DESIGN TO ENHANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS THROUGH INSPIRATION, INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

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ABSTRACT

As a passionate educator, I am interested in using art, design and technology to create innovative and engaging learning environments. I believe school classrooms and environments need to be aesthetically designed, to trigger positive emotional attachments to educational spaces. This will allow for understanding, recall and recognition, engagement, problem solving, and communication.

The classroom environment has a powerful influence on learning, and student’s perceptions of that environment can influence their behaviour. If an environment is limited in opportunities for exploration and involvement, the potential for learning is also limited. Classroom’s need to be spaces that are interdisciplinary learning resources used to inspire and relate to curriculum through engaging graphics.

It is necessary for all educators to understand the link between learning environment and learning experience. A student’s perception of a learning environment can affect their ability to absorb information. Transforming classrooms into interdisciplinary resources for learning will provide opportunities for interactivity and promote high levels of engagement. Incorporating writable surfaces and digital displays in classroom design, will create stimulating environments. Students will be encouraged to become actively involved in the learning process as diverse experiences of all students will be brought into play during problem solving, increasing the richness of ideas explored.

Field of Research: creativity, design, engagement, innovation, Inspiration

1. Introduction

As students are surrounded by their environmental and the information within it, the information being presented in any learning environment needs to be inspiring, innovative and creative. Curriculum content being displayed needs to draw the students’ attention and everything within the space needs to be welcoming. Even before an educator has the chance to begin instruction, the environment around them, will have either enhanced or hindered their quality of learning experience.
2. Inspiration

In order to positively spark an internal urge in students, where they feel encouraged to want to take part in the learning process, the environment in which learning is taking place needs to motivate them. As students enter a learning environment, they form a cognitive impression of that space and experience an associated emotional response. The physical characteristics of learning environments need to appeal to the current generation of learners. These children are fascinated with digital technology, social networking, enjoy social interaction and digital experiences. Places in which these same children enjoy spending their time are movie theatres, arcades, bowling alleys, laser tag centres, shopping centres, theme parks and studios. The commonality between each of these venues is their ability to aesthetically engage. If as much focus, attention and funding were invested into the interplay between the learner and the learning environment, children would be as interested as being in a classroom as they are in visiting an entertainment venue. The time and money invested into marketing a product and/or service to attract the attention of customers, allows for the creation of a space that is visually engaging, exciting and attractive. Students should be inspired enough to want to be in their learning venue, which is the school classroom. Classroom environments that emit the same level of engagement and entertainment factor being experienced in entertainment venues will allow for successful learning experiences. If the environment is limited in opportunities for exploration and involvement, the potential for learning is also limited.

Engaging Graphics

Learning environments can be enhanced through simple graphics that engage the current generation of learners. By reflecting on what already visually engages children, graphics can be designed to simply attract them inside the classroom and become a space where they enjoy being. For example, depending on the demographics of the students within the classroom, painted murals, wall stickers and wallpaper based on general interests of the age group could be used to cover the walls within a classroom.

Use of Nature

Using nature as a way to create a space that is calming and tranquil by bringing the outside in or extending the inside of a classroom to the outside. Creating spaces where students can sit amongst nature would provide a calming yet engaging learning experience. Richard Louv in his book, ‘Last Child in the Woods’ makes evident the importance of children having direct exposure to nature for healthy childhood development. He indicates the implications of children being separated by nature, noting a “diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses...nature deficit disorder can even change human behavior. Through painted graphics, wall stickers, vinyl wraps and/or digital displays, this can be achieved.

Graphically Designed Content

For years now, the way in which we teach has been changing, through the development and implementation of software and technology to replace textbooks. Teachers are often attending professional development sessions to ensure they are up to date with new methods of teaching. Something that hasn’t been considered all too much is the way in which the content is displayed around the classroom. Teachers often display posters and information inside the classroom, though the information becomes cluttered and acts as more of a distraction rather than being informative. Instead, information, content and curriculum components should be presented as if a graphic designer has taken the time to prepare the walls for such display. Thought needs to go into the type
of information being displayed, the composition, placement, colour, size and all other elements and principles of design. Content should be graphically designed then displayed through the use of paint, wall stickers, vinyl wraps and or digital displays.

3. Innovation

It is crucial for the classroom environment to always introduce new ideas, concepts and information in order to stimulate original and creative thinking. Gone are the days of out dated laminated posters that quickly become irrelevant. This visual clutter makes it difficult for students to gather and understand the content when it is bombarding them. While paint can enhance an environment to become engaging and educational, it needs to be re-painted every so often to remain current and relevant. An alternative to painted walls for enhancement is digital technology. LED screens and other forms of motion technology can provide engaging learning experiences that are easily updated through computer software. Students need to feel connected with the environment that they are learning in order to be connected to the teacher and content that they are learning. Students sit in classrooms for the majority of their day, where they are absorbing information. This exchange of knowledge between the teacher and student needs to be brought to life in a way that makes them excited about learning. If it were an experience at a movie theatre or theme park, the environment would be a creative and fascinating space. Rather then seeming like visual clutter, classroom walls should display content in a visually engaging way that also appeals to children. Similar to the way advertisements market a product or service, curriculum content should be marketed to students in the environment they are learning in, to grab their interest and attention. This carefully designed curriculum content needs to always remain innovative – up to date and relevant.

