

Teachers said that autonomy greatly increases their willingness to take on a learner role. Some had been involved with improvement efforts where teachers had input, but no real authority. Without authority, they said, it wasn't worth the time investment required to learn new things and innovate. It was almost impossible to sustain their changes, they said.

James McGovern at Mission Hill K–8 School (Mission Hill) said, “We’re all learners here. That’s because of [the autonomy]. At my previous school there was no culture of learning among the staff. It wasn’t the people. It was the structures preventing any real change. We had a progressive principal, but we couldn’t move ahead. People didn’t want to create something that would just be pulled back.”

AUTONOMOUS TEACHERS INNOVATE WITH THE DESIGN OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS TO PUT STUDENTS IN THE POSITION TO BE ACTIVE, NOT PASSIVE, LEARNERS

Almost 97 percent of autonomous teachers rated their collective belief that the basic function of a teacher is to motivate students to be learners as excellent (61.4 percent), very good (29.5 percent), or good (5.7 percent). With engagement and motivation central, teachers said they realize quickly that they need to put students in a position to take responsibility for their own learning. So they design innovative learning environments in an effort to find the best means of encouraging students to be active learners, not passive learners whose job it is to receive and memorize information from teachers.

They also design the environments with an eye toward accommodating students’ varying levels of readiness, aptitudes, interests, and rates of learning. Learning how to encourage individual students to be active learners, autonomous teachers expand what constitutes the physical learning environment, expand their own roles, and expand students’ means of learning.

Expanding What Constitutes the Physical Learning Environment

When most people think of a school they think of a building. They think of bells telling students when to move. They remember their own classrooms with desks in tidy rows and a teacher at the front instructing a group of students who were all learning the same curriculum at the same time. They think of teachers using a white board to instruct students and teachers having a “lounge” that is their space alone. Autonomous teachers suggest that all of these set-ups assume students are passive learners. When the goal is to help students become active learners, these designs no longer make sense.

Some autonomous teachers had arranged classrooms in conventional ways, but in most schools teachers and students worked together to design spaces that were more conducive to self-directed and experiential learning programs. In these spaces there isn't a "front of the room." Instead, the schools are large warehouse-style open spaces (one a former church, one a former coffee factory, one a former storage facility) that look like a typical work office. Walls are often brightly colored and covered with student work including graffiti or other art specific to the cultures of the students attending the school.

Carrie Bakken at Avalon School said,

The space is designed to reinforce our values. We intentionally avoided leasing an old school with traditional classrooms because an open warehouse design is vital to our educational environment. Students are learning to work collaboratively with adults and other students while managing their own individual projects. Teachers work alongside students as advisers who support learning but do not direct it. We needed a space that allows for both communal interaction and individual work.

Middle and high school students often have their own work stations situated amid students of mixed ages, complete with an office-style desk, computer, Internet access, and personal décor.

At the Mission Hill K–8 School (Mission Hill) there aren't any desks. Students regularly chose among multiple activities throughout their classrooms and school to learn their subject material. To learn physical science, for example, they could go to the art room, work with manipulative materials, build boats in one corner, or cook in another. It was perfectly acceptable for students to complete their writing and reading activities at a table or while lying on the ground.

Melissa Tonachel, a teacher at Mission Hill, said, "We give students freedom-of-movement choices. They decide where to work and what to work on. They are able to figure out where they work best." Bakken at Avalon said, "Designing our space, we had to step back and realize that not all of them are going to be earning their living while listening to lectures and working at desks."

Most schools didn't have any bells telling students when to move, opting instead for students and teachers to monitor the time themselves. Most students also had the ability to move freely throughout the day. Most teen students didn't need permission to use the restroom or get a snack, for example. They simply went by themselves.

In most schools there were few, if any, spaces that were off limits to students (except areas that housed student records). Teachers and students share bathroom, kitchen, and dining areas. In ten of the eleven schools, students called teachers by their first names. Jonathan Woloshin at TAGOS

Leadership Academy said, “We always try to signal that teachers *and* students have voice and choice in school. All of us have real ownership as one community of learners.”

As will be covered in more detail in chapter 7, autonomous teachers expand the learning environments beyond physical school buildings as well. Teachers view broad physical boundaries for learning as an integral part of the learning programs they design, and say these should not be confused with occasional field tripping. At EOC, for example, students learn online, from home, without a central “building” at all. Chrysalis Charter School (Chrysalis) students learn by doing field studies using the natural environment.

Expanding Teachers’ Roles

Patrick Yecha at Phoenix High School (Phoenix) said, “Everything is different about how students learn here. The bottom line being: I don’t teach them everything.” Many autonomous teachers do not see themselves as “instructors,” but as “guides” and “coaches” in helping students to get better at taking an active role in their learning. At the high school level, for example, teachers said their role is to foster an environment in which students are challenging themselves, developing a better understanding of how their own abilities and interests lend themselves to careers, and meeting graduation requirements.

When they are guides and coaches, autonomous teachers learn four new ways of operating. First, knowing they cannot possibly be content experts in all the areas students will learn, many see themselves as lifelong learners who must act more as generalists than specialists. Dee Thomas at Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) said, “Our students see adults modeling lifelong learning. Every adult here is teaching outside their subject area expertise.”

Chris French at Independence School Local 1 (Independence) said, “We’re all lifelong learners. We all teach outside our subject area. Anyone who teaches here has to be willing to teach outside their comfort zone.” Teachers said that subject area expertise does come in handy, but in unconventional ways. Experts train their colleagues about how to advise students well in their subject area. Also, students who are exploring their subject area frequently seek them out for coaching even if their main advisor is another teacher.

Second, many autonomous teachers said they designed their schools so each teacher is intentionally advising students from more than one—sometimes multiple—grade levels. Instructing students at every age level is difficult, and that is the point. To encourage active student learners they want to avoid instructing. Serving students from multiple grade levels *requires* them to coach more and instruct less.