

Movable Tables for Two and Personal Marker Boards

Fall 2019 Summary of Findings

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BACKGROUND

As part of the [Master Plan for Modernizing Carolina Classrooms](#) approved in Fall 2018, the University continues to explore classroom modifications that help improve student learning. Enhancements include movable furniture, additional whiteboards, and in some cases sound-proofing and multiple digital displays. These changes make it easier for students to interact with their instructors and with each other, and provide instructors with the flexibility to use a greater variety of teaching methods.

During the summer of 2019, general purpose classrooms **301 Woollen Gym** and **224 Phillips Hall** were outfitted with two-person tables and chairs. Both tables and chairs are equipped with casters, making them easy to move. Each of the chairs has a storage bay beneath the seat for storing student book bags and other personal belongings. In 301 Woollen Gym, an additional digital monitor was installed at the back of the classroom to make it easier for students to see displayed content while they are working in groups. The tables in the two classrooms include small personal marker boards for each student (Figure 1).

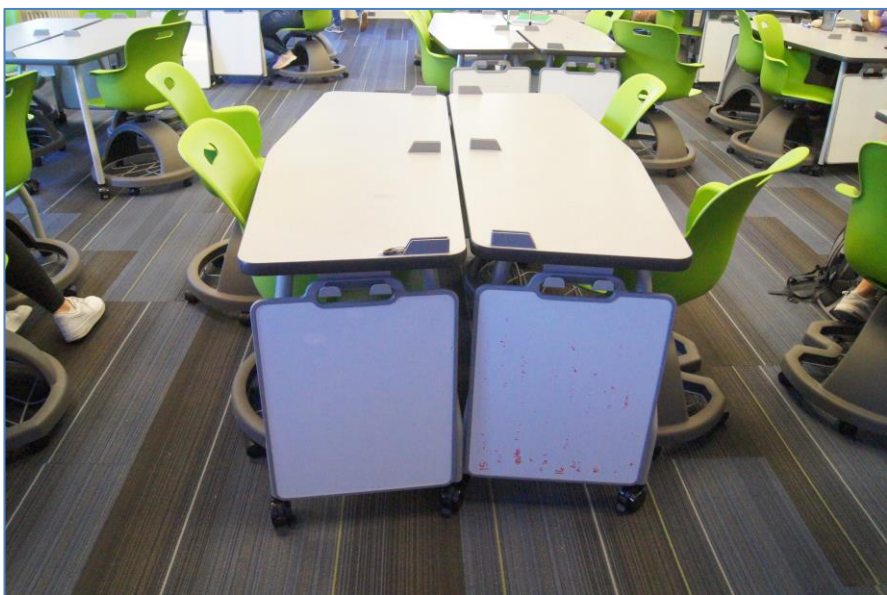


Figure 1 - Furniture in 301 Woollen Gym

The marker boards can be hung on either end of the table and can also be mounted perpendicularly on the tables.

The Center for Faculty Excellence conducted an evaluation of the efficacy of changes made to the two classrooms during the fall 2019 semester. All instructors teaching in 301 Woollen Gym or 224 Phillips Hall were invited to complete an end-of-semester survey about their experience teaching in the classrooms. Two of the instructors also partnered with the CFE on a survey that was administered to students enrolled in the courses they were teaching.

FINDINGS – STUDENT ATTITUDES

Students enrolled in two separate courses taught in 301 Woollen Gym during the fall 2019 semester were invited to complete an online survey at the end of the semester. One was an introductory humanities course that enrolled first-year students and sophomores. 90% of the 29 students in this course completed the survey. The other, an upper-level natural sciences course, enrolled 30 juniors and seniors. The response rate was only 22% for this group. A total of 33 students across the two courses completed the survey.

Student feedback on some of the primary design goals for the classroom were positive. Design goals for these and other flexible learning spaces at UNC are based on educational research that shows that students learn and retain more when they interact constructively with their peers and their instructors. Consistent with those goals,

- 94% of students surveyed agreed that *the furniture allowed them to easily work with others during small group activities.*
- 94% agreed that *they were able to get individual help from their instructor when they needed it.*
- 91% agreed that it was *easy to see students at other tables during class discussion.*
- 100% agreed that *the tables were big enough to provide adequate personal work space.*

The instructor teaching the humanities course made regular use of the personal marker boards available at each table. Students enrolled in that course provided the following feedback:

- 100% agreed that *the personal marker boards made it easier for them to share their work with other students.*
- 92% agreed that *the personal marker boards make it easier for them to learn from the work of other students.*
- Nearly 1 in 4 students felt that *the personal marker boards are too heavy.*
- 85% agreed that *they would like to see the personal marker boards available in more classrooms.*



Overall, 94% of students agreed that *the furniture in the classroom contributed to their overall learning in the course.* 40% felt it contributed *a great deal or a lot.*

Representative student comments shared via the survey include:

“I like how easily movable the desks are in order to form smaller or larger groups.”

