

# Classroom.NEXT: Engaging Faculty and Students in Learning Space Design

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- » **The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Texas Wesleyan University undertook a project to find out what a classroom would look like if it were designed by faculty and students—and then to build that classroom. The goal was to promote innovation in learning space design and to advance instructors' understanding of how classroom design impacts teaching and learning.**
  - » **Classroom.NEXT initiated a campus-wide dialogue on the design of informal and formal learning spaces, and faculty, students, and administrators identified flexibility and interactivity as key attributes to be promoted in all Texas Wesleyan learning spaces.**
  - » **Collaboration, particularly student-faculty collaboration, was a central component of the success of Classroom.NEXT. Faculty participants commented that they learned as much from their students about learning space design and technology as they did from the research.**
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What if faculty and students designed a classroom? The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) (see <http://www.txwescetl.com>), the faculty development center at Texas Wesleyan University, asked this question after hearing stories from students and faculty members about the struggles they faced in their physical classrooms. We heard about students who struggled to learn in uncomfortable, inflexible, and often aged classrooms. Instructors told stories of spaces with malfunctioning lighting, poorly arranged and immovable furniture, and instructional technology that did not support students' learning needs. The students' and instructors' stories made it clear that the faculty development programs we provided to improve teaching and learning practices would be incomplete without improving the design of learning environments on the Texas Wesleyan campus.

With the full support of the information technology department, under which the CETL is housed, we created a team-based competitive program called Classroom.NEXT (see <http://www.txwescetl.com/programs/classroom-next/>) that challenged faculty members and students to research and design their ideal classrooms. The selected classroom design would serve as a blueprint for transforming an existing Texas Wesleyan classroom into Classroom.NEXT, a classroom model designed to support student-centered learning and teaching in the 21st century.

The goal of the Classroom.NEXT initiative was to promote innovation in learning space design and to advance instructors' understanding of how classroom design impacts teaching and learning. In this brief, we describe the Classroom.NEXT program in detail, share the five submitted designs, discuss the selected design, and share program outcomes.

## Development of Classroom.NEXT

The CETL team—Amy Collier, Director, and Instructional Designers Arturo Ozuna, Bill Watson, and Chris Faulkner—began designing the Classroom.NEXT program in August 2010. We approached the design of the program just as we encourage our faculty members to approach the design of a new course: We started by establishing a set of objectives for the program. Through Classroom.NEXT, we sought to:

- Promote innovation in learning space design and in student-centered teaching practices
- Promote an awareness of the role learning space design and student-centered teaching methods play in the student experience
- Promote faculty professional growth
- Advance the scholarship of teaching and learning, especially in the areas of learning space design and learner-centered teaching methods
- Promote collaboration in evidence-based research and teaching

- Promote collaboration between faculty, students, and departments
- Promote an understanding of instructional design principles
- Promote an understanding of the role of assessment in teaching and learning

Once the objectives were finalized by the CETL and approved by IT and academic leadership, CETL staff created a formal request for proposal (RFP) (see [http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELIB1102\\_rfp.pdf](http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELIB1102_rfp.pdf)) to guide the faculty through the development of their designs and proposals. When the requirements for the RFP were finalized, it became clear that participation in the Classroom.NEXT program would require a significant time investment from faculty members.

## Engaging Faculty and Students through Competition and Collaboration

Texas Wesleyan faculty members, like those of other universities, are overburdened with course preparation and management tasks, service to the university and community, and research projects. We discovered that to motivate faculty to contribute, we would need to provide sufficient incentives and rewards for participation in program. We hypothesized that competition would be a powerful motivator for the faculty to participate in the program. To promote competition and participation, the CETL incorporated numerous incentives and rewards. The primary incentive for participation was that the winning design would be implemented with few, if any, budgetary restrictions. Faculty authors of the selected proposal would receive priority scheduling for the redesigned classroom during the

fall 2011 and spring 2012 semesters, an especially appealing incentive on a campus where there are few well-designed learning spaces. Additionally, each team member would receive a pocket camcorder to keep and would be asked to document the redesign process and their use of the space. Members would also receive recognition at a campus-wide event and have their names placed on a plaque that would hang in the redesigned classroom.

