

# Innovative Classrooms of 2021

## The Learner Think Tank.

In the year 2012, schools aggressively pushed for a new focus on college and career readiness. In doing so, they looked at the original inspiration for classroom design and organization. Even though it was rooted in the industrial model, it had not evolved as many factories had. As a matter of fact, the manufacturing environments had undergone radical changes. Modern workplaces had also undergone radical changes, abandoning the notion of isolation and non-inclusive work product.

Ironically, school workspaces hadn't changed.

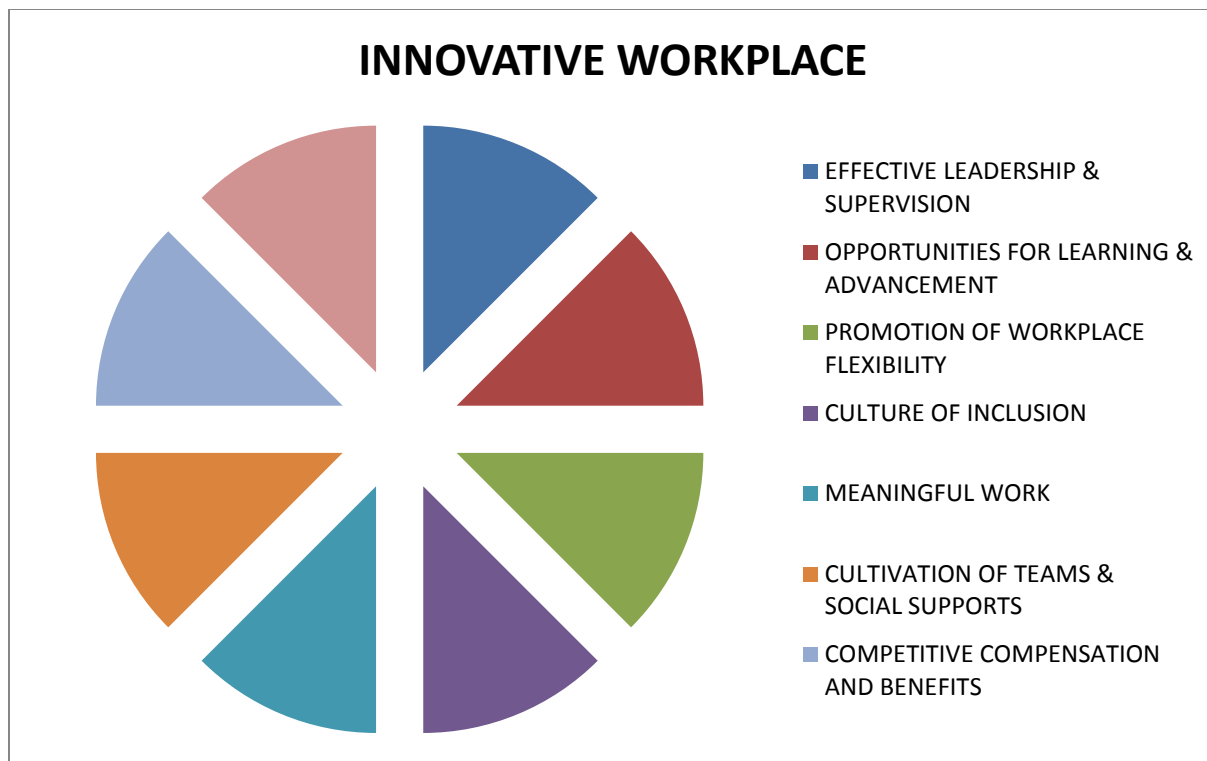
Based on a desire to change, educators, architects and educational facility planners looked at the modern workspace for inspiration. Aligning the learning environment with the work environment helped create spaces where innovation, creativity and collaboration thrived.

In 2021, learning spaces are considered innovative workplaces.<sup>i</sup>

By 2021, learning spaces and workplaces are linked, sharing many of the same characteristics, goals and outcomes. These innovative workplaces, “although the term workplace almost seems a misnomer these days as work can be accomplished in a myriad of new ways and locations”,<sup>ii</sup> are designed with communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation in mind. By embracing a culture of creativity and innovation, these learner think tanks have resulted in higher performance and student success, and in a much closer connection between learners and facilitators, learners and learners, and learners and their community.

Following the Innovative Workplace Model developed in the year 2010 as a basis, the new learner think tanks are built on eight dimensions that work to create dynamic environments that support learners and help them meet their goals. This is much in line with the workplace environment and the way companies help support their employees while meeting their performance objectives.

