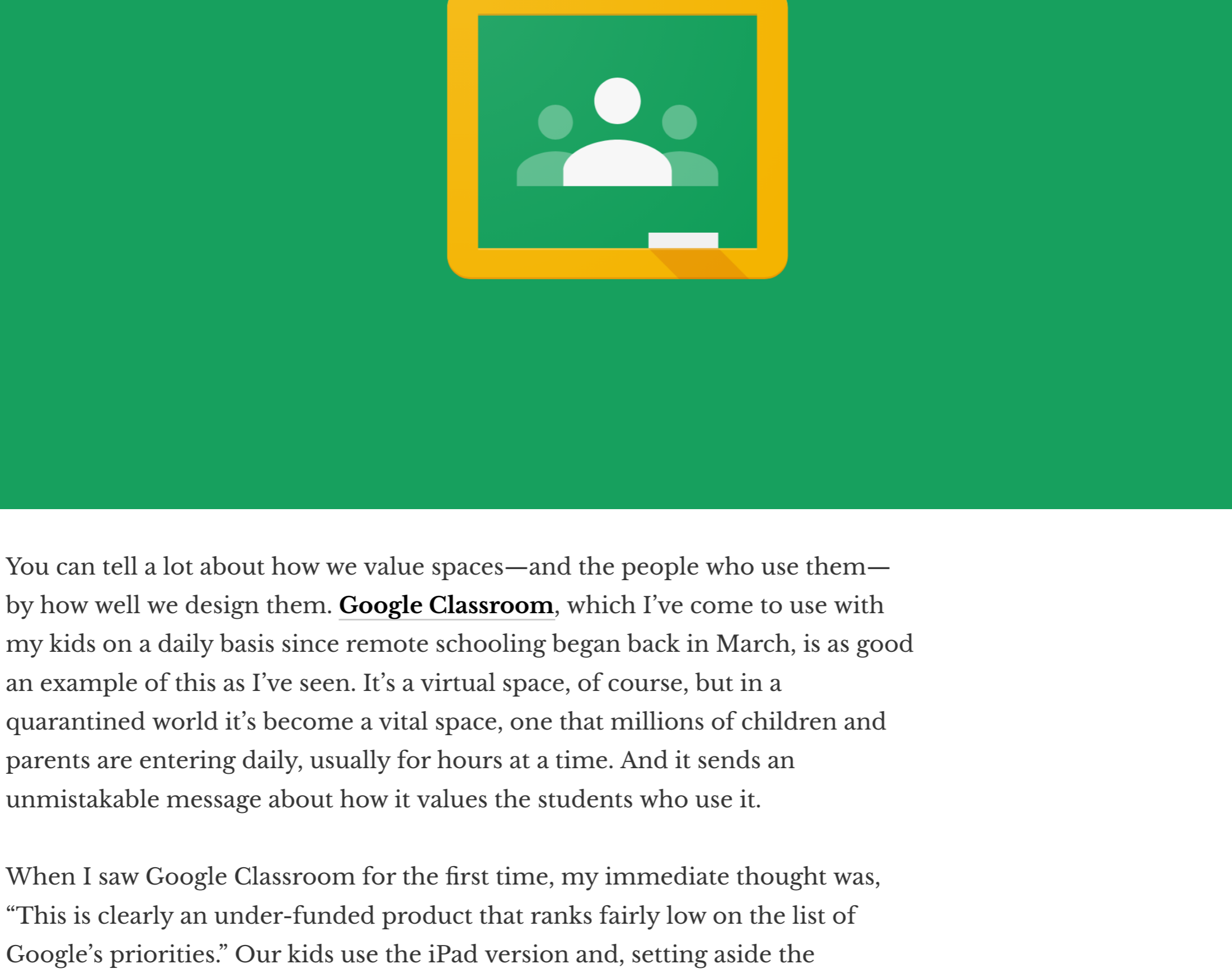


Google Classroom and How Spaces Value People

Tue 19 May 2020 02:09 PM Google Classroom and How Spaces Value People



You can tell a lot about how we value spaces—and the people who use them—by how well we design them. Google Classroom, which I've come to use with my kids on a daily basis since remote schooling began back in March, is as good an example of this as I've seen. It's a virtual space, of course, but in a quarantined world it's become a vital space, one that millions of children and parents are entering daily, usually for hours at a time. And it sends an unmistakable message about how it values the students who use it.

