

Harnessing the Power of Active Learning Environments

The Innovative Learning Environments and Teacher Change (ILETC) research project is helping educators optimize active learning environments.

Steelcase Education hosted the North American Transitions Symposium established by Innovative Learning Environments and Teacher Change (ILETC) in Grand Rapids, Michigan last week (September 2017). The Transitions Learning Symposium brings together PhDs and other global educators to share research and collaborate on the future of education environments and approaches. Symposiums were held in Australia, Europe and North America.

Dr. Wesley Imms is the lead Chief Investigator of the Australian Research Council's Linkage Project for ILETC. Imms traveled to Steelcase from the University of Melbourne. He sat down with 360 to tell us what their research has discovered so far and share his vision for the future of education.

360: Your research project runs from 2016-2019. Tell us what ILETC is trying to achieve?

Wesley: We've discovered the importance of spatial design and have reconstructed classrooms to be innovative and active, but evidence says teachers are continuing to teach the way they taught in traditional classrooms. We are trying to effect a change in that, however getting teachers to change is a challenge. Teachers respond to evidence, so our project is about getting good evidence that elicits a change in practice.

360: What is the ILETC trying to convince administration and teachers through the evidence collected in this research project?

Wesley: The essence of the problem is extraordinary amounts of money have been invested in what we call innovative learning environments, and now we're looking at how to get teachers to use these wonderfully designed classrooms as they were intended. What was the point in building something that is innovative and flexible if the same practices are happening within? Why didn't we just put ordinary classrooms in? It goes beyond just proof of concept, but effecting change in what teachers are doing.

360: What makes you passionate about the field of education and the ILETC research project?

Wesley: I've always wanted to be a teacher. I love teaching. Underlying that is a really firm belief that the aesthetic environment in which we live, work and play has an impact on the way we feel and the way we act. So, why do we have boring looking schools? Why do we have uncomfortable classrooms? The aesthetic part of our existence is critical and this applies to learning environments as well.

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360: Tell us about the Transitions events that brought you here to Steelcase in Grand Rapids. How is taking the project outside of Australia and into different parts of the world an important step in your research process?

Wesley: We took the Transitions symposium to Europe and North America to obtain a global perspective, to avoid duplicate research and to establish a network. We've had nothing but positive support. Someone at the London symposium said this is the most important research being done in education globally. We can have the best research happening in the world, but if we're not connecting with each other, it gets lost and fragmented.

360: Based on the research you've seen so far, what are you learning? Is education evolving in the right direction?

Wesley: One of our surveys showed three-quarters of Australian teachers stand at the front of the class and teach in a traditional way. While there is a need for direct instruction and teacher-led pedagogy, kids need a range of teaching and learning approaches to succeed. These innovative spaces provide that opportunity and many teachers still aren't using them to educate across a range of styles.

On the bright side, there's an extraordinarily strong correlation between the one-quarter of teachers who use innovative, active learning approaches and those who are in these active learning environments. For the most part, in Australia, we have resolved poorly designed classrooms with innovative environments. Now, we're moving into the whole nuance about teachers' actions. Education is a really complex area, but the one thing that all educators agree on internationally is that changes in student learning outcomes come from the quality of teaching they receive.

360: What does the process look like for transforming education? What is the trajectory of steps that must be taken to elicit an educational change?

Wesley: We have to get away from thinking only educators can fix educational problems. We need to step out of our academic bubbles and engage other industries and sectors. If we're not learning from each other it's our fault, it's poor communication.

For example, Steelcase is constantly producing research on ways to design furniture and learning spaces to improve students' learning. This is critical insight for our project. We have 15 partner organizations in the project from different industries including Steelcase. It just makes the research richer. This is the way it's going to have to happen in the future, research will have to be interdisciplinary with collaboration between industries.

360: Do you see an interplay between education and the work environment? How do you feel about industry telling schools what kinds of graduates they need?

Wesley: We are in an era where the type of people who are in the workforce need to have a way of thinking that's different from what schools traditionally taught. Non-thinking and repetitive jobs are dropping away. People are hired for critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. I would argue that schools should no longer train the graduate you want, but teach people how to learn. If you have that, you have somebody who can do anything.

360: How do you see educational institutions evolving over the next five or 10 years?

Wesley: There will be greater diversification and flexibility in the delivery of knowledge. Students will work at home as much as they work at the school, they'll self-select workshops and do project-based learning.

Schools will be social environments like community learning spaces and teaching areas will become secondary to that.

Time tables are going to be another revolution in education. The idea that kids go to school at nine, go home at four, and move classroom to classroom in 30 minute time blocks— I can almost guarantee in 20 years time we're going to laugh at that. That's where we're heading, but the spatial design side I think is the trigger.

360: Why do you say that spatial design is the trigger?

Wesley: There's a debate about whether space is a catalyst for change or an agent for change. A catalyst for change means simply by providing a space, you automatically change the way people behave in the space. It isn't true. In those spaces, we still see traditional teaching and learning models. However, the space as an agent for change philosophy argues we must provide spaces and teach people to use them for collaborative learning and critical thinking. When a teacher stops teaching from the front, divides the room into groups, let's the kids move around and interact, they have used the space as an agent for changing the way kids learn.

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360: What do you see as the future of learning environments?

Wesley: I think the pathway we're treading down is accurate. Intentionally designed innovative learning spaces, unique flexible furniture like Steelcase provides, acoustic treatments, advanced telecommunications — the practices within those environments is where the revolution's going to come.

Dr. Wesley Imms is the lead chief investigator of the Australian Research Council's Linkage Project for ILETC. He is also an associate professor in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, head of Visual Art and Design Education and research domain coordinator for curriculum and teaching.

Tylee Bush
Brand Communications Intern

Tylee Bush is a Brand Communications Intern at Steelcase. She contributes content as well as works on media coverage and brand management. Tylee is also a student at Grand Valley State University pursuing a Bachelors in Communication Studies paired with a minor in Writing. She has published work on various news, business and social platforms.

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