

The Imagination Lab: Innovation Through Standardization



On the second floor of the Skaggs Hall of Learning in the Micron Business and Economics Building (MBEB) is a space called “The Imagination Lab.” At first glance, this space is like any other rectangular room on campus, but the way faculty in the College of Business and Economics (COBE) use the space is quite innovative. This presented a challenge for the Office of Information Technology (OIT) to become more innovative in our approach to delivering classroom technology.

Mark Fitzgerald, Director of OIT’s Customer Care department, tells us the origin story of the space. “When the college built the Imagination Lab, they made a choice not to bring in any technology. They wanted a blue sky room in which they could use clear thinking and generate new ideas.” He explains that part of the reason they did not originally plan to have projectors, display screens, or doc cams was that the technology at that time did not provide the flexibility desired for the space.

For example, along one wall of The Imagination Lab are five breakout rooms with names such as Anti-Complacency Room, Reverse Thinking Room and Aha Room. The idea is that faculty can have students break into groups during class and then reconvene in the main space to present their discoveries.

About five years after The Imagination Lab was built, faculty and departments had developed a clear idea of how they use this space. So Fitzgerald sat down with COBE and asked, “what is it that you would like to accomplish?” Fitzgerald says, “As they described a room, they kept using words like ‘flexible,’ and being able to move things around, being able to have it different every time that we come into the room.”

“This was a little bit at odds with our desire to keep everything standard,” Fitzgerald explains. For a small team of classroom technology and audio visual experts who maintain technology in over 150 classrooms, this seemed an impossible request.* But as he thought about it an idea began to form and he wondered, “What if we could accomplish both?”

Fitzgerald and his audio visual and classroom support teams sat down with faculty and departments in COBE and developed a plan for the room using the standard components used in all general classrooms, but that could be set up in a flexible manner.

The Imagination Lab features technology common to all Boise State’s general classrooms such as a projector, screen, document camera and computer. But where OIT innovated was to add ports throughout the room so people can connect up to five TV’s on wheels and place these anywhere in the space as required. The TV’s can also be easily moved into the breakout rooms where students can connect their personal laptops for group work. Students can then present to the entire class via the projector and screen using a laptop or the computer in the room.

Additionally, OIT installed speakers in the ceiling throughout the room and added wireless microphones so it’s easy to hear and present from anywhere in the room.

“We subverted the idea of the front of the room,” Fitzgerald explains. “Not only did we equip one room, we ended up equipping six different rooms to be able to do different technology and then come back as a big cohesive group.” And all using standard equipment that is easy and cost effective to maintain and replace over time.

COBE utilizes The Imagination Lab for teaching and learning as well as public events and hosting guest speakers. Boise State’s CIO Max Davis-Johnson sums it up best, “So what’s really interesting I think about this room is the fact that it’s technology designed to accommodate the space. Being able to standardize technology that can fit the flexibility of the entire room, I think that is true innovation.”

* In 2016, OIT Customer Care teams completed a technology standardization project that simplified hardware and interfaces in Boise State’s general classrooms and which has resulted in an almost 90% reduction in calls to the Help Desk regarding technology issues in these classrooms.

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