In Neat Little Rows No More :

The Evolution of Modern Classrooms

Though some people lament days gone by, it's undeniable that the classrooms of yore cannot equip students for success in the modern world. Consider the data: The technology industry employs more than 3.9 million people, and IT jobs will grow 22% through 2020. Roughly 75% of employers rate teamwork and collaboration as "very important" in the workplace. The Bureau of Labor Statistics highlights the importance of creativity in myriad careers, and creative industries are growing faster and losing fewer jobs than other sectors of the economy.

Technology, creativity and collaboration are front-running desired skills in the modern workplace, and schools must give students opportunity to practice these skills. Classrooms are being converted from the age-old vision of students' desks in perfect rows facing the teacher who lectures from the front of the classroom, an arrangement that leaves little room for collaboration, creativity or hands-on use of technology. How are schools remedying this and preparing students for the future and for jobs that don't even exist yet?

Creating a Place Students Want to Be

Mrs. McWilliams, a language arts teacher in Eaton, Colorado, says, "One of my seventh graders is 6'1". He can't fit in traditional student desks designed for kids a foot shorter than him. How would his focus and ability to learn be affected by being uncomfortable for the whole class period?" Her classroom features standing desks where this tall student posts up, an overstuffed couch, leather chairs, and plenty of exercise balls for wiggle-infused 7th graders to sit on during class.

The perimeter of her classroom looks like a reading lounge with countless books and alternative seating arrangements. Students are encouraged to sit on the comfy chairs and couch during reading time and afterward while they conference and share about their books with other students. "I've got students who have never picked up a book willingly. If it takes letting them lounge during reading time to show them how enjoyable reading can be, I'll gladly do it. Literacy is the launching pad for these kids' success," she says.

Drafting a Classroom Based on Collaboration

In their report "Preparing 21st Century Students for a Global Society," the National Education Association suggested that the entire workplace landscape has evolved in the last 50 years. Then, work was often performed alone. Today, work is often done in teams and pursuit of team objectives is shared, making collaboration an essential skill for students.

In a Denver, Colorado classroom, the environment was remade to allow for collaboration and hands-on, project-based learning. For only $75 per square foot, the original 1947 classroom was overhauled from replacing plumbing, lighting and flooring to adding technology in a natural, intuitive manner. New tech included a touchscreen, audio speakers, a camera mount for recording classes, and Skype Mountain, an amphitheatre featuring a rolling TV panel where students may watch and interact with guest speakers from around the world.

The designers of the renovated learning space sought to include several options in the classroom design to support diverse learning methods, allowing students to the options to read alone, work together in groups,

present an idea or project to the whole class, and utilize technology in their learning and work. The flexible layout also promotes collaboration. The modular and moveable furniture in collaborative learning spaces

equips students to work in groups to tackle new topics, share knowledge and ideas, and experiment with different solutions.

Developing Problem Solving

Surveyed CEOs said the top skill they seek in their employees is creative problem solving and the ability to figure things out. STEM schools are lauded for preparing students for future careers in science, engineering, technology and math by teaching problem solving.

TeacherVision says problem solving relies on three core functions: Seeking knowledge, creating new knowledge, and making decisions. Whether students in STEM classrooms are designing a 3D model with CAD, building and calculating the trajectory of catapults, or using Legos to learn about engineering, and math, the classroom space needed to host these creative explorations of existing and new knowledge cannot feature rigid rows of desks and static students.

As uniformity takes a backseat to technology, collaboration and creativity, classrooms of the future will continue to evolve. The next generations of students will likely not have one mental picture of a classroom, but rather many, as they progress through their education.