

American Studies Facilities Issues

Important historical notes on the arrangement of the current AIS classrooms:

In the past, the prevailing attitude for creating space for AIS classes seemed to be simply to provide one large room. One of the current AIS rooms was originally two art rooms with a wall in the middle that separated the two rooms. In order to create an AIS room, the dividing wall was knocked down. The other existing AIS rooms were always structured as large rooms.

What's the arrangement of our current AIS classrooms?

Our current AIS classrooms are essentially arranged as long rectangles with the front of the room serving as a traditional focal point for the students' attention; the only white board space is in front of the classroom and this is also where the teachers project overhead documents, film, and anything linked to the laptop computer in the classroom. The shape of the room creates problems for students on the edges. These students frequently have trouble hearing comments from other students, and their sight lines are also diminished.

For furniture, we use heavy tables and simple chairs. On average, there are 3-4 students to each table. The most common room arrangement is to place tables side-by-side and set them up in long rows running across the room, creating something somewhat reminiscent of an "auditorium style" room.

What are the limitations of our current AIS classrooms?

The greatest limitation with our current AIS rooms is that they are *not* student centered. With the limited space, rectangle arrangement, and large, cumbersome tables, it's difficult to arrange the room into a variety of configurations. Interdisciplinary studies requires many classroom arrangements based upon what teachers need students to do in a given class period. For example, in an AIS classroom students will:

- Participate in large-group discussions.
- Participate in small-group discussions (approximately 4-6 students).
- Work on collaborative reading and writing projects.
- Peer-edit compositions.
- Study artifacts of the American Experience. Many of these artifacts, in addition to textual artifacts, include photography, paintings, and other forms of art.
- Complete in-class compositions and informal writing.

As you'd expect, these activities require a modular room that can fit a *variety of needs*, and we need a space that can morph into whatever the students' needs dictate. This would truly be a student centered classroom, but our current configuration doesn't allow for this kind of arrangement. With heavy, cumbersome tables it's difficult to arrange the room "on the fly" to fit a particular need or activity. With limited space, configuring the room in a variety of patterns is difficult; and with the long rectangle shape of the room, the sight lines for our students sitting on the edges are average, at best.

What should an AIS classroom look like?

An AIS classroom should be able to meet a variety of needs, and the classroom space should be able to change to fit these needs on the fly. In a sense, the room should be a "blank slate" of sorts, a room that welcomes the instructional strategy of that day to dictate the room arrangement.

The following is a list of AIS classroom needs generated by current AIS teachers:

- Laptop accessibility in the room. It would be ideal if there were laptops for every student, thereby allowing the room to also function as a computer lab for in-class essays and other research and writing. Scheduling a lab for current AIS classes is problematic. The only lab that can accommodate an AIS class is lab 377N *and* parts of 377S. It's very difficult to find both of these labs available at the same time for an AIS class. If we had a room that could also function as a computer lab, we wouldn't have this problem.
- At least one desktop computer in the room.
- A breakout room adjacent/attached (or at least nearby) so students have a place to conference with a teacher, make up a quiz, or take care of other business away from the work of the large group. This doesn't need to be a full-sized classroom, just additional space for small-group work. (Note: pictures 775 and 776 in the attached pictures are photos of this type of room in Annenberg Hall at Northwestern University.)
- The room needs to be spacious so we have the ability to move the furniture around and configure the room. This is a current hurdle; sometimes it's hard to move the furniture because we don't have the space to move it.
- Furniture should be easy to move (light, possibly on wheels).
- Storage space for materials, student work (portfolios, projects, etc.). Perhaps some permanent bookshelves and file cabinets?
- Some teachers prefer chalk board to white boards. (We'll have to discuss this to reach consensus.)
- More room on the walls for permanent art work (e.g. paintings, photographs), displaying student work, etc. Any permanent displays that announce "this is an American Studies" classroom can make the environment feel more welcoming for students.
- More natural light. But we also need to be able to darken the room for overhead projection and films.
- Better acoustics. Teachers frequently have to repeat comments made by students so the other side of the room can participate in the conversation.
- Better sight lines so students can see their classmates during large-group discussions.
- The ability to use more than one wall/space as the traditional "front" of the classroom.

Final Thoughts:

In a facilities meeting this year with Dr. Yonke, she mentioned that an architect once told her that teachers are the most flexible professionals when it comes to working with limited and awkward classroom spaces. This is true of our AIS teachers with our current

space configuration. We've managed with the current classrooms, but it's time for a *better* space for this important program at New Trier. Our registration numbers each year indicate our students appreciate AIS, and it's time we gave our students a space that best suits the goals of this curriculum.

**Note*

We have digital photos of a classroom facility very similar to what we'd like to see for our AIS rooms. If you'd like to see them, please let us know.