4. Creativity

The importance of creativity is increasingly bring realised in education. As the world is constantly changing, generation’s change and technology advances, we need to develop the next generation of innovative and creative thinkers who are in tune to the digital age and ready for the workforce. We need a generation who are able to create solutions to problems, develop new ideas and as a result, assist in the development of new jobs and industries. In order to generate the next generation of thinkers and doers, we need to spark curiosity, imagination and engagement through inspiration and innovation. How can students’ become creative in an environment that is limited in opportunities for exploration and involvement? Environments need to be built and designed to spark imagination, motivation and be creative enough to encourage students themselves to be creative. Classrooms need to be transformed into spaces that encourage and support interactive, interdisciplinary and collaborative learning. Environments need to be relevant, adaptable and challenging places for learning to prepare students for the world.

5. Materials To Enhance And Design Learning Environments

Acrylic Paint, Whiteboard Paint and Blackboard Paint

Paint has the ability to dramatically enhance a space by covering the surface of classroom walls. With a simple coat of paint a classroom can be transformed into a more inviting space for students. However with a little thought to the capabilities of paint, an inspiring, innovative and creative classroom can be achieved. Content and information graphics need to be designed visually then painted on the walls of a classroom. Using a combination of traditional acrylic paint in certain areas of the wall, along with whiteboard and blackboard paint will allow for an interactive, collaborative and interdisciplinary space to be created. The plain acrylic wall sections will be aesthetically pleasing while the whiteboard and blackboard areas will allow students to interact with the walls by writing and drawing on them. The room itself will be transformed into a resource of its own and if designed
well, it will allow for interdisciplinary learning. Figure 1 (below) is an example of a classroom that provides a creative and interactive opportunity for students to learn about the world in a variety of ways. The white areas can be written on with a whiteboard marker, while the blue ocean creates a calm and soothing environment for students to be learning in. Maps provide a visual representation of an area, highlighting relationships between elements of that area such as objects, regions, and themes. The classroom becomes a resource itself for any subject, as students can learn about longitude and latitude in Geography; countries, destinations and war in History; area, volume and distance in Mathematics; world religion, food and resource distribution; or simply birth places of famous musicians, writers, artists and designers. Similarly, Figure 2 provides space for brainstorming ideas and key concepts. This brainstorm graphic design can be used in any subject.

![Figure 1: Acrylic & Whiteboard Painted Map Classroom](image1)

![Figure 2: Painted Brainstorm Classroom](image2)

**Wall Stickers and Vinyl Wraps**

Wall stickers can be designed for classrooms and interior educational settings, setting a specific mood in a classroom and creating a meaningful focal point. The wall stickers are educational and include hidden formulas and equations, yet subtly presenting curriculum content in the design. Wall stickers will allow students to associate particular educational illustrations that they may have seen in a classroom, when they are required to recall information. Through classic and elegant flower designs to something that appeals to a particular age group and gender, such as a youth on a skateboard. The right wall stickers can be designed to create the right feel. Wall stickers would be a less permanent way of decorating any classroom and to add interest on a blank wall. The range of stickers can be applied to any clean and smooth flat surface including walls, windows, mirrors, doors, floors, metal, laptops and whiteboards. Stickers would be made from a high quality adhesive vinyl that can be easily removed by simply peeling them off. Similarly, vinyl wraps can be applied to the classroom walls to display content and to create an engaging space that students feel exhilarated to be in.
Digital Displays

In a digital age we rarely see much use of innovative digital technology in school classrooms except for interactive whiteboard technology. While students and teachers in the classroom are successfully using smartboards, computers, projectors, mobile devices and other forms of technology, there are greater opportunities to use technology to enhance learning experiences. The most effective way to create inspirational, innovative and creative classrooms is through the use of quality visual products and displays including digital signage and large format digital displays. Digital Signage is a type of electronic display that is used to advertise information and build awareness. The images are displayed via LED, LCD monitors and may be projected as well. Using digital displays in a classroom allows for content to always remain current. The content that is seen on the monitors is uploaded and controlled by computer using specialized software. This option does not require repainting of walls, nor does it require vinyl graphics to be removed and replaced. While the initial outlay for the signs may be a lot more than what painting or a print would cost, money will be saved on further printing costs. Digital monitors can be connected to the Internet, which can directly enhance the learning experience. For example, Twitter feeds, news feeds, currency updates, weather updates and more can be incorporated into the display. Teachers and students can interact with blog posts and video content from YouTube. Digital signage can grab the attention of students in a subtle way. The high definition displays combined with vivid colours and the ability to include elements such as news feeds and online video allows educators to connect with students. A digital display that uses a combination of high quality images and video can have a powerful influence on students and their understanding of curriculum content. This type of display enables teachers to showcase students’ work. Slideshows can be set up to present work in more meaningful ways then through a usual PowerPoint presentation or hidden away in a students workbook.
6. Conclusion

Learning environments be a place where students want to spend the majority of their day. Through inspiration, innovative and creativity educational spaces should foster and encourage creativity and create happiness amongst students. Depending on the need and budget of the school, various options for designing and displaying content can be achieved through the use of paint, wall stickers, vinyl wraps and digital displays. With further attention and funding to the issue of classroom design, there is a lot of potential for greater ideas to be implemented to enhance learning environments.

References

