A
fter visiting hundreds of schools and classrooms around the world, I’m still amazed at just how traditional most of their physical spaces, and the things happening within them, seem to be. Students sit quietly (or not so quietly) in neatly aligned rows of desks, as a teacher lectures from the front of the class. But as we have seen, there are no standard learners, so they should not be forced to learn in standard classrooms,
reading standard textbooks, and taking standardized tests. Digital natives have a desire to engage, socialize, share, and create things relevant to their lives, but often don’t have access to dedicated learning environments that allow them to do these things. We must do a better job of ensuring the availability of purposefully built physical and digital learning spaces in which they can soar.

Educational futurist David Thornburg, in his book *Campfires in Cyberspace*, describes three types of primary learning spaces: the campfire (designed for one-to-many learning), the watering hole (designed for many-to-many learning), and the cave (designed for one-to-one learning). Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, I thought I’d instead share with you my own interpretation of Thornburg’s learning spaces, to which I’ve added my own fourth space: the mountaintop. (Only after using this term for many years did I learn of Thornburg’s most recent and similar addition to his spaces metaphor, life.) From my experience, the most effective schools and classrooms contain some form of all these spaces.

**THE CAMPFIRE**

It’s no secret that storytelling is one of the most powerful ways of sharing information with others. No matter the content being shared, listeners are likely to remember the best of the lessons from these dramatic stories for the rest of their lives, as they go on to retell their own versions to future generations. One of the best places for hearing and telling stories historically has been over a campfire, where parents, grandparents, and camp leaders have shared their wisdom through a combination of fiction and real-life tales.
The campfire is an example of the one-to-many model, where typically one person speaks to many others at once. As Thornburg notes, the one-to-many model has been the most widely used form of learning space in schools for the past century. It’s a teacher directly addressing students while walking excitedly around the classroom, or a guest speaker sharing their wisdom from the real world, helping to bring theories to life. When done right, the one-to-many model works well, but unfortunately more often than not, it’s done wrong.

Lecturing motionless from the front of a class in a monotone voice as students fight to stay awake is also a form of the one-to-many model, but it’s no campfire! I feel that it’s not what’s being shared that matters so much as it is the way that it’s being shared. It’s not content, it’s craft, and employing a good story to convey information works well. An influential 1987 U.S. Department of Education study concluded that “even students with low motivation and weak academic skills are more likely to listen, read, write, and work hard in the context of storytelling.”

When stories are told, and rhetorical questions asked, in classroom environments designed to resemble the physical attributes of real campfires, the impact can be even greater. For example, rather than putting desks in rows, putting them in circles (either one big circle or several smaller group circles) where there’s social reinforcement, and where everyone can see each other, might be a better option.

Technology now allows us to experience learning-based campfires in digital and virtual ways as well. One example is the use of video conferencing through the likes of Skype, iChat Video, iTunes U, or live YouTube streams. At Baldwin Elementary