

Classroom Design for the 21st Century

When I think about a traditional secondary classroom, I picture neat rows of desks that face a main focal point, usually a chalk or white board. The teacher's desk is nestled in a nook away from the hustle and bustle of everyday class activity. There is usually a computer for use of the teacher but the student population does not have access to computers of their own within the general classroom. If you look around the room, you may see bulletin boards that have been neatly decorated and usually contain subject specific information. Hanging on the walls you might see some generic, pre-made posters with inspirational sayings or building specific information. In a social studies classroom (my area of emphasis) you will hopefully see lots of maps, but more often than not, these maps are too small to be useable unless the students are out of their seats and standing directly in front of them.

That classroom that I have described above may look nice and neat and spacious, when it is empty! What happens when class is in session and the room is filled with thirty plus students and their belongings? Let me tell you from experience, it can become cramped, difficult to move, the once neat rows of desks will gradually shift, and student belongings cover the floors beneath the desks. With everyone crammed into the same workspace, movement can be difficult and discussions are hindered as students are facing the "front" of the room and not each other. Perhaps this design was effective when thought was that the teacher should be the focal point of the class while students quietly watched and took notes as the teacher instructed in the front of the classroom. The question remains, is this the most effective classroom design model for 21st century education? I don't think so!

I have noticed when I walk down the halls in my building, most, if not all of the classrooms have been designed and set-up using a more traditional model. Having talked to several teachers about classroom design, I have found that many feel that this model is best for classroom management. The thought is that the desks help to separate students, keeping them quieter and less likely to touch each other (a big issue in middle school). Almost everyone that I talk to wants desks, so, it was not hard for me to gain access to all of the tables that I want and need.

In my classroom, I want to encourage conversation and collaborative, project based learning, not hinder it. It is important that I design a space that will allow me to teach in a discussion based way. I want to create an environment where my students feel comfortable and safe to take risks, think outside of the box, and challenge ideas and concepts. It is important that students are arranged in a way that their faces are directed toward each other, making eye contact; so that they can collaborate, share ideas, and yes, I said it, talk to each other. I would have a SMART board, internet café and news corner, and a mural of a world and United States map covering the walls. My bulletin boards would be covered with student created work, not premade, generic posters that can be purchased at any teachers store. Lastly, I want my classroom to have a flow that makes it easy for myself and students to move around without tripping over chairs, desks, and student belongings.

There are several resources that are necessary to implement my vision successfully. First, and most importantly, I need enough tables (preferably round) to accommodate my class sizes. I also want my desk and work area to be part of the classroom so I am working right alongside my students and am not confined to my own corner. I think that it is important that teachers and students alike are active members of the classroom and conversation, and the flow of my classroom will create this feeling. Students will be able to easily move around without tripping over desks and will be able to more easily collaborate with each other. I would also like to have a cubby station where students can store their belongings

that they do not need for my class. This will help to get excess items removed from the floors, and help to reduce the urge to use materials that are not necessary and distracting to their learning in my class. Ikea has some great organization tools that are relatively inexpensive that would be perfect for this purpose.

Technology is an important part of any 21st century learning environment. In my district SMART boards have been installed in the entire building and they are a wonderful tool and resource to have. In addition to a SMART board, I would love to have access to an iPad cart for my classroom that will allow students to use iPads and technology daily. I envision a corner of my room that I would call *Mrs. Warner's Internet Café* where I would house the iPad cart and create a cozy and comfortable space for learning and reading. An old rug or piece of carpet would define the space and I would have several bean bag chairs, and bookshelves that house books, magazines, and newspapers. It would be like our own Starbucks right inside my classroom!

For the large maps, I would use wallpaper that can be easily hung on the walls of my room. Many wallpaper companies make map wallpaper and this is an easy way to put a large scale map or maps in your classroom. The wallpaper is large enough (depending on how many sheets you purchase) to cover large areas, like an entire wall. The wallpaper will cover an entire wall so students will be able to easily see the map, in its entirety from any point in the room. This is going to be a bit of an upfront expense, but, it is worth every penny! I had hung a wallpaper map in my old classroom a couple of years ago and it was the most worthwhile investment that I made that year (maybe in the past seven years). I found that the students were drawn to it and were forever examining it, looking for different countries, and it sparked a lot of great discussions and questions.

There will be a significant cost involved in creating the classroom that I envision. Everything would happen all at once and be ready for the start of a new school year, except for the iPad cart. The largest cost would be the classroom set of iPads. Realistically, it is going to take some time before my building is willing to fund and purchase a building set of iPads. A proposal for a building set, or two, has been brought to the board and I, like many, are keeping our fingers crossed that it gets approved. While this would not be my own classroom set, it would be a good start and a great way to demonstrate the value of having access to this kind of technology in the classroom.

Organizational items and the map wallpaper is a cost that I would need to cover on my own. I can put in requests for supplies like colored pencils, markers, and crayons, but I know that I will not get reimbursed for the larger items. I like to think of the purchase of these items as an investment in my classroom and students. While there is no doubt that it will need to be updated in the future, it will add to the dynamic and learning environment in my classroom for years to come. I will save money by using student created work to decorate my bulletin boards and free wall space. Many of the posters that you can purchase at a teachers store can be costly; student work is free and creates an environment that students (the creators) can take pride and ownership in.

Below is a basic design of the classroom and learning space that I envision for my 21st century learning environment: