

Chairless in Charleville

THE DESIGN OF LEARNING SPACES IS YET TO BE SEEN BY MANY EDUCATORS AS OF PRIMARY CONCERN, EXPLAINS **DAVID LOADER**.

I recently visited a classroom in which there was no furniture, just a carpet, yet in this space I found students who were happily engaged in work. There were some students sitting with their backs to the wall with notebook computers on their knees. Others were lying on the floor, a cushion under their heads, reading a book. In one corner three students were involved in some sort of robotic construction. In another corner were five students sitting in a circle discussing a project. The teacher had no desk either, but was walking around the room engaging with students.

This was not some new educational experiment in an innovative learning community. I was visiting a new classroom that was yet to receive its chairs, tables and whiteboards, but the students and teacher didn't seem troubled by the temporary absence of furniture.

This classroom is perhaps an insight into the learning space of the future. Have we been letting the furniture determine what happens in our learning spaces instead of vice versa, with the learning determining whatever space and furniture that we provide? If we fill our learning spaces with traditional classroom furniture, there's a good chance we're being regressive. Traditional classroom furniture supports the concept of 'work' as something one does only at a desk and 'learning' as a consequence of instruction by others instead of construction by oneself with support from others.

I'm not arguing that there should be no tables and chairs in our classrooms. They have a place as they are undeniably comfortable and useful. We need some individual desks and chairs, some tables and chairs for groups and some comfortable chairs in which we can lounge. The classroom needs to be a combination of a number of rooms

such as an individual study, a group meeting area and a lounge area for comfortable reading. Our goal is to design and equip a learning space that will facilitate both individual and group learning.

Increasingly, we are freeing students from being locked in to a general 'class' learning program and moving to individual learning pathways that acknowledge the different abilities, learning styles and learning speeds of individuals as well as the different interests of students and their different starting points. This needs to be reflected in the classroom design, creating a space defined by the learning needs not of a class, but of a group of individual learners.

Given the skills and interests of our current group of learners, learning is a social experience, so our new learning spaces need to provide for students to work collaboratively. There needs to be space for them to interact in a number of ways, to research together, to teach each other, to present work publicly. The learning space needs to provide for new patterns of social and intellectual interaction.

In the past, classrooms have been designed around technologies that provided for group instruction, the latest being the interactive whiteboard and moveable furniture that fills and dominates the learning space. In today's classroom, however, that technology can be in the background rather than being the focus of the design. Today's technology includes mobile devices and wireless access, ubiquitous but not dominant, and open spaces that students can fill. Learning is an active, social and collaborative process that needs flexible spaces and furniture that will facilitate both physical and virtual contact between learners.

I'm not saying you should throw out all this old furniture, but asking that it be included only if it's really necessary. The whiteboard, for example, might go on the back wall or perhaps even in the corridor outside the classroom. Instead of it being for the teacher, it then becomes a vehicle for students to share ideas.

The learning space needs to be designed for comfort, safety and functionality. The learning space needs to be flexible to accommodate the evolving learning needs of its occupants. Its design should reflect institutional values; when a visitor sees a learning space they will have an insight into the educational philosophy of that institution.

Learning space design is yet to be seen by many educators as of primary concern. Time is given to professional development of staff in new theories of learning and new information technologies, and this is important, yet both of these are addressed directly in the design of learning spaces. A learning culture begins in the student learning space, not in the staff room.

Why not experiment with a learning space with minimum furniture? It won't just be a saving in capital and recurrent costs, it will be an investment in student learning. Using space differently, incorporating new technology and applying new learning theory from our improved knowledge of cognition can lead to more engaged learners. **T**

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