Although few Texas Wesleyan faculty members collaborate with other faculty members on issues related to teaching and learning, they do work well with one another and with their students on student-related issues. CETL staff built on this willingness to work together and with students to promote participation in Classroom.NEXT. Classroom.NEXT required that each team have at least one faculty contributor and one student contributor. CETL staff also encouraged applicants to form teams that would promote interdepartmental collaboration and interdisciplinary teaching methods. The CETL further promoted collaboration by assigning a CETL staff member to each team to serve as a guide through the development of the proposals and designs.

## Five Learner-Centered, Flexible Designs

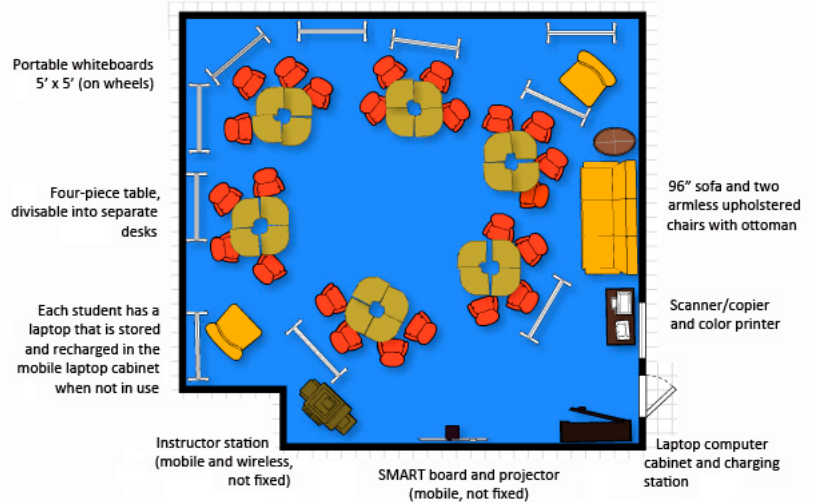
Five teams submitted designs for the Classroom.NEXT competition. Overall, the designs emphasized a need for flexibility in the design of learning spaces. They also incorporated the use of learner-centered teaching methods and called attention to the unique characteristics of today's students and their need to personalize the learning environment.

### A Radically-Flexible Classroom

The Radically-Flexible team, comprising one faculty member and five students, focused on the needs of today's students and their major characteristics, which include an "unconscious integration of technology into their lives" and a desire to "study and socialize as a group." To meet this generation's needs, the team designed a radically flexible classroom that emphasizes inquiry-based learning and student engagement. The team sought to design a space that easily "harmonizes with learning theory, encourages inquiry-based instruction, and responds to the needs of Net Gen students." To meet these goals, the team built their design on four key themes: flexibility, sensory stimulation, technology support, and decentering the room so that there is no single front or focal point.

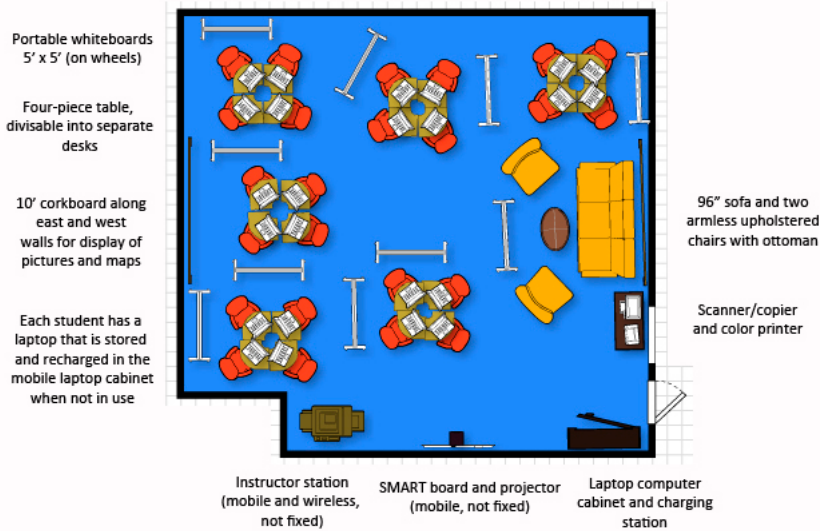
### Classroom is arranged for whole class discussion

In this configuration, each group has moved a whiteboard to use in their presentation. Students can move chairs and/or desks for best sight lines.



