid classroom chair and desk](#).

2. Power of Posture:

Do you have a sea of one type of chair and desk combination in your classroom?

Encourage your students to stand around a counter and collaborate. Allow your students to sit on the floor in the corner to be able to get away and focus. Lounge seating can be used as a conversational area where students can comfortably collaborate and have discussions. Being able to move around, wiggle, and fidget can increase their engagement in their work or discussion.

3. Power of Presence:

How are your students using technology?

The ability to make connections to the world outside the classroom is crucial to a student's ability to wonder and explore. Create places where they can plug in and share information, collaborate virtually, and use technology as a teaching and learning aid.

4. Power of Privacy:

Do your students have a place where they can get away, focus, or have some degree of privacy?

Are we providing students who need some down time the opportunity to escape the sometimes loud and overwhelming collaborative atmosphere of the classroom?

Consider creating places, either inside or outside of the classroom where students can reset and focus.

We have often found that the learning space can act in one of two ways: It can be a barrier to learning, or it can be an accelerator. While the learning space cannot solve each of a student's learning needs, ignoring its impact can have distinctly negative results.

For James, the rigid classroom environment of his high school prevented him from connecting and finding a deeper purpose in his studies – where the collaborative atmosphere of the studio classroom model accelerated his ability to connect and find purpose. In that open and flexible environment, James went from a disengaged, confrontational student into one who was self-driven, self-motivated, and connected to the people around him.

James's story is just one story of many, and each student's story is uniquely touched by the power of physical space. Just as we now know that not every student learns the same way, not every student shares the same impact from their classroom environment. This perspective gives us a greater belief in the power of creating flexible classrooms, which empower students to actively shape them. It is about providing each student choice and control over their learning setting. We know that when designed with intention, the learning space can be a powerful instigator for students to make deeper and more meaningful connections.

Further reading:

- [Flexible Seating and Student-Centered Redesign](#) (edutopia)
- [10+ Tips for Using Brain-Based Methods to Redesign Your Classroom](#) (EdSurge)
- [Collaborative Learning Spaces: Classrooms That Connect to the World](#) (edutopia)
- [Designing Collaborative Spaces for Schools](#) (THE Journal)

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