“I like that the chairs can swivel so that I can see any part of the room where my teacher is teaching at that moment.”

“I like the two projectors at both ends of the class so that I never miss any information.”

FINDINGS – FACULTY EXPERIENCE

Ten instructors representing six different departments completed the instructor survey that was administered near the end of the Fall 2019 semester. Instructor feedback on the primary design goals for the classroom were positive. For example,

- 90% of instructors agreed that *moving between different instructional modes (lecture, small group work, full class discussion) was easy.*
- 90% of instructors agreed that *during class activities they were able to easily observe and communicate with their students.*

- 90% of instructors agreed that *they were able to easily access their students, regardless of where they were sitting.*

Not surprisingly, overall faculty attitudes about the classrooms were closely tied to the specific instructional methods they used to teach their courses. For example, of the three possible furniture configurations depicted in Figure 2, 60% of the surveyed instructors reported that they were most likely to arrange furniture in *tables of four*, or some combination of the three.

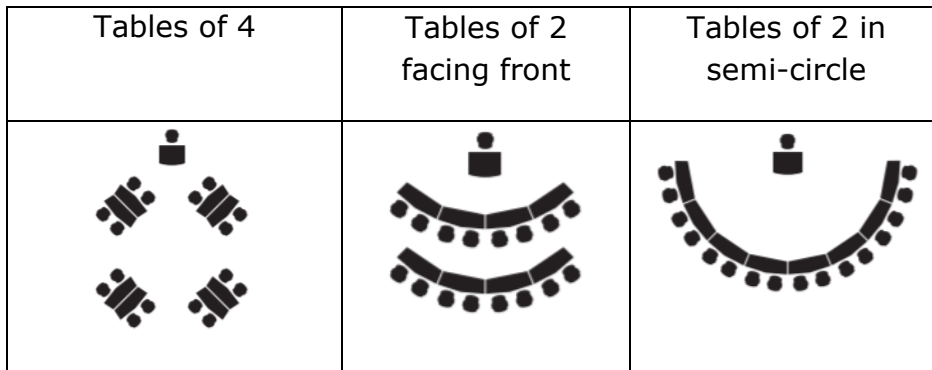


Figure 2 – Common furniture configurations

Instructors who arranged furniture in *tables of 4* were much more likely to agree with the following statements:

- *I was much more likely to use small group activities in the classroom.*
- *If I was to teach in this classroom again, I would likely incorporate new activities.*
- *The furniture has contributed to the overall learning experience in the classroom.*

The following comments were typical of this group of instructors:

“I liked virtually everything about this classroom. By far my favorite instructional space that I have used in my short Carolina career.”

“I love this classroom. It was awesome from day one to create a sense of community and students loved the (white)boards.”

The ease and time required to re-arrange tables also significantly impacted instructors’ overall feelings about the classroom. Instructors who re-arranged tables were evenly split on their agreement with the following statements:

- *The tables were easy to move.*
- *The time it took to move the tables was reasonable.*

Instructors who strongly disagreed with these statements were much more likely to report being dissatisfied with their overall experience teaching in the classroom. The following comment was representative of this view:

“(Re-arranging the tables) required valuable class time to rearrange to something resembling the desired configuration. In some cases, this was not possible, and it detracted from the lectures.”

Findings related to use of shared writing surfaces in the classroom:

- 30% of the instructors surveyed asked students to use the personal marker boards during a class activity.
- 20% of the instructors asked students to write on a wall-mounted whiteboard or blackboard during a class activity.

DISCUSSION

One of the goals of the [Flexible Learning Spaces Initiative](#) is to strike a proper balance between 1) providing flexible designs that can serve a wide range of disciplinary needs and 2) accommodating specific disciplinary preferences. For example, courses in some disciplines put a premium on additional table space for students. While the tables used in these two classrooms appear to provide ample working space for students, the survey findings also suggest that they are not as easy to re-configure as other flexible furniture (e.g. tablet arm chairs on casters). In fact, one instructor scheduled to teach in 301 Woollen Gym during the fall 2019 semester moved to a classroom with mobile tablet arm seats because she was concerned about the additional time required to reconfigure the tables.

Now that UNC instructors have more choices with respect to general purpose classrooms, we must continue exploring strategies for effectively matching instructor preferences with learning spaces that best serve their instructional goals. Faculty members and scheduling officers may also need to assume more responsibility for ensuring that assigned classrooms are consistent with their instructional needs *before* each term begins. Interested parties can learn more about the University's general purpose classrooms at the [ITS Classroom Hotline website](#).

At the same time, it may be beneficial for many instructors to get some exposure teaching in classrooms that accommodate a wider range of instructional methods. Our experience to date suggests that some will decide that they prefer traditional classrooms, while others will discover an appreciation for the opportunities afforded by the flexible classrooms.

CONTACT

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