

Modern Spaces for New Technology

As digital learning, personalized learning, and 1:1 initiatives take hold in our schools, the question remains: How can we truly leverage technology to make an educational difference for our students? Teachers across the nation have attended numerous professional development sessions that promote the latest technologies, and there are more and more fantastic tools, devices, and resources available to classrooms. Yet, teaching and learning practice has (for the most part) stayed the same.



As Director for Technology and Innovation for the Great Prairie Area Education Agency (GPAEA), I work with 33 public school districts and six non-public schools in southeastern Iowa. Our technology team's goal is to support the successful integration of technology that enhances learning for all students—but we realized we needed to take technology integration to the next level. That's where our classroom redesign story begins.

Gathering Data, Momentum

Nearly three years ago, our team realized that to truly improve our students' experiences, we could no longer be satisfied with short-term technology wins. Classroom follow-ups and coaching teachers were important, but they were not always enough. No matter how great the technology or the professional development was, teachers returned to the same classrooms they left.

We also recognized that implementing a new technology can easily fail if the technology doesn't work, or isn't fully supported. When that happens, educators tend to "default" to what has worked in the past.

About that same time, we implemented the BrightBytes Data System, which can measure the four areas of technology integration: classroom, access, skills, and environment. It became clear to us that we needed to begin at the classroom level and be specific about how we could use technology to embed the four Cs (communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity) into instructional practice.

3 Redesign Tenets

First, GPAEA redesigned an old computer lab into a modern learning space for teachers and students named Room 21C. See it at: <http://classroom21c.weebly.com>.

Room 21C was designed around three tenets of modern learning spaces:

1. **Each learning area is mobile and flexible.** Learning areas consist of tables that can accommodate multiple groups of students. In Room 21C, we assign six students per table group to maximize the possible combination of small groups of two or three students. Tables have lockable castors and can easily be moved. Student chairs are on castors; they swivel and include storage space.
2. **Each learning area has a display.** Displays are typically large, flat screen TVs/monitors. They can be mounted on the wall, or be mobile.
3. **Each learning area has a writeable surface.** Writable surfaces can be anything from portable whiteboards (which also make great room dividers), whiteboard tabletops, or writable paint (the entire wall becomes a whiteboard!).

Engage and Collaborate

Learning spaces should include areas for collaborative group work and should be flexible. Besides these key features, redesigned learning spaces might also include:

- Independent learning areas (with comfortable, couch-like seating);
- Learning lounges (typically found in common areas, hallways, or media centers);
- Wireless room control for A/V switching, LED lighting, and audio; and
- 3-D projectors, theater screens, green screens, and game consoles.

Mount Pleasant Middle School in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, has implemented such a redesigned classroom, known as an Integrated Learning Center. Middle school teacher Laura Fernandez describes learning in this room as highly engaging and collaborative.

Redesigned learning can also happen in hallways and in schools' open areas of schools. New London Middle/High School in New London, Iowa,

has redesigned a large hallway into a student commons area. According to superintendent Stephen McAllister, the space was designed to enhance their 1:1 student laptop initiative to help the district transition from a traditional to a digital 21st Century teaching and learning environment.

Lessons Learned

Redesigned learning is not about the technology—it is about learning through the use of technology. That shift in instructional practice can start by simply rearranging the furniture. Flexible learning areas with easy access to technology naturally promote student engagement and project-based learning, inquiry, collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving. Collaborative learning in these new spaces can be busy and noisy—and that’s okay!

There is not one recipe for redesigning learning spaces; they can happen anywhere in a school on a variety of budgets. Most schools today have computer labs that can be redesigned into active learning environments. Administrators can reallocate the funds traditionally used to maintain those computer labs to transform them into new spaces. Adding audio-video switching and wireless access to the room would be an expansion to the school’s network, but schools can redesign in smaller stages to making large-scale projects more cost-manageable.

For more information and research on redesigning learning spaces, explore the University of Iowa’s TILE (spaces to Transform, Interact, Learn, and Engage) Classrooms project or North Carolina State’s SCALE-UP (Student-Centered Active Learning Environments with Upside-down Pedagogies) projects.

Finally, remember that many teachers need to experience 21st century learning before they can fully understand 21st century teaching. Modernized classrooms can help them do that. 

Sally Lindgren is director for technology and innovation for the Great Prairie Area Education Agency.

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