## Classroom is arranged for small group work

Each group has one or more whiteboards to record its work. Whiteboards also allow separation of groups.



To ensure the room is flexible and easily reconfigured for a variety of teaching methods, the team's proposal called for the use of rolling office chairs, laptops, quarter-round tables with wheels, mobile whiteboards, and a mobile SMART Board. The use of reconfigurable furniture and mobile technology in the space, the proposal suggested, allows for "active learning approaches that focus on student interactions and involvement."

The design recommended repainting the walls, carpeting the floor, and including several pieces of living-room style furniture. These aesthetic elements, combined with the flexible design of the furniture, convey to students that the "classroom is a different kind of space where a different kind of learning will take place." Equally important, the proposed furniture and mobile technology support the Net Gen's need for social interaction, as well as their desire to personalize their learning spaces. The proposal also called for the use of a classroom response system in the space to allow the instructor to gather feedback and to stimulate class discussions.

## C5C Next!

The C5CNext! team, comprising two English professors, a mass communications professor, and a student, designed a learning space to foster "connection, comfort, creativity, confidence, and care." Building on Dee Fink's book *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, the team designed a flexible space capable of supporting multiple learning activities and promoting significant learning experiences for students. The design was intended to build on students' social, physical, and psychological needs and to help students care more deeply about the implications of their learning in contexts inside and outside the classroom.



## COLOR



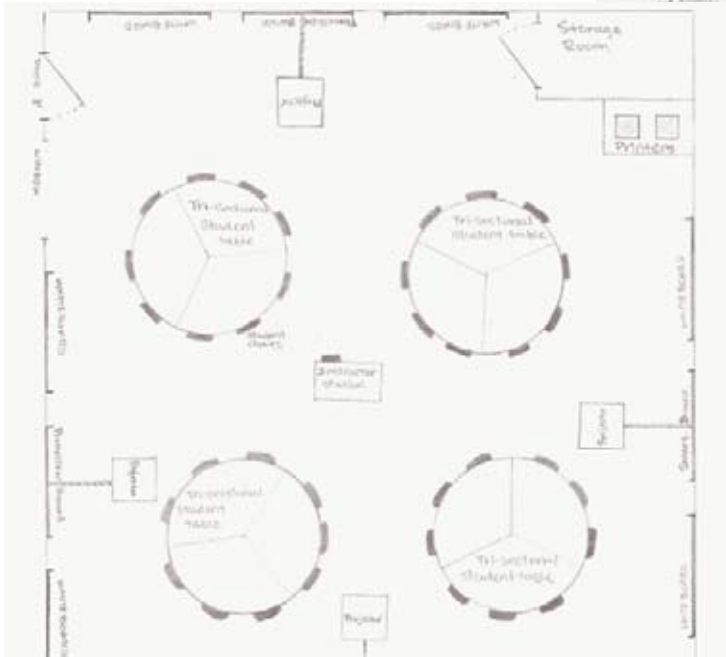
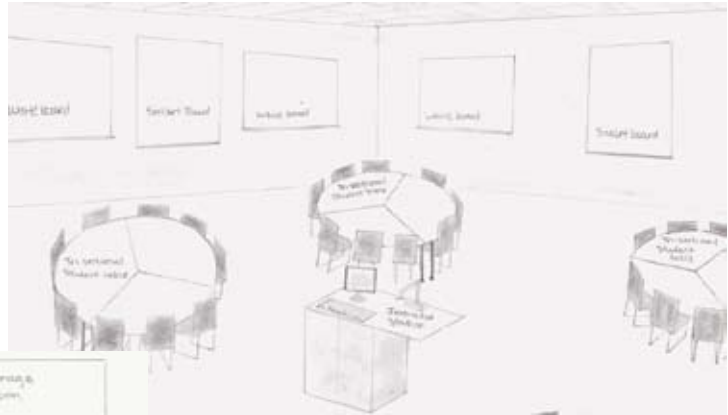
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## Light

