



# DITCHING THE DESKS

**FLEXIBLE LEARNING SPACES FOCUS ON HELPING STUDENTS BE PRODUCTIVE, COMFORTABLE**

By Tim Douglas

**B**elieve it or not, Jeff Spicoli may have been onto something.

"I've been thinking about this, Mr. Hand. If I'm here and you're here, doesn't that make it our time? Certainly, there's nothing wrong with a little feast on our time."

Spicoli may have been a fictional character who delivered this classic line in the 1980s movie "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" to explain his view of classroom dynamics to his teacher, Mr. Hand, but it makes a great deal of sense today: Instruction time belongs to both teacher and student.

But what about the environment? How has the use of classroom space changed since the '80s, or, or for that matter, over the past 100 years?

## SPACE TIME OVER FACE TIME

The most effective and efficient boardrooms, offices, factories and fields allow a certain freedom in getting the work done. We are better in groups, particularly when we have a choice in how and where we handle the job. This certainly applies to classrooms as well. Instead of teachers delivering the daily lessons to rows of students, what if instructors trusted their students to choose their places? Instead of demanding to see faces, what if teachers stressed spaces?

Flexible learning spaces and classrooms that create active learning environments are gaining in popularity. Around the world, educators are moving away from seating charts and toward overstuffed chairs and alternative furnishings. Many are also saying goodbye to the teacher's desk. In fact, the movement has its own hashtag: #ditchthedesk.

To ditch the desk, however, requires understanding all that comes with this classroom transformation.

"Classrooms are time stuck," says Kayla Delzer, a third grade teacher at Mapleton Elementary in Mapleton, North Dakota, and a recognized pioneer in the flexible learning space movement. "I showed two pictures [to a colleague] of two classrooms. One was shot in the 1950s. The other was taken just recently. The only difference? One was in black and white. Our education system has been OK, but we can do better. The world is full of change, yet classrooms aren't."

## THE COMFORT ZONE

There is much to be said about being relaxed and content. There are comfort foods, comfort clothes and creature comforts. We're more likely to be more productive when we're comfortable – and that applies to adults and students.

Words of wisdom from Meredith Douglas, a sixth grader, at Garfield Elementary School in Clovis, California. "Why should we just sit there? It feels better to move around. We're students, not statues."

Comfort is but one component. Shifting to a flexible space requires thought, intention and meeting the ultimate goal: helping students achieve and learn at the highest level. To begin, teachers need to be mentally ready. It's important to understand the "why" when making this shift.

"People get too wrapped up in the furniture piece," says Ilsa Dohmen, a sixth grade science teacher at Hillbrook School in Los Gatos, California. "This is about shifting a mindset and teachers giving more control to students. As adults, we have a

sense of how we work best, yet we govern kids.”

Giving up the governance takes faith, but a key mechanism for improving schools nationwide and globally can be described in a single word: relationships, which require trust. Going from a controlled environment that is run by one person to one that may appear at times to border on bedlam takes buy-in from beyond the classroom.

It's not only the teacher and the students who need to trust each other. Administration, district leaders, parents and families all need to be on board, and teachers need to remember they're not giving up everything.

In an email, Chris Johnson, interim director and assistant professor with the Educational Technology Program at the University of Arizona South, and ISTE member, says that individual educators can begin by realizing they do have control of the components of their classroom, such as the instructional activities. However, teachers can't assume they will do this in a vacuum. “I would make sure I had talked to my principal ... to discuss how this will change my instruction and improve student learning. I'd do this after researching the impact of space on learning and have a general idea of what I wanted to do,” Johnson writes.

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

Dale Basye, a content developer at Clarity Innovations, a company that “matches promising technologies to the needs of education,” says to keep it simple when creating a flexible learning environment.

“When you think about it, all classrooms start empty,” he explains via email. “So educators can begin by thinking about an empty classroom space: imagining it without furniture, with blank white walls, no lighting, etc. Then start thinking about how that space could better support learning.”

Schools and teachers can also proceed at their own pace. There's no need to attempt to make every change at once. A simple pilot program is one way to start, where rows become circles for a day. Flexibility can take many forms. A teacher might allow a student to go outside without asking permission or to get a drink or to stand up. The only limits are the imagination and being mindful of all the resources.

“Another key step in designing an effective classroom is gathering information from students: the most important users of the learning space,” Basye notes. “Ask them what makes them feel comfortable and productive.”

## INVITE PEOPLE IN

As teachers proceed, it's a good idea to share in order to maintain trust among all the stakeholders.

