

Preparing for flexible learning environments - 1

Western Springs College / Ngā Puna o Waiōrea is one of many secondary schools where modern, innovative, flexible or quality learning environments (they go by several names) are being built. For teachers it can be daunting to watch the new blocks go up, knowing they will need to change their teaching substantially.

Over the last three years Ngā Puna o Waiōrea has run several projects to prepare teachers for a large flexible learning environment (FLE) under construction – two are reported here.

FL environments usually include big spaces (sometimes called learning commons) where several classes of students learn at once. Tables, couches and chairs can divide such spaces flexibly into different areas. Some rooms have glazing between them, which enables indirect supervision. Many have breakout spaces that encourage small group and independent learning

However, the changes go deeper than just the construction of such learning spaces. Flexible environments also require changes in pedagogy and behaviour. Teachers and students both need to learn to share the space. Such spaces also require a more student-centred pedagogy – students taking more responsibility for their learning as they work through activities more geared to students finding out for themselves than teachers imparting knowledge.

*Is your school also preparing for FLEs?
Are there useful preparations you have made which may help others and which you would like to share?*

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Many schools are already exploring such approaches, but they become imperative for these new spaces. Many teachers understand learning to be constructed through collaboration with others. This requires students to have more agency in their learning – making decisions about what is learnt and how as they become more independent learners. In shared spaces it does not work for teachers to spend most of the lesson lecturing students. It disturbs others and does not allow students the time they need to work things out with each other.

Ngā Puna o Waiōrea has experimented with team-teaching and with walk-throughs to help teachers and students prepare for their move to large flexible learning spaces, expected by the end of term.

Team-teaching project

Kathryn Jenkins and Ginny Reid decided to team-teach two year 10 classes that had been timetabled at the same time. Using more student-centred approaches than either had used before, they worked through three main challenges.

Finding a space big enough

Their two classes were timetabled to separate labs, but neither could hold the combined 60 students. They started teaching in the library, but that displaced and inconvenienced other classes who asked them to move. They then found an available classroom in a prefab with a large communal space shared by four classrooms. Ginny and Kathryn packed 60 students into the classroom for brief lesson introductions, instructions and plenaries. The students then spread over that classroom and the communal space to work through





the learning tasks. Occasionally they had to take their classes separately in their own labs, especially for practicals.

Learning to plan together

Kathryn and Ginny had to find time for joint planning and also had to adapt their approach. Ginny said, “It wasn’t more work, just less random and more organised.” They used a weekly shared non-contact period to thrash out next steps, teaching strategies and responsibilities. The pair often discussed the lesson afterwards if it went into a break. Ginny and Kathryn needed to learn to compromise, at times making different decisions to those they would have made if they had been teaching alone. Kathryn said, “There was no winging it; we had to explain why we wanted to do something, and why that way.”

Encouraging students to change

This was very new for all involved and no-one else in the school was trying this, so many students found it hard. Some students didn’t want to share their teacher, or did not like more student-centred approaches. They said: “You are not teaching us!” or “I want our own space, not a shared space”. Ginny and Kathryn used student surveys, separate class discussions and senior leader support to help students get used to the changes.

Creating a classroom commons

As a result of this project, one of the existing two-classroom science prefabs was converted into a shared teaching space by knocking down the dividing wall over the Christmas break. Lots of careful planning went in beforehand, but even so the result showed the importance of acoustics (they found they needed more carpet and less lino).

Science teachers have since had the opportunity to work in this shared space, in a concerted effort to learn some of what was required for FLEs. Even when the classes were not combined for team teaching, the two classes still had to learn to be considerate of others, and teachers had to adapt their teaching styles. This year some teachers in this space have negotiated shared expectations, and found it harder than they had expected.

Was it worthwhile? Ginny says, “I had to trust that Kathryn was getting her bit done. In the end you always knew your mate had your back. I felt better prepared for the move”. Kathryn says, “We got to see the best of each other and to know each other in a different way. We were forced to do everything better - I tried more new things and pushed myself more than at any time since I was a beginning teacher.”

Walk-through project

The second project, led by science teacher Linda Dillon, involved teachers taking turns to visit other classes and have other teachers visit their classes. The walk-throughs were designed to develop trust between teachers, and to discuss learning with students.

The visits happened over two days. On the first, seven teachers visited one class in one period, and the second involved up to four visitors for up to three classes during four 90-minute periods. The second day required two relievers for the seven teachers involved, and complex negotiations about non-contacts.



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Each visitor sat with a table of students for 10 to 15 minutes, asking them what they were doing, what they were learning, and how students knew that they had learned something. Teachers sat at different tables and took notes afterwards. In the time remaining in each 90-minute period, all visitors discussed what they learned and what needed to change in the walk-through process itself, facilitated by project leader Linda or Co-Head of Faculty Kathryn. Detailed visitors' notes were fed back to the teacher of the class being observed, and the students received a summary.

Teachers were nervous at the start, but quickly relaxed, and reported being comfortable being observed and going into each others rooms. Visiting teachers found the walk-through exercise very valuable, and good practice for a flexible learning environment.

Kathryn thought the process met the aim of building trust between teachers and recognising each others' strengths. It may also lead teachers to be more explicit about helping students reflect on how they learn.

The second day was exhausting for teachers – four periods in a day was too much, so a smaller number would be better. While the classroom questions and observations were useful, one teacher said “the discussion/debrief afterwards was the most valuable”.

Benefits for teachers

Visitors made teachers feel safer: “I could talk with them about what went on in my lesson”. All visitors found that observing the different ways their colleagues connected science to real life, allowed student choice, and the different types of learning in biology, chemistry and physics, all made them reflect on their own practice.

Teachers thought the process had potential across the school; for example, for all teachers of one class.

The process could be used as a collaborative inquiry for appraisals: “We’ve talked about this for years but now we are actually doing it”.

Teachers could ask visitors to post particular question to students, and teachers found visitors’ feedback valuable.

Kathryn was pleased to have one of her science teachers tell her “I’m less scared about our new building” [as a result of the walk-throughs].

Links

Comparing [different co-teaching strategies](#)

Ministry guidelines on [designing flexible learning spaces](#)

ERO report on [flexible learning environments in 12 schools](#) (100-page PDF)

Ministry Innovative learning environments: [Flexible learning spaces](#)

Enabling e-learning on [flexible learning spaces](#)

Wilson, G. L. (2016). [Co-planning for co-teaching: Time-saving routines that work in inclusive classrooms](#) (ASCD Arias). ASCD.