The Model is as follows:



**Figure 1- Source: University of Kentucky Institute for Workplace Innovation**

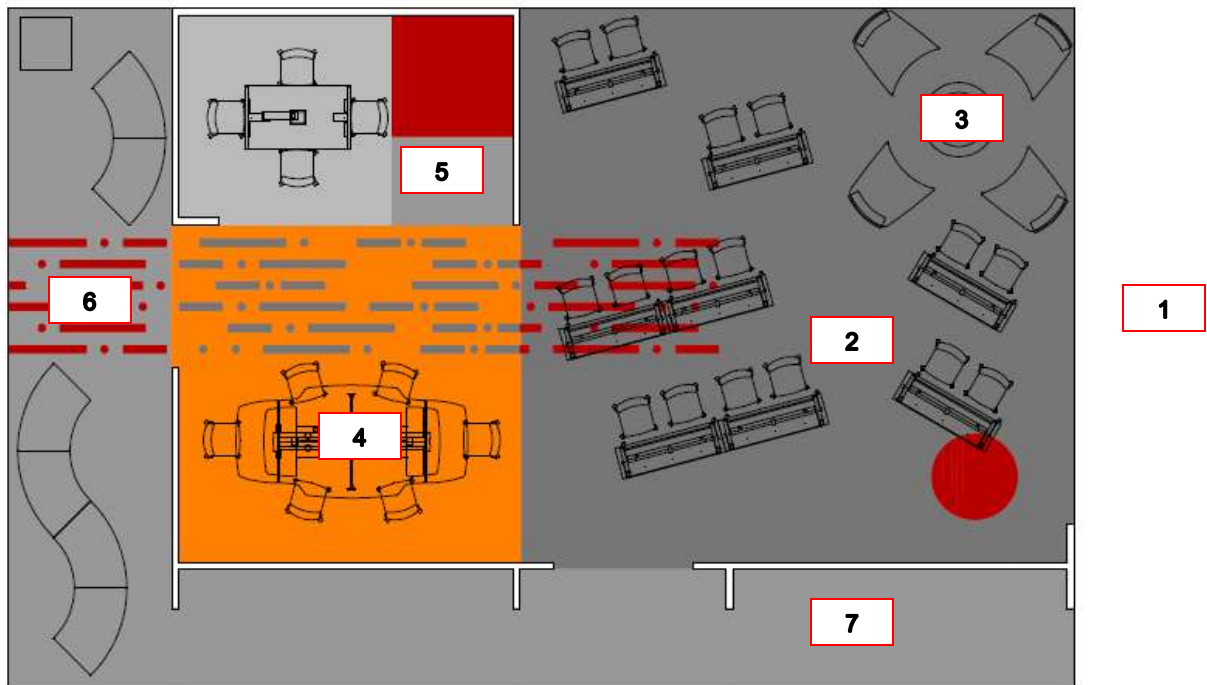
These eight dimensions are interrelated, and as a whole, they provide the foundation for the learner think tank:

DIMENSION	WORKPLACE	LEARNER THINK TANK
EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND SUPERVISION	Management techniques that respect and support a variety of thought and work styles	Facilitator works with each learner's individual learning styles to create the best learning environment for each individual learner
LEARNING & ADVANCEMENT	Management strategies that promote tasks and projects that challenge employees	Activities are designed based on student's strengths and interests, so they are engaged in their own learning.
WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY	Flexible work arrangements allow employees to balance their work and no-work responsibilities, reducing stress and increasing performance	Learners are allowed the flexibility to work on the schedule that best suits them. The think tank provides them flexible and varied settings for tackling diverse activities and tasks.

CULTURE OF INCLUSION	An inclusive work environment that strengthens everyone's ability to commit and to accomplish the desired business result.	Learners feel comfortable in the learning environment as they share their own ideas, which may be based on their own cultural background, and are met with respect and support. Learners commit fully to learning as they respect and are interested in everyone's input and ideas.
MEANINGFUL WORK	Work environment that results in longer employee tenure and less turnover as employees are engaged in meaningful work.	Learners are challenged and have the opportunity to be creative and to be rewarded for their work. Facilitators allow learners the opportunity to identify those projects that they consider meaningful, and they assist in making the real life connections based on their selected tasks.
CULTIVATION OF SOCIAL & SUPPORT TEAMS	Employees stay working for the company as the environment allows them to develop close relationships with their bosses.	Learners and Facilitators have a connection that is based on trust, allowing them to work together collaboratively. Learners also have the same opportunity to develop connections between themselves, creating an environment where creativity and innovation thrives.
COMPETITIVE COMPENSATION & BENEFITS	Work environment that focuses on results over hours, empowering employees to take charge of their work schedule.	Accomplishments are rewarded and celebrated, empowering students to take on more challenges and become fully engaged in the work. Trust received from the facilitators incents them to work more productively and creatively.
HEALTH & WELLNESS	Work environments that promote health beyond just exercise and diet. These environments foster relationships between supervisors and employees in order to reduce stress and other associated health risks.	Understanding the connection between movement and learning, the think tank encourages movement as part of the daily routine. Trusting relationships between facilitators and learners help identify at risk students early so that help and support can be provided.

