

## 7 Essential Principles of Innovative Learning

Every educator wants to create an environment that will foster students' love of learning. Because the criteria are intangible, it's difficult to define or pinpoint exactly what they are. But one group is giving it a try.

Researchers at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) launched the [Innovative Learning Environments](#) project to turn an academic lens on the project of identifying concrete traits that mark innovative learning environments. They sifted through and categorized the research on learning science, documented case studies, and compiled policy recommendations they hope will transform the current system.

Their book, [The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice](#) and the accompanying [practitioner's guide](#), lay out the key principles for designing learning environments that will help students build skills useful in a world where jobs are increasingly information and knowledge-based. The principles are not job-specific – no one knows what the future economy will demand. Instead, the main goal is to develop self-directed learners, students with “adaptive expertise.”

“Adaptive expertise tries to push beyond the idea of mastery,” said Jennifer Groff, an educational engineer and co-founder of the [Center for Curriculum Redesign](#). “You may be proficient, but without adaptive expertise you can get stuck very quickly as the world shifts.”

Groff doesn't dispute that mastery is important and that students need to learn age-appropriate content, but she also argues it's equally important to develop students' ability to go beyond that, to question and apply learning in new situations.

To that end, these are their identified principles for innovative learning.

- 1. Learners have to be at the center of what happens in the classroom** with activities focused on their cognition and growth. They have to actively engage in

learning in order to become self-regulated learners who are able to control their emotions and motivations during the study process, set goals, and monitor their own learning process.

- 2. 2. Learning is a social practice and can't happen alone.** “By our nature we are social beings and we learn by interacting,” Groff said. “We learn by pushing and pulling on concepts with one another.” Structured, collaborative group work can be good for all learners; it pushes people in different ways.
- 3. 3. Emotions are an integral part of learning.** Students understand ideas better when there's interplay between emotions, motivation and cognition, so positive beliefs about oneself are a core part of reaching a more profound understanding. The [power of emotions](#) and motivation in the classroom are well documented, but often overlooked because they are “soft.” Still most teachers know that if a student is upset about something that happened at home or in school, he won't learn well. Similarly, keeping students motivated should be the starting point of learning. If students understand why it matters, learning becomes more important to them.
- 4. 4. Learners are different** and innovative learning environments reflect the various experiences and prior knowledge that each student brings to class. “You really want practices and processes that help teachers engage each student where they are,” said Groff. This principle is understood by every frustrated educator teaching to a “middle” that doesn't exist.
- 5. 5. Students need to be stretched, but not too much.** “It's really critical to find that student's sweet spot,” Groff Said. Educators should try to prevent both coasting and overloading. Students need to experience both academic success and the challenge of discovery. In a diverse classroom group work can help achieve this as students at different levels help one another.
- 6. 6. Assessment should be for learning, not of learning.** Assessments are important, but only to gauge how to structure the next lesson for maximum

effectiveness. It should be meaningful, substantial, and shape the learning environment itself. “Good teachers do this informally most of the time,” Groff said. “But when it’s done well and more formally it’s a whole structure and methodology where you collect feedback on the learning pathway and it drives the next step that you take.”

- 7. *7. Learning needs to be connected across disciplines*** and reach out into the real world. Learning can’t be meaningful if students don’t understand why the knowledge will be useful to them, how it can be applied in life. Understanding the connections between subjects and ideas is essential for the ability to transfer skills and adapt. “We can’t just have things remain in silos that never interact,” Groff said.

## **IMPLEMENTING THE PRINCIPLES**

Many of the seven principles Groff outlines are second nature to good teachers, but they can feel hard to achieve within education systems that are slow-moving, bureaucratic and resistant to change. Still Groff says there are ways for teachers who want to create an innovative learning environment to begin down the path, even without the full support of their colleagues and administration. Groff also hopes shifting to the Common Core could offer openings for building in these practices. “It’s designed in a way that condones a lot of the principles that we’ve been talking about,” she said.

Everyone knows the common barriers educators face: the school culture, the students and themselves. Groff says with some reflection and problem solving, teachers can often begin to work around these barriers. An educator might think she’s open to innovation without realizing that there are preconceived notions about how one should teach that are deeply ingrained.

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What’s more, if the school culture does not encourage experimentation, educators can mitigate negative reaction by framing the ideas in a way that will be accepted, or by

bringing in outside resources to try and convince naysayers. Even finding one colleague in or outside of the school to bounce ideas with can make the process much smoother.

Educators can also test ideas with students before implementing them. Students have been indoctrinated into the same educational mindset about what makes a “useful” education as everyone else, and some might be resistant to new teaching methodologies. Without their enthusiasm it can be hard to persevere through other obstacles.

## **CASE STUDY**

The darling of the Innovative Learning Environment case studies is the [Jenaplan School](#) in Germany. It's one of the few schools embodying all the principles fluidly. The school has about 450 students that range three to 20 years old. Students aren't broken up into grade levels, instead they learn in mixed-age groups as well as in groups of roughly the same age. Learning is directed by students, often project-based, evaluated primarily through writing and projects, self-assessments and peer-assessment. The schedule is periodic, focusing on a topic like geography or history for three to four weeks and crossing into multiple disciplines. The teacher is seen as an active mentor and coordinator and the school has active parental involvement.

The Jenaplan School has won awards for its model and in the eyes of the Innovative Learning Environment researchers is doing an excellent job at preparing students to be adaptive and nimble thinkers in a knowledge-based world.

Source:

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