

Innovative Learning Environments*

Ka pū te ruha, ka hao te rangatahi.

When the old net is worn, the new net goes fishing.

Why ILEs? What's changed?

Just about everything: society, the world of work, technology, and our understanding of the brain. And while some things in schools will always be important (the key role that teachers play, good quality relationships, the student being at the centre of decision-making) many 'traditional' teaching practices are being replaced by approaches that build skills seen as vital for a changing world: problem-solving, team-work, communication, critical thinking, creativity and leadership.¹

School architecture is being reconsidered as part of this process. The traditional rows of classrooms, each with rows of desks facing the front (from where teacher delivers knowledge), is increasingly out of step with the world of work, but also with what we know about the brain and learning. Active, differentiated, student-centred learning leads to higher levels of motivation, engagement and achievement,² but traditional environments don't support this kind of learning well.³

What does the research say?

Learning environments should be 'fit for purpose'.

Some studies suggest the physical environment explains up to 16% of the variation in student progress over a year.⁴ An environment with a variety of reconfigurable spaces helps to meet the needs of different learners, but also increases interest, engagement and recall.⁵

Well-designed environments allow students to learn in ways that work for them: learning with a teacher; learning on their own; thinking and reflecting in quiet, focused settings;⁶ collaborating in groups;⁷ practising and revising at their own pace;⁸ sitting, standing and moving physically;⁹ and teaching (and learning from) one other.¹⁰



When students are supported to take charge of their learning in environments like these, sustained higher achievement is more likely. However students should not be left 'to discover' in an unstructured environment: teachers should provide as much or as little structure and guidance as each student needs.¹¹

Learning environments should promote teacher collaboration.

Environments that allow teachers to teach together are more likely to lead to improved student outcomes than traditional 'single-teacher' spaces.¹² Teachers who co-teach learn more from each other, accelerate their professional development and increase their problem-solving ability.¹³ When learning environments are designed for teacher collaboration, the quality of teaching improves.¹⁴

What are the keys to success?

- *Ensure the design of the physical environment is evidence-based and focused on the needs of learners.¹⁵*
- *Ensure staff members have sufficient professional development to prepare them for working in open spaces, and have adequate systems to support collaborative practice.¹⁶*
- *Ensure continuous self-review and evaluation to build on what is working well, and address what is not.¹⁷*

* The term 'innovative learning environment' is commonly used to describe spaces that are more open, flexible and collaborative than traditional classrooms (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015).

About Leading Learning

Leading Learning is an educational consultancy based in Auckland, New Zealand. Their key areas of focus are innovative learning environments, future-focused teaching and learning, and change leadership. Leading Learning's consultants work with schools and school districts across New Zealand, Australia, The United Kingdom, Europe, Canada and the United States.

About the author

Mark Osborne is Director of Leading Learning Ltd and has been a teacher, school leader and consultant for more than 20 years. He works nationally and internationally on future-focused education, innovative learning environments and educational leadership, helping schools build great places to learn and the capability to make the most of those spaces. Mark is also a doctoral researcher at the University of Melbourne currently exploring change leadership in innovative learning environments.



Endnotes

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