The Learner Think Tank is organized in seven (7) major areas:

1. Outdoor Learning Area
2. Large Group Area
3. Informal break out
4. Innovation Station
5. Quiet Tank
6. Spill Space
7. Storage and Support Space



These seven spaces support the “Innovative Workplace” environment by providing a variety of settings that can support each of the dimensions and by fostering a culture of communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation. According to Tim Springer, PhD, “creative interactions can take place anywhere – individual offices, hallways, lunch rooms, informal spaces, and meeting rooms. The challenge is to support both independent and interactive work and easy transition between the two modes.”<sup>iii</sup>

To this effect, the Learner Think Tank was designed to support the following activities:

- Informal conversation in the spill over area, where different teams can come out and vet ideas out with other classmates. This area also allows for observation to the activities happening in the room, given the seating configuration and the transparency to the room. The graphics also provide a bright focus for increased conversation and exploration. The transparency, seating configuration and flooring pattern help tie this space to the Innovation station.
- Creation, collaboration and ideation is the main focus of the innovation station. This station provides the setting for new ideas and concepts to be developed, in a setting that allows for individual work and collaboration. The seating area allows spaces for students to work individually, but the transparency of the screens and the meeting post that the furniture provides,; create excellent collaboration and conversations spots. Inspired by the “Breathe Wall” and the graphic ceiling, the space is abuzz with energy, ideas and fun.
- Adjacent to the innovation station is the quiet tank, where ideas are developed and concepts evaluated. The table provides for conversation, with walls that provide privacy and plenty of writing opportunities. The acoustics of the space are enhanced by the ceiling treatment, making for a perfect room to deliberate and develop plans of action.
- The large group area provides flexibility for a variety of activities to take place. From lecture to individual work, the flexibility of the tables and chairs allow for an agile work environment that can change as needed. Learners can reorganize the room and work in groups of 2, 4, 8 or even 24, depending on the task at hand. The technology rich wall allows for a variety of displays to take place, and for interactivity with the students own technology with the IPAD/IPHONE docking stations. The space is open to the outdoor space, allowing the two spaces to become one large learning space. The large group area also has a pivot wall that leads to the support and storage area, which makes the space complete.
- Within the large group area is the informal break out space, with seating that is loose, relaxed and fun. This breakout space allows for conversation and for a fun setting where ideas can be shared. The seating brings color and comfort to the room, and its light weight allows it to be relocated anywhere in the room, and even the outdoors.

Overall, the learner think tank includes different organizational strategies which are similar to those found in innovative workplace environments:

- Multi-purpose space : Using space for different activities, which reduces the need for dedicated specific function spaces
- On-site/flexible/drop-in spaces: Unassigned workspaces that are available on a just time, first come, first serve basis.
- Hoteling: The treatment of workspaces like a hotel, where they can reserve a space for the time they need and release it to be soused by others when they are finished.
- Zones and neighborhoods: Creating activity based spaces that are clustered together.<sup>iv</sup>

Some of the other practical features of the Learner Think Tank are:

- The workspace has an experimental component, with natural light, bright colors and graphics as creative workers like visual stimulation
- The workspace is productive, with a variety of settings to accommodate different learning styles
- It provides diversity with a wider and richer range of work settings that can support creative and collaborative work
- It includes more shared space, space that is not owned and can be used by different people daily
- It is sustainable, bringing nature into the space, and utilizing materials that are environmentally friendly. Also, understanding that change is good, it allows for reconfiguration to occur as needed, with wall systems that are demountable, technology friendly and sustainable in their construction.

The world of learning is changing, and its relationship to the workplace is growing. The need for flexibility, agility, creativity and collaboration is growing as demanded by changes in technology, economics and globalization. The design of the Learner Think Tank, based on the eight dimensions of the innovative workplace, allows change to occur naturally and positively. The opportunities for our students to learn and perform at their full potential is maximized, while maintaining an environment centered on trust, respect and fun.

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<sup>i</sup> Swanberg, J., (2010), the innovative workplace: a white paper on developing an innovative workplace. *The Working Think Tank powered by University of Kentucky.*

<sup>ii</sup> Swanberg, J., (2010), the innovative workplace: a white paper on developing an innovative workplace. *The Working Think Tank powered by University of Kentucky.*

<sup>iii</sup> Springer, T, (2011), Fundamentals of Workplace Strategy, *Kimball Office*

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