

# Learning in Space

Casey O'Meara

**Abstract:** Since the COVID-19 shutdown in March of 2020, I have a newfound appreciation for space and its influence on “work” and productivity. Inherent in designing spaces for learning is an understanding of each space's purpose and who is using the space. Learning in space took on even greater importance during the 2020–2021 school year. As educators considering student engagement, we soon realized that the best way to stay safe and increase student engagement was to learn outside.

**Keywords:** outdoor learning, space, COVID-19, environmental psychology

I think a great deal about space these days. Not outer space, but about how to design for learning in space. In March of 2020, during the COVID-19 shutdown, my bedroom became the space where I attended virtual meetings and participated in professional development. My daughter was in her learning space at the kitchen counter, and my wife was facilitating meetings from her space in our living room.

As the Pandemic continues in 2021, at the time of writing, I am spending more time than ever before in my house. The extended time at home has me assessing paint colors, organization of furniture, natural light, the thickness of walls, and where I can find space for “alone time.” Thanks to the Pandemic I think about the items in my house in ways I never have before. For example, is the placement of furniture for entertainment, relaxation, or for functionality?

Since the COVID-19 shutdown in March of 2020, I have a newfound appreciation for space and its influence on “work” and productivity. I think about space in kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, public libraries, coffee shops, community centers, and in automobiles as potential learning spaces. I've come to know “environmental psychology” as the interaction between people and space. “Space sense,” my term for environmental psychology, is a new constant as I now consider learning spaces in my home.

Architects and interior designers have long known that space evokes feelings. While at work in my “home office” the design and layout of my learning space has always had the necessary materials, but now I consider items needed to optimize mood, emotion, motivation, and engagement. I see lighting, color, the staging of furniture, and sound influencing my learning in space.

## Designing with Purpose

Space can inspire. As well, space can do quite the opposite. Isen et al. (1985) found when people exist in a welcoming space, they experience a higher degree of positivity and creativity. Isen (2001) also discovered that spaces can be designed to improve people's moods, causing them to act in “more socially responsible ways.”

Inherent in designing spaces for learning is an understanding of each space's purpose and who is using the space. What could it mean to reflect on learners before designing learning spaces? Working from home during COVID-19 taught me that learning spaces must be flexible in order to respond to a variety of work and the requirements of “home living.” What does a learning space feel like that supports movement, independence, collaboration, and optimizes visual and auditory displays?

Learning in space took on even greater importance during the 2020–2021 school year. The return of students to the classroom in the fall 2020 for in-person learning raised many safety concerns. What will socially distanced lunches look like, how will morning meetings take shape, and how will students behave wearing masks? As educators considering student engagement, we soon realized that the best way to stay safe and increase student engagement was to learn outside.

The COVID-19 Pandemic provided Slate Valley Unified Union School District with an opportunity to create outdoor classrooms. Castleton Elementary School, set on more than 40 acres of open and forested land, provided space for a year of learning outdoors.

Students applied formulas and used tools to determine the height and circumferences of trees, discussed the importance of natural resources to Vermont’s economy, navigated hiking trails and applied new learning through use of a compass.



Sightings of deer, foxes, and birds reminded learners that their outdoor classroom was really the habitat of woodland creatures, habitats we had to respect and help maintain as stewards of this land.

In December of 2020, students designed outdoor classrooms. Students used lumber tarps, duct tape, carabiner clips, rope, and eye hooks to build outdoor learning spaces suitable for a Vermont winter. Without formal training as architects, engineers, or interior designers, but with outdoor learning experience since September, students designed and built spaces for outdoor learning. Knowing each other as learners, and understanding the purpose for *their* outdoor learning, classes constructed productive work spaces.



One Friday afternoon while waiting for the buses to deliver students safely home for the weekend, one student shared that he wished school didn't have to end because it is so much fun. While there are still questions and moments of doubt about how well we design and support student engagement in learning spaces at Castleton, this unexpected proclamation let us know outdoor learning appealed to this one learner.

## Conclusion

With the benefit of reflecting on “working from home,” thanks to COVID-19, I find myself wondering how space for learning can be flexible. I now think about how sound and light impact productivity in a learning space. And how pedagogy might influence the design of spaces. I now find I’m asking myself this: How do we design inspirational, safe, and comfortable learning spaces *with* students?

Not all families can modify work spaces to support learning at home. However, an awareness of learning in space, in and outside of school, is an important factor in one’s social/emotional well-being, level of engagement, and productivity.

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**About the Author:** Coughlan (Casey) O’Meara, MEd, is Director of Curriculum, Slate Valley Unified Union School District, Fair Haven, VT.