“The easiest way to make [flexible learning environments] the norm is to invite people – everyone – into the classroom,” says Bill Selak, director of technology at Hillbrook. “At our school, we say, 'hey, come in and see for yourself.' And this is where technology is so important. We send pictures of students engaged and learning through Instagram or Snapchat, and it's painfully obvious how effective it is.”

“I want to make this process, this new environment, as transparent as I can,” Delzer says. “I post every day. Technology allows us to have an incredible open door policy, and we need to take advantage.”

Sharing also enhances professional development and encourages collaboration.

“Reaching out and including others works very well,” writes Johnson, who also chairs the ISTE Learning Space Professional Learning Network. “The PLN is a great place to post a question like, 'hey, I'm thinking of doing this ... has anyone else tried it?’”

## A MATTER OF MATERIALS

Once a teacher has adopted the mindset, there is a matter of materials. Again, creating flexible learning spaces and classrooms that allow for active learning is not about the furniture, but teachers do need some tools.

The shopping list needs to be practical, not pricey. Teachers and schools need to keep in mind the end goal is to educate students effectively, and, preferably, economically. Without tremendous thought and foresight, an expensive piece of furniture is just that, and doesn't move the needle for a teacher's classroom or the student.

“Raising a table is free or taking the legs off a table is free,” Delzer says. “I strongly endorse standing – my students have a lot of energy – and to provide comfortable standing space is free.”

Dohmen, who is also the director of professional development and the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Hillbrook, and her students are advocates of the TenJam: large, cylindrical, high-density, foam shape that her students use in a variety of ways.

“They will put it on a table and sit on it, or on top of a chair and sit on it,” she said. “The biggest thing is giving kids a choice, and that goes back to trust. [Trust] is free if you allow it.”

At Hillbrook, there are some staples – the whiteboards on wheels that are actually tables and “wobble” stools that let children fidget easily – but the emphasis is on creating the room together.

“It's not a one-size-fits-all approach, and more importantly, we don't have names attached to our classrooms,” Selak says. “Multiple adults have access to each space. It's a feeling of 'our space,' not 'my space,' with our students.”

Chairs that *encourage* students to fidget. Couches. Children lying on the floor. Surely this isn't comfort. It's chaos, right?

Selak, who works closely with Dohmen, tells the story of one student who was videotaped “on the green squishy thing (the TenJam), and if you just saw the tape without the audio, you would think this kid was out of control. He's really moving and squirming, but he's actually hyper focused and really involved. His engagement was off the charts.”

## GO FOR ENGAGEMENT

On the other hand, students shouldn't abuse the comfortable environment. It's a new classroom contract being created on the fly. “I don't know if there's an answer or a formula to make sure a class

doesn't go off the rails," Selak says. "But what if this is what engagement really looks like? It's noisy, but it works."

"Letting go of some control is key to giving students more ownership of their learning," Basye writes. "There is this fear that students will go crazy if the teacher can't see them at all times ... active learning spaces require students to make ongoing decisions about which particular spaces match their individual needs. With the right amount of support and practice in how to monitor student performance, students will begin to develop their own self-management skills, which is a vital life skill."

In many ways, this is how the real world works. It's messy, far from perfect and demands pragmatism. The new classroom is a testing ground for what's in store for students, but teachers still have the ultimate oversight.

"Flexible doesn't mean lack of structure," Delzer says. "Work isn't a choice, but where you do it is."

Allowing students to design their own flexible learning environment offers the added benefit of addressing the Innovative Designer standard within the 2016 ISTE Standards for Students. That standard expects students to "use a variety of technologies within a design process to identify and solve problems by creating new, useful or imaginative solutions."

But do flexible spaces actually improve learning? Those who've created learning environments say "yes."

Delzer compared the math test results of her students in an environment they created together vs. those of students in a traditional classroom. Delzer's students scored 15 percent higher than the other group.

Nearly four years ago, Hillbrook implemented this practice in one classroom. It was so well received, the entire campus is now flexible. While there is data that supports the complete switch at Hillbrook, the move was really based on personal feedback.

"We wanted to be really intentional about changing the space throughout," Dohmen said. "So we conducted interviews with teachers and students, and in interview after interview, we heard how this was freedom and that it felt more real. It was then clear to us what we needed to do."

What works for Hillbrook or anywhere else may not be a good fit for another school, but space exploration in the classroom may be here to stay as trendsetters push for evolution in education. Teachers and students share time and space – this isn't likely to change much in the coming years – which means education is really about relationships.

"There is online learning and online classes and some who think classrooms are going away," Dohmen says. "But I think we will have schools for quite some time. Learning is fundamentally social. I think we all know that, and anything that improves our ability to be social in the classroom, that will stick. Flexible spaces are here to stay."