The design called for the use of color, textures, and other visual elements that make students feel welcome and comfortable. The furniture selected for the design, including mobile pedestal tables with flip-tops, creates a space where planned and spontaneous active learning thrive. The design of the room, particularly the recommended technology, "utilizes and expands students' existing technology literacies, engenders social interaction and connectedness, and invites student exploration and innovation by making technology ubiquitous yet unobtrusive." The team recommended using laptops and a mobile instructor workstation in the classroom to ensure that the room is flexible and to encourage students to invest in the room's usability and flexibility.

### Enhancement of the Signature Student Experience

This design, submitted by three faculty members and one student from the School of Education, was a replication of the Active Learning Classrooms implemented at the University of Minnesota. Featuring student learning hubs and a series of circular tables accommodating up to nine students, the design is highly

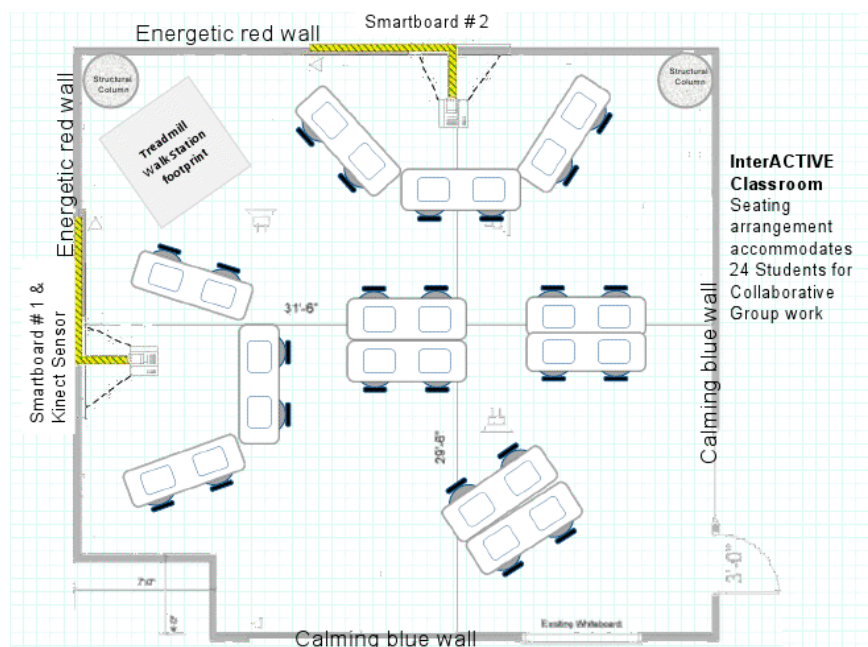


flexible and seeks to move away from teacher-centered instruction and to put learning into the hands of the students. The layout is also flexible enough to help maintain student attention and foster involvement by allowing the instructor the space and technological support needed to design lessons that will fully engage students and increase motivation.

The technology items in the design included four interactive whiteboards (two Promethean boards and two SMART Boards) that would be used to prepare preservice teachers for using interactive boards in their K-12 classrooms. The teacher's station, centered in the room and the design, included technology to allow the instructor and students to share "control" of the interactive whiteboards.

### InterACTIVE Classroom

This design, submitted by three kinesiology faculty members and one student, promoted physically active learning in the classroom. Using active equipment, the learner would experience activation of various muscular contractions that help stimulate oxygen and blood flow to the brain, thus increasing attention and learning capacity. By encouraging a physically active learner and engaging subconscious activation of neural and muscular responses, this design experience would be embedded in memory and develop a signature connection.



