Innovations That Are Changing the Classroom

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Excited to try creative new teaching strategies? We’ve got you covered! Read up on the latest education innovations from experts and teachers on the front lines.

1. PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Have you ever had a student ask, “Why do we need to know this?” Then you might want to add more project-based learning to your teaching tool kit. Teachers who implement this approach see a boost in student interest and involvement. And the more real-world connectedness, the better. When you think about it, most of what we do in our adult life boils down to following through on projects, whether it’s preparing a family meal, running a fund-raiser in your town, or dealing with a problem at work. Project-based learning harnesses the natural human desire to problem-solve and make a difference.

In Carla Swenson’s K–5 STEM classes at Irle Elementary in Glasgow, Montana, the students learn via all kinds of projects. At the moment, her kindergartners are studying the bones in the arm and hand. Their project: to design a waterproof cast. Swenson provides the basic lesson structure, then lets the kids use what they’ve learned to get the job done. “It’s amazing to watch them learn and work together,” she says. When kids create their own projects, they become their own innovators and look at learning in a new light.
2. THE GENIUS HOUR

Tech giant Google pioneered the idea of letting employees devote part of their workweek to pursuing their own interests. Before long, word got out and the “Genius Hour” began taking off in elementary-school classrooms across the country. The Genius Hour puts kids in the driver’s seat: They pick their own projects—often with a tech focus—then get to explore and improvise in a low-pressure environment. At East Side Elementary in Marietta, Georgia, Jessica Morelli’s fifth-grade students look forward to their weekly Genius Hour. “There’s no formula,” Morelli says, and basically anything goes—one girl brought in her chemistry set and conducted different experiments each week. “I just want them to find the joy and the creative piece of learning.”

3. INCLUSION

If you’re not already teaching in an inclusive classroom—where students with physical, cognitive, learning, or social-emotional disabilities learn in regular classrooms alongside their typically developing peers—it may be in your future. Teachers in a growing number of school districts are leading inclusive classes. In fact, more than 60 percent of developmentally challenged students spend at least 80 percent of their day in regular classrooms, according to a 2016 report by the National Center for Education Statistics.

“I think teachers see the overall value of inclusion,” says Nicole Eredics, an educational consultant who runs the blog The Inclusive Class. Some educators worry that typically developing students will get shortchanged if disabled peers require too much of their attention, or they wonder how to effectively teach kids with disabilities. But the key to successful inclusion, Eredics believes, is asking your school to have proper support staff (speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists) and paraprofessionals in place—and getting any additional training and professional development you might need.

4. WHOLE-CHILD APPROACH

If you’re constantly thinking about what makes each student in your class tick, you’re already practicing the whole-child approach. The aim of whole-child education is to nurture children in every way—academically, physically, socially, and emotionally. “This approach encourages teachers to meet and understand the unique circumstances that every child brings with him or her into the classroom,” says Julie Owens-Birch, associate professor of education at Concordia University-Portland’s College of Education. Your goal is to ensure that you’re meeting all your kids’ needs, including the development of social-emotional skills such as empathy and basic health needs like nutritious meals and plenty of exercise.

62% of students with disabilities spend 80 percent or more of their day in regular classrooms.
At East Side Elementary, first-grade teacher Lyssa Sahadevan starts the day with a morning meeting, where kids greet each other and make eye contact. They might discuss how to be more inclusive on the playground or what to do when someone’s feelings get hurt. The meeting lasts only 20 minutes, but it’s always powerful, says Sahadevan.

### 5. FLEXIBLE SEATING

Arranging desks in tidy rows is one way to set up a classroom, but why not give your space a makeover? Offering kids comfy, flexible seating options means they have some control over where they sit and how they learn. Some teachers decide to overhaul the entire room, while others simply furnish a corner with soft, inviting sofas or chairs. The students in Carla Swenson’s STEM classroom can choose from tables, desks, wiggle stools, yoga balls, and even standing desks—all in the name of increasing comfort, focus, and engagement. “Generally, we’re using tables because it’s collaborative learning,” she says. “But students have the ability to get up and move if they need to.”

We asked principal Jennifer McCalley of Portland’s Faubion School, an innovative PreK–8 school that operates in partnership with Concordia University-Portland’s College of Education (and is housed in the same building as the college), about the benefits of the whole-child approach.

**Why is a whole-child focus working for your school?**

At Faubion, we’re really looking at the whole student, the whole family, and then the whole community—and what we can do to provide support all the way around. We are a predominantly underserved community in an area where schools historically get shut down or moved. So the idea is for us to be “a home away from home.”

**What are some of the benefits for kids?**

We work really hard on knowing every student by name. No one gets to fly under the radar. Everything we do is relationship based, and that’s changing the way we’re doing education. We’re spending more time at the beginning of the school year getting to know students’ stories and perspectives, and giving them a voice. This approach is slowly turning the ship, making education more exciting.

**How do you help students who might have challenges at home?**

We utilize trauma-responsive practices. So instead of looking at negative student behavior as “doing something wrong,” we’re much more interested in understanding the factors—outside of school and even inside of school—that are creating those behaviors. We’re taking away the notion that it’s a student “problem,” and that has really helped.
6. STEAM

We don’t have to tell you that STEM education is in high demand. The continued push for science, technology, engineering, and math in schools is driven by the understanding that when students are in the job market, they’re going to need a whole new set of skills. But in the last few years, STEM has changed to STEAM. Why? Educators believe that the arts—writing, visual arts, performance, and/or music—and sciences aren’t mutually exclusive. Instead, they complement one another and support kids’ problem-solving skills. And it’s crucial for teachers to be willing to take risks alongside their students, says Jennifer McCalley, principal at Faubion School in Portland, Oregon, where educators integrate STEAM lessons throughout the day. In a recent kindergarten unit on *The Three Little Pigs*, Faubion teachers invited architects into the class to show the children how to draw blueprints to scale; the kids then designed a house, built it from craft materials, and analyzed how it withstood the “huffing and puffing” created by a portable fan.

7. PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Obviously, not all of your students are the same developmentally, so chances are you make minor adjustments to your teaching approach every day without even thinking about it. But personalized learning takes that concept and runs with it. The latest educational technology allows you to customize lessons and even assessments for the diverse students in your classroom. The goal is to keep standards and expectations high, but adjust them from student to student, depending on each child’s abilities and skills. It takes some extra time and planning, and a mind-set shift too (think of yourself as a “learning facilitator”), but getting personal in the classroom can pay off.

Teachers at the Brookings School District in South Dakota who’ve pushed innovations in individualized reading assessments are enthusiastic about the results. “Historically, you hear ‘Read well by third grade,’ but we’re starting to see grade definitions fracture,” says superintendent Klint Willert. Personalized learning allows learners to progress at their own pace, outside the traditional school-grade structure.

“Taking risks and becoming your own classroom innovator is a win-win. It keeps you—and your students—engaged, energized, and excited about school every day. Let these ideas and approaches be just a start to spark your inspiration. For more ideas, visit Concordia’s blog at [Room241.com](http://Room241.com).