

Best Practices in Computer Classroom Layout

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Figure 1: Computer Classroom Layouts at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and Austin Peay State University

ABSTRACT

This panel of animation industry veterans-turned-animators discusses their efforts to craft a physical classroom to better mirror the professional environment and encourage the best creative output from their students. They aim to identify common challenges and obstacles while sharing solutions, learning lessons, and generating ideas for future improvements or implementations.

KEYWORDS

animation, art, design, education

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1 INTRODUCTION

Creating animation, from big-budget, feature-length films to humble student shorts, involves interlocking elements of research, storytelling, drawing, acting, and design. The process requires specific

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technical skill and broad conceptual understanding. It can be alternately spontaneous and tedious. It employs digital tools while continuing to incorporate elements of the hand-made. It is rooted in tradition yet leans heavily on the latest technological innovations. It is at times an individual pursuit and at other times a collaborative effort. In short, the animation process is a rich mix of contradictory and complementary methods and modes.

A successful animation production environment reflects this complex and multi-faceted process. A tour of animation studios both large and small yields a picture of organizations designing their physical spaces to foster the complex blend of planning and serendipity that results in creative magic. There is a recognition in the industry that something as mundane as the layout of an office, or the choice of furniture in a lounge, can have a cumulative impact on the quality of the creative work being done under their roof.

How best to replicate the intricacies of a creative production workspace in an educational environment? A classroom by its nature will not necessarily mimic a professional studio. It is, after all, a kind of purposeful bubble, a non-commercial space where students feel free to explore, fail, learn independently, and pursue a personal vision. The purpose of a classroom is the creation of knowledge, not necessarily a product. However, the knowledge created in that space should be directed towards both the preparation for and the transformation of the profession. Neither of those things can happen unless the space is optimized for creative learning.

However, many animation students and faculty find themselves assigned to classrooms or computer labs in which the goal of fostering creativity has taken a backseat to considerations of "How can we most efficiently fit 15 computers in here?"

In some institutions, animation programs have to share space with non-aligned subjects simply because they use the same hardware, i.e. a desktop computer. It's as if the universal utility of the computer dictates that each academic space should be interchangeable. This certainly benefits administrators looking for ways to optimize the usage of school resources. But is this the best way to prepare students for the spaces in which creative professionals truly operate? Is it appropriate that the space where students study animation is identical to the space where they might take a course in database management or statistical analysis? What is the message for students entering an animation class when they walk into a room where the desks are arranged in rigid rows, all facing a teacher at the front?

Animation programs face other challenges as well. These include the priority given to IT departments for the convenience of their servicing computers and cables over the need for flexibility in classroom layout and hardware. Additionally, animation programs must often "make do" with inherited classroom space, some of it small or oddly-shaped, and certainly not optimized for the multi-modal nature of the animation classroom.

When presented with the problem of how to arrange his classroom to support a more creative learning experience for animation and other computer-based design courses, animation artist and Assistant Professor Geoffrey Beatty found few clear guidelines or in-depth research on the topic. After reaching out to the ASIFA Animation Educators Forum, Beatty connected with numerous other educators facing the same issues, which led to the formation of this panel.

In this panel discussion, a distinguished group of animation industry veterans-turned-educators share what they've learned about how best to organize their learning spaces to better mirror a professional environment and encourage the best creative output from their students. The panelists share a wealth of experience in the animation industry, including tours at DreamWorks Animation, Lucasfilm, Blizzard Entertainment, and Riot Games. Now working in both public and private universities across the country, each of them has faced unique challenges in developing their learning environment, from limited institutional buy-in to legacy spaces to the need to adapt to changing technologies.

They aim to identify common challenges and obstacles among varying animation programs, while sharing solutions, learning lessons, and ideas for future improvements or implementations. Their insights will prove valuable for any animation and computer graphics educator with the opportunity to plan new space or simply looking to re-energize their existing classroom.

2 SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND TOPICS

The panel will include discussions about questions such as:

- Who uses your space?
- What activities take place in your classroom?
- Describe the technology available in the room (computers, projectors, monitors, etc)?
- What aspects are working of the physical space in which you teach?
- What would you change about your space, if you could?

- How moveable or flexible is your space? Can students change the space themselves?
- What research and planning went into intentional moves to new spaces?
- What creative approaches were taken to modifying existing spaces?
- How is this space situated within the larger campus?

3 MODERATOR

Geoffrey Beatty is Assistant Professor of Digital Arts at La Salle University in Philadelphia. After receiving his undergraduate degree in animation, Geoffrey worked for the MIT Media Lab, creating animation for research into artificial intelligence and robotics. Since then, as owner and creative director of Germantown Studios, he has worked on a wide variety of projects including augmented reality exhibits, character-based narratives, and medical visualizations for clients as diverse as Google, Target, Hermès, Hasbro, Novartis, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

4 PANELISTS

Brittany Biggs is an animation filmmaker and Assistant Professor of Animation with the Academy for Creative Media at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa. Her feature film credits include DreamWorks' 'Trolls,' 'Kung Fu Panda 3,' 'Kung Fu Panda 2,' and 'Turbo.' Her short animated film 'A Tall Tale' was screened internationally in film festivals, including Annecy International Animation Film Festival, and it won Best Animated Short in the 2011 Los Angeles Women's International Film Festival.

Scott Raymond is currently the Associate Professor of Animation at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, TN. There he has created a brand new BFA concentration in Animation + Visual Effects. Previously Scott spent 8 years at DreamWorks Animation, first as a crowds artist and then as an animator. He has worked in feature and TV animation, live-action visual effects, gaming, AR, webseries, theme parks and commercials - the latter winning several National ADDY awards for animation.

Tad Leckman has backgrounds in both entertainment and education spending the past twenty years focused on the learning and development of artists, designers and writers who are making games, films, TV shows, and comics. He has taught at Academy of Art University, Savannah College of Art and Design, and NYU's Center for Advanced Digital Applications. Tad has served as a training Director for both Lucasfilm and Riot Games, and was a Senior Training Manager at Blizzard Entertainment. For the past three years, Tad has been teaching at UC Santa Cruz in their Arts Games and Playable Media, and Computational Media programs.