## InterACTIVE Classroom Furnishings



**Gaiam® Balance Ball Chair**  
<http://www.gaiam.com/product/exercise-ball-balanceball-chair.do>



**Steelcase, Inc. Walk Station**

Watch the video GMA Report on the Walk Station  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPJNO7JyVjo>



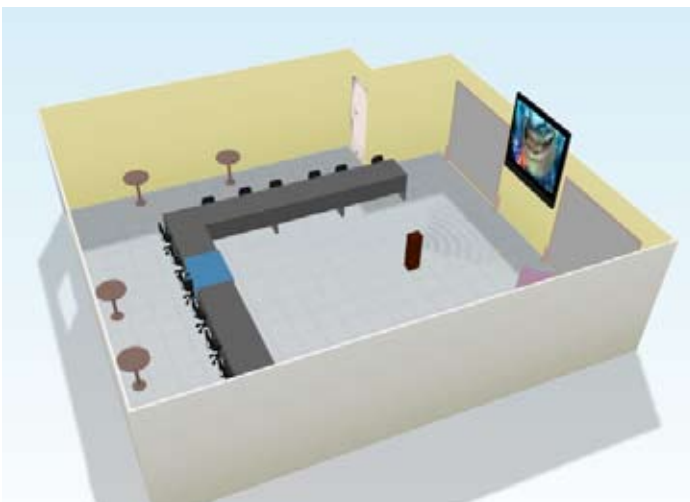
**Pop-up computer tables - two seats/table (6' x 2')**

**Steelcase, Inc. Walk Station Spec Sheet**  
[http://details-worktools.com/files/documents/products/Walkstation\\_Spec\\_0508.pdf](http://details-worktools.com/files/documents/products/Walkstation_Spec_0508.pdf)

The room's proposed color scheme was two walls painted in blue and two in red; blue to promote a relaxing environment and red to simulate activity and energy. The team's design included rolling student computer stations with notebook computers, a wireless network question-and-answer system, two SMART Boards, exercise-ball chairs, a motion-detecting game system (Kinect VG system), and a treadmill built into the podium.

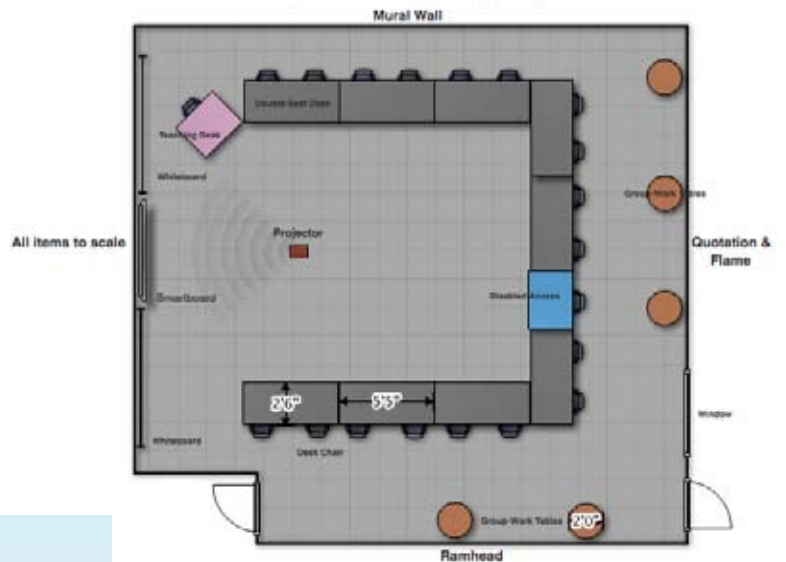
## The Write Stuff

The Write Stuff, which was submitted by a faculty member and three students, promoted a design that appealed primarily to writing classes and focused on the collaborative writing process. The design included arranging the desks in the room in a semicircle to make students feel valued and to maximize their participation in class activities. The design recommended dimmable natural lighting elements in the room, as well as wall colors and decor that provide psychological benefits for students. The wall colors included a golden shade of yellow, a calming blue, and a soft gray. The room would also feature a Fort Worth- and Wesleyan-themed mural.



