

# SEEN

SouthEast Education Network

**Collaboration  
Makes Learning Fun**

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BY JOHN KESSELL

# Collaboration furniture

## *How computer table geometry unleashes the flow of exchange*

Collaborative learning is the holy grail of progressive colleges and universities nation-wide, so it is not surprising that high schools are now looking at this approach to prepare their students for successfully continuing their academic careers.

“Collaborative learning” is a general term for a variety of educational approaches which involve an exchange of intellectual effort by students and teachers together. Typically, students work in groups of two or more, searching together in a process directed to solve for a common goal. Collaborative learning activities vary widely, but most center on students’ exploration and application of the course material, not simply the teacher’s presentation of it.

In collaborative classrooms, the lecturing, listening and note-taking process may not disappear entirely, but it lives alongside other processes that are based in students’ discussion and active work with the course material. Teachers who use collaborative learning approaches tend to think of themselves more as designers of intellectual experiences, and less as presenters of knowledge to students. In planning a space for

this activity, the shapes of the shape of the furniture promotes the dynamics of the collaboration group.

### What shapes promote the exchange of ideas in your context?

Different shapes of furniture arrange people in different ways to promote a flow of interaction. Col-

laborative learning approaches put people together to understand differences, build consensus, present research and permit personal space for independent focus for synthesis and contribution. Computers, laptops and mobile devices, such as iPad, Notebook, Kindle, Nook, and smart phones — all are relevant technologies for the process. They all go hand-in-hand with the use of text materials and note pads. In a collaboration classroom setting, the overarching goal is to promote the interface of people as they use text and technology to communicate, synthesize and generate the assignments. People use body language and read cues about people speaking and listening. The way people are staged can actually promote positive collaborative outcomes.



Collaborative Pinwheel

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The idea of changing the table shape to promote the exchange of ideas started with King Arthur’s “round table.” Perhaps that’s why a “round table discussion” is still the terminology we use when we want to equalize power in a meeting and be open to input from all parties. While there are drawbacks to the round table, it’s the right direction for collaboration because of its radial symmetry. The concept is equal empowerment, in contrast to the long rectangular conference table, having a head and status positions on the left and the right of the king seat, with distance demoting the status of those seated farther away from the king.

### The Collaborative Hexagon

The collaborative hexagon is a little shift different from a simple round table, or a simple hexagon shape. The hexagon is nearly a circle, but the geometry es-

establishes equal territory for each seat. A circle can have “ganging up,” which distorts the power distribution around the table. The collaborative hexagon is made up of right triangles, which does two things for sending body language cues: first, the internal hexagon diffuses head-to-head, confrontational body language by its being out of phase with the external hexagon; second, the hypotenuse legs of the triangle top elements set up diagonal lines within the hexagon shape. These internal lines promote flow, making it comfortable to turn the body to address everyone openly at the table without physically moving from the individual focus zone.

### The Collaborative Pinwheel

When triangular elements are applied to form a pinwheel shape, this does an amazing thing for collaboration: it promotes the formation of synapse discussion locations (places where people synthesize synchronously). Each workspace portions equal territory, but each space turns people for positive body

language — ideal for collaboration. At the same time, the shape discourages head-to-head, confrontational cues, thus promoting consensus-building through empathetic understanding. Like the collaborative hexagon, each seat is also a focus zone. Unlike the hexagon, people are more apt to turn and form groups without needing to “gang up.” When larger groups form, the zone is comfortable and team centered. For individual focus, computer monitors are angled for privacy without the need for physical privacy screens. The pinwheel’s angles juxtapose body cues for focus. By simply changing body position with a head turn, or shoulder turn, personal cues are openly mirrored for understanding and communication. The returns of the focus zones become synapse conference areas for groups of two or three.

### The Collaborative Triangle

The collaborative triangle is equilateral. The points of the table form synapse discussion locations, with the

long sides providing individual focus zones. The focus zones orient people to the middle of the long sides so they can easily team or focus, depending on how they turn their bodies. Computer workstations or laptop safes are provided in a multi-use delivery system on the sides, but the ends are open for personal laptop or mobile device use. This shape is a stronger choice for the formation of groups than the hexagon shape, and because of the focus zone locations being variably placed, the areas of the table have fewer areas for personal solitude. This table shape is for joiners and nudges people together for closer communication.

How do you design the space appropriate for the intellectual experience? Collaborate. There is no boiler-plate solution. In the process, there is plenty of room for invention and innovation. As you build consensus, you build your ideal collaboration classroom.

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