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Key Elements for Creating Collaborative Learning Spaces

by Cynthia Merse | Dec 14, 2018



The workforce of tomorrow bears little resemblance to the industrial, factory-based model of the early 20th century. The days of working solo on a factory floor assembly line are being replaced with work environments that thrive on teamwork and collaboration. It is no surprise then that the ability to collaborate has emerged as a critical skill for today's K-12 students. In fact, collaboration is recognized as one of four 21st century skills students need to master to thrive in 21st century careers, according to organizations such as the National Education Association and the Partnership for 21st Century Learning.

Yet, many classroom environments have not caught up with the rapid changes that are occurring in education. Take a peek into the average K-12 classroom and you are likely to see row upon row of desks, facing front, waiting for the teacher to deliver his or her lesson. This works great for lectures, but not so much for group learning and collaboration. As teaching practices like project-based learning take hold in our schools, it is critical that we begin to rethink the types of learning spaces we provide for our students.

Key Elements of a Collaborative Learning Space

A truly collaborative learning space encourages students to gather in groups, large and small, to solve problems, work on a project, or have a meaningful discussion. These spaces can take numerous forms, but all satisfy some basic requirements.

- Collaborative learning spaces should accommodate all types of learning: independent one-on-one learning, small group learning, and large group learning.
- Collaborative learning spaces should be flexible, in terms of both the physical space and how it is used. Furniture should be easy to move, enabling easy transitions between group and independent learning. Students should have a variety of seating (or standing!) options, from traditional desk chairs to bean bags, sofas, stools, and standing desks.
- Collaborative learning spaces should make students and teachers feel comfortable engaging in a variety of teaching and learning styles, whether it's the traditional sage-on-a-stage presentation or some combination of project-based and personalized learning.
- Most importantly, collaborative learning spaces should reinforce and encourage the other three Cs of 21st century learning: critical thinking, creativity, and communication.

If you are thinking that collaborative learning spaces are expensive or labor-intensive to implement, fear not. It's possible to transform your classroom into a collaborative learning space using a little ingenuity and some lost-cost supplies. For example, you can add tennis balls to desk and chair legs to make them easier to move around, or purchase (or re-purpose!) pillows and used furniture to create cozy spaces for independent or small group work. The goal is not to create the flashiest, most modern-looking space you can. It is to create an environment that is inviting and conducive to learning and collaboration. Dale Basye, a writer and designer of multimedia experiences for children, says it well: "Children

respond well to novelty. If they enter a room that's different, they open up more to the lesson and are more in the moment as to what learning and teaching can be."

Collaborative Learning in Albuquerque Public Schools

One school district that has seen success from adopting collaborative learning spaces is Albuquerque Public Schools in New Mexico. The district designed one of its newest schools, the George I. Sanchez Collaborative Community School, to be a collaborative learning center that includes both traditional classrooms and age-appropriate breakout spaces. Each breakout space features a variety of seating choices, including soft-shaped seating, chairs, and stools, as well as technology-enabled tables that allow students to plug-in their digital devices so they can work where they feel most comfortable. All furnishings were selected with ease of movement and flexibility in mind. Teachers encourage their students to use these spaces for collaborative, problem-solving activities; however, these spaces can also be adapted for independent study.

How do teachers and staff feel about their school's collaborative environments?

"Our first year of operation has been truly ground-breaking!" said Melissa Grant, Facilities Specialist for Albuquerque Public Schools. "In just one year, the George I. Sanchez Collaborative Community School has seen tremendous reception from students, teachers, and the public at large – folks are being drawn to the facility."

The positive response to the George I. Sanchez School has encouraged Albuquerque Public Schools to plan additional collaborative learning spaces within the district. A resounding endorsement of collaborative learning spaces that should have other school districts taking notice.

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