

Three Takeaways from Learning Spaces Symposium

Research and stories from the field showcased the full scope of how space affects learning at the Transitions North America symposium.

By Robert Talbert, Grand Valley State University professor

The following article is contributed by Robert Talbert. A professor of mathematics at GVSU, Talbert is on a year-long sabbatical working at Steelcase as a scholar-in-residence.

Steelcase Education, a project sponsor of the Innovative Learning and Teacher Change (ILETC) at the University of Melbourne, hosted their Transitions North America symposium at the Grand Rapids Learning and Innovation Center on September 14, 2017. This day-long conference, also sponsored by DLR group, featured research on learning spaces by graduate and early-career researchers and reports from the field by seasoned practitioners. Over the course of the day, the full scope of how space affects learning was on display through a combination of both rigorous scholarly research and compelling stories.

The one-day symposium, followed up with a “think tank” of conference participants and interlocutors the following day, produced more big ideas and good questions than any one person can process briefly. However, here are three primary takeaways from my experience at the symposium:

Active learning environments make a difference in students’ lives.

Several talks at the symposium highlighted moving personal accounts of active learning spaces enhancing students’ lives. Dr. Julie Marshall, teacher at Saluda Trail Middle School in South Carolina, gave an emotional keynote on how her Steelcase active learning classroom gave her students — many of whom grow up in poverty — a place to call home. For Julie’s students, she said, “the classroom is like the family dining room table” and provides them a place where they have agency and freedom to choose their paths.

Dr. Julie Marshall, teacher from South Carolina’s Saluda Trail Middle School, gave a keynote address at the Transitions North America symposium about the impact active learning and an active learning environment has had on her students.

Similarly, Robert Dillon spoke of his experiences with Steelcase classrooms in his former school district in University City, Missouri during the Ferguson racial unrest of 2014. For his students, the opportunities afforded by a classroom space that emphasizes freedom and agency helped to break what he called the “school to prison pipeline”. In these and other cases, classroom spaces designed with the dignity and abilities of students in mind unlocked powerful learning experiences that can change the course of students’ lives for the better.

We already know many of the answers to questions about active learning and active learning spaces.

Other talks noted that the elements of classroom space design that can bring about such positive change are often right under our noses. Robert Dillon, in his talk, also described the concept of “biomimicry,” or the adaptation of the principles of nature in designing learning spaces. By welcoming such natural elements as agility, flow, and noise and by “letting space breathe,” we design classroom spaces more attuned to nature, and to our own natures. Julie Kallio of the University of Wisconsin echoed this point by looking to the design principles of flexibility, visibility (including the use of natural light), variation and movement to create welcoming spaces where lasting learning experiences can take place.

Research can give us solid scientific knowledge about the effects of space on learning.

While stories from the front lines of learning are powerful, the presentations at the symposium also remind us that rigorous scholarly work can be done to find causal links between changes in the environment and changes in behavior. Many of the talks featured ingenious ways to collect data on the use of space for learning. For example, Ben Shapiro of Vanderbilt University studied the use of space at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee, using data gathered by sensors attached to exhibits. Using the data, Shapiro could track patrons’ movements and listen to their conversations as they moved from exhibit to exhibit, producing an interactive map of the use of space with verbal conversations at each point. The data were then used to understand which spaces in the museum were producing the most engaging visits. A similar study from Jane Zhang of the Harvard Graduate School of Design involved interviewing design students and registering the activities in which they engage in two buildings on Harvard’s campus. The verbs from those interviews were mapped onto a floor plan of the building literally to see what activities clustered in various parts of the building, allowing Zhang to draw conclusions about the use of the space.

Space indeed does make a difference in student learning, and the reports from research and practice presented at the symposium show us in vivid terms just how much of a difference is made.

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