

Introduction

Our journey into new types of learning space came about through necessity. We were two school administrators and an architect in search of a better building, and we were part of a team that brainstormed, researched, planned, and then finally built a new type of high school building designed around global skills, the learning styles of 21st century learners, and student use of technology. The building is Clark Hall, an award-winning addition that is a part of Gahanna Lincoln High School in Gahanna, Ohio.

But this book is not just about learning space; it's also about the process of reinvention. When dreaming up Clark Hall we questioned nearly everything we knew about teaching, learning, and designing a building for high school students. We kept what we thought was relevant for today's students, and we gently moved the rest of it to the side. Building Clark Hall was both the most exciting and frightening experience of our professional lives—exciting because we saw the vast potential in the concept, yet frightening because we were placing our efforts (and around 20 million taxpayer dollars) into a new type of building the likes of which had not been constructed.

Since the opening of Clark Hall, we have found other educators around America who have gone through a similar process in various sorts of learning spaces. Some have redesigned parts of existing schools or individual classrooms, and a few have gotten to build a new structure from the ground up. They, too, know that just changing the learning space without changing practices will provide minimal improvement. We have to change the space in our heads to use the space in our environment. Twenty-first century teaching is more than a room; it's a state of mind.

Though Clark Hall has been a success (and was honored nationally by Scholastic as being one of the Best in Tech 2012), we are also quick to tell people that Clark Hall is not perfect; like any other environment, it is what you make of it. This is not a book in which we claim to have all of the answers and to have created an educational Utopia. Yet enough educators and students have adjusted their practices in Clark Hall to show the concept works. We have also heard from other teachers elsewhere in America who are using similar tactics in new types of space and are also seeing success. Like them, we are not turning back. We know this is the way forward.

We salute the educators who have been brave enough to begin to ask questions about their teaching and classroom design and those who will read this book and decide that they, too, want to begin taking steps into a new way to use learning space. We hope this book inspires them and guides them. It is designed around the five most important steps that we took during our own transformation: (1) understanding today's students (Generation Z) and designing user-friendly spaces that can help them to learn; (2) the need to ask essential questions of what we are trying to accomplish today with teaching, learning, and the use of space; (3) the difficulty of shifting our thinking to a 21st century mindset; (4) the necessity of implementing global skills into our curriculum and how they can be augmented through different types of space; and (5) the importance of allowing students to have access to powerful technology that will help them to maximize their learning throughout the new learning space.

The professional development activities in this book are designed to provide points for discussion and concrete steps that can be used to transition into a 21st century learning space. Many of them are built around the global skills we want to see our students use today—collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communication. Just as importantly, there are questions at the end of most chapters in subsections titled “Stretch to the Future” that encourage educators to extend their thinking and questions into areas in which there might not yet be clear answers. If we as educators are going to continue to evolve, then we must continue to push our imaginations into the next stage of 21st century teaching and learning. We must prepare for the future now. But a word of warning: some of these discussions will not be easy—some of them will be difficult. Like student learning, our own learning at times is messy and emotional, and it takes a great deal of perseverance and work to find answers that are not always immediately recognizable.

Finally, whereas this book is K–12 in its scope, we know that it will probably be most beneficial to high school educators. Whereas most elementary and middle school teachers have traditionally recognized the importance of flexible learning space, we know some are pushing their classroom design into new frontiers. To teach Generation Z, teachers at all levels must question their practices.

We wish you luck as you move forward with your efforts.

Dwight Carter
Columbus, Ohio

Gary Sebach
Columbus, Ohio

Mark White
Beijing, China