## CETL Next Classroom "The Write Stuff"

3D Floorplan can be accessed at: <http://pi.ar.vtjill>



To make the most efficient use of desk space, the team's design includes desks capable of stowing the computers and monitors when not in use or when students need additional desktop space. This type of desk also creates space for the use of small round tables, which can be used for team collaboration. The room would be equipped with an interactive SMART Board and PCs at every student desk.

## Selecting and Implementing the Classroom.NEXT

A panel of seven internal and external judges reviewed and rated the designs using a rubric provided by the CETL (see [http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELIB1102\\_rubric.pdf](http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELIB1102_rubric.pdf)). Because Texas Wesleyan does not employ classroom design experts, CETL staff included external judges with expertise in learning space design principles. External judges also offered impartiality. Internal judges, including delegates from student services, student life, and academic support, represented the needs of Texas Wesleyan students in their evaluation of the classroom designs.

After reviewing and ranking the five designs, the judges selected the Radically Flexible Classroom design to be implemented as Classroom.NEXT. This design was submitted by a team of five history students and Elizabeth Alexander, a professor of history. The judges noted the selected team's focus on flexibility and their careful use of key elements for the room. In reviewing "A Radically Flexible Classroom Design," one judge commented on the highly flexible nature of the design and suggested, "I believe the Radically Flexible Classroom name fits perfectly. The classroom has the ability to form itself to the teaching subject, method, and needs of the students. The room has the ability to focus on group work, presentations, traditional lecture style, all with a medium that moves easily." Judges gave high marks to the team's plan for assessing the redesigned space: "These spaces don't stand alone, and the assessment program (including sample instruments) reinforces their stance on what is most important about a learning space—the learning, not the space."

### Implementation of the Room

The implementation of the Radically Flexible Classroom is scheduled to be complete at the beginning of the fall 2011 semester. To minimize disruption to classes, the renovation is planned to take place during the summer. The initial phase of the redesign will include removal of existing classroom furniture and equipment. After new paint, ceiling tiles, lighting, and carpet, the room will receive the technology and furniture components. The classroom will be completed with ample time for Alexander and other faculty members to become familiar with the room and its equipment.

## Classroom.NEXT: A Transformative Program

Classroom.NEXT achieved its goals. While Classroom.NEXT resulted in the redesign of one classroom on our campus, it has also sparked a movement at Texas Wesleyan. Classroom.NEXT initiated a campus-wide dialogue on the design of informal and formal learning spaces, as well as a discussion on the interrelationship between pedagogy and classroom design.

Ideas that emerged from the Classroom.NEXT project began to seep into other campus initiatives and into the university's strategic goals. Faculty, students, and administrators identified flexibility and interactivity as key attributes to be promoted in all Texas Wesleyan learning spaces. The program inspired several faculty members to make changes to the physical layout of their classrooms to promote better learning. Classroom.NEXT was also highlighted as an important program to support Texas Wesleyan's Signature Experience initiative, a campus-wide initiative to provide a personal, supportive, and student-centered experience for students.

Collaboration, particularly student-faculty collaboration, was a central component of the success of Classroom.NEXT. Because of this collaboration, the participating students played a pivotal role in the design of the classroom. Students offered their perspectives on space design, technology requirements, color schemes, and lighting. Faculty participants commented that they learned as much from their students about learning space design and technology as they did from the research. The program also provided faculty with an opportunity to collaborate with other university faculty on issues related to learner-centered teaching methods and to reflect upon their own teaching strategies. Faculty also shared experiences about the role that learning spaces play in teaching and learning.

The results of Classroom.NEXT exceeded our expectations and led to a transformative movement for learner-centered university spaces. Classroom.NEXT is awakening the university to the need to refocus its attention on student learning and to provide financial support for the creation of spaces that promote meaningful learning experiences.

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