



DESIGNING INCLUSIVE SPACES

TO TRANSFORM EDUCATION

by Mira Korber

Classroom design is about much more than just desks, tables, and chairs laid out in a room. It's about power. Anyone responsible for educational space design must ask themselves two questions: first, historically, who in the room has held the most power? Next, how should that power be balanced in the future? Does power sit with the instructor or the students? Can they possibly share power?



Space design is the tool that can empower both teachers and students to experience transformative effects of education, but stakeholder needs must be carefully balanced to facilitate this process and foster an educational culture centering EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion). In today's educational landscape, it is critical to take a learner-centered approach to design and invite participation from students, instructors, and—potentially—the community at large when conceptualizing new spaces.

Designing for Equity: From K-12 to Higher Education

At the K-8 level, students frequently receive all instruction in one room, and often they have permanent desk arrangements as a result. For students who participate in these relatively static spaces, designers should consider how the natural environment of the room shapes student experience. Most traditional environments situate all power with the

teacher, but space design can enable students to take agency over their learning in safe and affirming ways. Key design questions revolve around building sufficient sub-spaces within the room: a reading nook, for example, or lightweight table elements that can be formed into pod learning or separated into siloed stations. These ideas speak to equity in design to facilitate not only student learning, but all students' best learning.

In high schools, classrooms are more frequently allocated based on subject matter taught. Teachers can bring personalized materials to customize the space according to their subject needs. In this academic ecosystem, students move from room to room and interact with different peers across subjects throughout the day. Major aspects of architecture, furniture, and technology integration are out of individual teachers' control, but these aspects create parameters within which educators can personalize spaces for their students. Student needs

are constantly changing, and a diversity of spaces for different classes shapes the process of student learning in high school. At its core, classroom design puts students on the path of how they experience school, which is controlled by administrative decisions, both intentional and unintentional.

At universities, students are autonomous agents moving from not only room to room, but also building to building. According to the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research, 95% of undergraduate students own a laptop, a significant increase from the early 2000s, when many students relied on desktop computers provided by universities. This increasingly mobile method of studying is part of an increasing trend towards personalization in learning, but this learning approach also comes with risk of distraction. Design can compel students to use their technology for academic purposes in libraries and classrooms yet help students feel at ease on their personal devices in lounges and informal

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spaces. The ubiquity of student laptops necessitates flexible, moveable arrangements of power outlets and work surfaces that do not obstruct personal technology use. However, when designing for EDI, planners must foster a sense of belonging by providing a sufficient presence of technology such as desktop computers, scanners, and printers for students who may not have access to personal devices.

The Importance of a Needs Assessment

Considering all the unique factors that constitute the education experience from K-12 to higher education, educational administration must consider how to be most responsive to its core stakeholders' needs. To meet this goal, planners must design with equity in mind by asking for participation from those who are going to be using each space—namely, students and teachers, but also the community tangential to direct users as well.

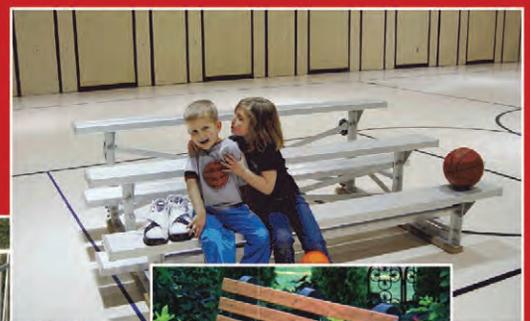
This process begins with direct outreach and a comprehensive needs assessment. As part of the needs assessment, facilities managers and architects must collaborate with students and teachers to define current pain points and future goals. Some examples of questions to consider include:

- If a classroom is part of a historic building, how can a newly renovated space both honor the traditions of the past while updating technology infrastructure to new standards?
- Will the learning space be used for multi-use classrooms, with both technology and pen-to-paper projects?
- Will students be expected to collaborate or work individually?

A collaborative approach to the needs assessment enables the design process to kick off in the right direction from the start. Furthermore, a participatory design process is

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iterative in nature, and administrators should expect changes as they receive comments from core stakeholders who will bring the space to life on a daily basis.

Designing for education is far from a monolithic undertaking. Three recent projects from SMARTdesks®, leading manufacturer of furniture for learning spaces, illustrate how physical space can be optimized for different learners and institutional goals.

Case Study #1: Multi-Use Learning Environment

At Virginia Wesleyan University, innovative furniture design allowed for 20% more students, greater freedom of movement, and flexible room capacity in a new workforce development classroom. The classroom offers both active learning furniture in the center of the room and height-adjustable computer tables around the perimeter. The optionality provided by the furniture enables instructors to teach in the space and students to use it

for independent work. The arrangement also enables the university to flex capacity requirements in an age when public health considerations can change in an instant. Designing with equity in mind in this project enabled VWU to suit a wide variety of learner needs in one space, while aligning with institutional goals to promote a specific workforce development curriculum.

Case Study #2: Library Annex

Texas A&M needed the Annex space for the new library to embody an adaptive classroom that would meet a diverse array of needs, twenty-four hours per day. The Annex is home to active learning, so having ergonomic, modular furniture was a core component of the project. Since active learning furniture is inherently mobile, the space also needed a flexible raised floor system to accommodate reconfiguration of the furniture elements. Raised access floors enable repositioning of power and data receptacles throughout any

room without the need for electricians or core drilling. If instructors need pod arrangements for tables, outlets can be centrally grouped together; alternatively, they can be spread across the room if tables are separated from each other.

Case Study #3: Government Training Agency

Elements of classroom design apply not only to traditional schools, but other learning spaces as well. At the Department of Homeland Security, computer lab desks with monitor lifts allow trainers to alternate between computer-based work and a clear worksurface for pen and paper note taking and assessment. Students rotate in briefly for training programs before moving on to other roles at the agency, so the furniture accommodates a wide variety of users who only occupy the space for a temporary period. In addition to twenty-four monitor lift desks, the DHS also selected height-adjustable tables and

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collaborative conference tables for breakout sessions. Programming varies from diversity-related conferences to regulatory training for job-specific education across government agencies.

The Path to Equity

Learning environments shape students' paths. To shape our path towards equity, classroom space designers have the great responsibility to their students and our future to build spaces that work best for all stakeholders involved.

SMARTdesks® works together with K-12 and Higher Education clients to furnish learning spaces for in-person, hybrid, and remote learning. People who are interested can learn more about integrated design services assistance at <https://smartdesks.com>.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mira Korber serves as Chief of Strategy for SMARTdesks®. She is also the founder of a tutoring company and has advised EdTech companies on strategic product planning. She is currently attending Vanderbilt University's Peabody College in pursuit of a master's degree in Education Policy.

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