Highlights from a recent webcast on Classroom Learning Dynamics

NAVIGATE THE NEW LEARNING LANDSCAPE

Create rich learning experiences with four distinct types of learning spaces.

The most effective way to help students learn has always been to teach them the way they learn best. That includes not only the choice of material and how it's presented, but also the manner and setting of that presentation.

"During the past two hundred years or so, the fundamental physics of the typical K-12 classroom hasn't changed much," says Sam Morris, Global Education Solution Architect, Lenovo Education. Yet today, students learn in different places and different spaces. "Understanding this dramatic new learning landscape is the key to designing successful learning programs."

Morris and educator Kelli Etheredge, Director of Teaching and Learning Resources, St. Paul's Episcopal School, Mobile, Alabama, spoke about the new learning landscape during a recent webcast presented by THE Journal and sponsored by Lenovo.

"Despite the influx of technology into the classroom," says Morris, "we're sometimes still stuck in those old modalities with kids in rows, content in the front, even when every kid has a device."

This begs the question: Is technology really creating a transformation in the educational experience? "I think it's important we don't we rely purely on

the technology as the means to transformation," he says. "It's certainly a critical piece to that transformation, but it is only one piece of the puzzle."

Morris and Etheredge both agree a big part of this transformation—if not the most important part—is the role of the teacher. "When I talk to teachers," says Etheredge, "I always tell them it's not about technology per se. It's about how they can use the technology to make their classroom better and more dynamic and truly a modern classroom."

For example, Etheredge often starts by helping teachers search the Internet to find the most up-to-date information on a topic. "I then show them how to put that information into Microsoft OneNote (a digital note-taking app) where everyone can see it and share it. OneNote is actually helping to transform the classroom," she says.

Four Types of Learning Spaces

To help teachers better understand the learning spaces in the modern classroom, Morris focuses on the four types of learning spaces developed by David Thornburg, educational futurist, in his 2013 book From the Campfire to the Holodeck: Creating Engaging and Powerful 21st Century Learning Environments. In that book, Thornburg describes four types of learning spaces:

Campfires: "This is the classic learning space," says Morris. "This is where direct instruction takes place. It's a place to learn from presenters and discuss ideas as a whole group."

Watering holes: This is the learning space for small group collaboration, exploration and conversations among peers. "It's important to understand when we think about watering holes," says Morris, "not only is there a physical attribute to how we organize kids in a watering hole type environment, but each watering hole may have different learning outcomes. Kids aren't necessarily working on the same task."

Caves: "Teachers have been creating this type of learning space for kids for a long time," says Morris. "It's the place for independent study, reflection, and creativity. It's the space where kids

read a good book or do some research on the Internet by themselves. It's the independent part of learning."

Life: Morris says Thornburg described Life as the space where kids can apply what they've learned. "It used to be extracurricular types of things, such as field trips or guest speaker," he says. "But today we see makerspace kinds of attributes and problem-based learning experiences coming into the Life space."

Morris suggests that in a truly transformative classroom, there will be parts of all four of these modalities will happen simultaneously. One group of students may be working in a cave, while another group is at the campfire. "Technology can be used in each of these modalities," he says, "to help a teacher move from a structured, teacher-centric position to a much more informal, flexible space."

These spaces are not silos, however. "It's the interplay between them that's important," he says. "Caves influence watering holes which influence campfires. The key is to leverage the technology in each space."

"If everybody in the classroom has a device," says Etheredge, "it frees up the teacher to do different types of campfire things. For example, you can flip the classroom and have the Campfire at home with OfficeMix (a free add-in for PowerPoint) where you do little short interactive lessons with quizzes and other interactives. Then in the classroom, you can do more interactive, hands-on things with the students."

The Role of the Teacher

Morris says one of the big challenges is helping to prepare teachers for the

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transformation without "scaring the daylights out of them."

"We need to show them a path to the future that doesn't seem like a jump off a cliff, but a gradual climb across a hillside," he says. One of the things we often fail to do when talking with teachers about how technology is a tool for transformation is to provide them with a rubric so they can self-assess whether or not they're using technology in a transformative way.

Etheredge agrees. "We use the "21st Century Skills Standards Rubrics," she says, "which includes one dimension for integrating technology and applying it effectively."

Both Etheredge and Morris also agree a teacher who conveys information is still a very important part of the learning process. "I'm tired of people bashing 'sage on the stage," says Morris. "There is a role for teachers to bring content to students. Lecturing is not necessarily a bad thing."

"We're experts in our field," says Etheredge, "and we need to share what we know. That doesn't mean we have all the answers. But we have more information than our students have and there are some times when we need to tell them that and convey that to them. But there are different ways we can do that now."

The transformation, however, can sometimes be confusing to the outside observer. "For example, people sometimes see the watering hole as just total chaos and nothing is really happening

when, in fact, the kids are collaborating and sharing and are passionate about what they're doing," she says.

And it's not always direct presentation of the material where technology can help. "I think there's sometimes a tendency to use the technology to control the chaos or attempt to limit it," says Morris. "But I say we should use the technology to leverage the chaos. It's all about finding ways that the technology can help solve modern-day problems."

Morris addressed the role of Lenovo's devices built specifically for educational use. "The question we've focused on," he says, "is why can't a device be more than just a laptop or a tablet? In the same way that teachers choose different modalities based on the different learning experiences, students need to have the same option."

Morris says that's why the 2-in-1 devices are so popular and better than single-mode devices. "It lets kids choose how they want to use technology," he says. "If they need a keyboard for content creation, they have a keyboard. If they need a touch device for content consumption, they have it. If they need to handwrite or draw, they have the pen mode."

That flexibility is proving helpful for teachers. "That's why we've standardized on one device," says Etheredge. "For kids, it does it all. It's invaluable."