When I saw Google Classroom for the first time, my immediate thought was, "This is clearly an under-funded product that ranks fairly low on the list of Google's priorities." Our kids use the iPad version and, setting aside the inconvenient fact that it's at least a few steps behind Google Classroom in the browser, the product as a whole is slow, inelegant and unappealing. It works but just barely, and it lacks nearly every modern user experience affordance commonly found in most contemporary productivity software.

Upon reflection, I came to realize that this is no accident. Google Classroom's lackluster design is actually perfectly in line with the way we've always thought about the spaces we build for learning. Schools have by and large been conspicuously if not chronically underfunded, especially in comparison to spaces for work. Most school buildings are fashioned from cinder blocks, institutional steel doors and wire glass, and piped with pre-digital HVAC systems. Children sit at decades-old, fixed height tables and chairs, share access to donated and/or outdated computer hardware, relieve themselves in archaic bathrooms. Their exercise and play time are segregated to large multi-purpose rooms or outside on blacktops or poorly tended fields.

When you walk into most schools, you immediately get the sense that the machinery of educational administration takes precedence over the students, despite the often valiant effort of teachers and staff to counter that bias. All of this speaks volumes about how we value students and children.

By contrast there's a population of contemporary knowledge workers who have grown accustomed to offices almost as a kind of work-resort, where play is interleaved with productivity. To begin with many office spaces have been built or rebuilt within the past decade, purely out of a desire to remain competitive in the race to hire employees in a worker's market. Lobbies, conference rooms and hallways are elaborately decorated and made of elegant, privacy-optimized glass and laid with colorful carpet. Communal spaces are strewn with sofas and chairs and, often, entertainment too; foosball, ping pong tables, and video games come to mind as clichés. Office furniture is sleek and modern; a single worker's chair alone can cost upwards of hundreds of dollars, and adjustable height desks are not uncommon. And the technology in offices, of course, is often superior to what anyone might have access to anywhere else in their lives: modern, capable hardware and fast, reliable Internet, not to mention a full staff dedicated to keeping it all running. And I'm not even going to compare the food options at tech companies to the mess hall-style cafeterias in schools.

The lesson to be learned contrasting schools and offices is pretty clear: we care relatively little about the former and we place a premium on the latter.

Cf. Slack

A useful way of understanding how we translate these values back into software is to look at a productivity tool like Slack, which is as close to a virtual equivalent of a modern office space as we have. Even after a recent, major redesign, I personally continue to have issues with Slack's user experience, but one thing the app can't be accused of is being under-featured. Slack is replete with user affordances, from @ mentions to people directories to a dedicated channel just for users to message themselves, plus a host of third-party plugins to meet virtually any user need. Even its frequent updates are delivered with more human attention than they have any right to be. And of course Slack is famously entertaining as well; its deep commitment to expressivity (sometimes to the detriment of productivity, actually) through emojis, animated GIFs, polls, quizzes and more has made the tool more than a tool; it's a hub for each company's culture, a repository for workplace sentiment, and a place for employees to hang out, even when they're not on the clock. People want to use Slack.

On the other hand almost everything you can find in Slack seems to be missing from Google Classroom. The app has what you might call a "plain vanilla Material Design" aesthetic that hits all the marks of Google's signature design language but achieves none of the panache or even whimsy that the best Material Design-compliant products are capable of. Which is to say it's inelegant and is deeply lacking for user affordances. Google Classroom's iPad app is slow. It's slow to switch modes, slow to present work, slow to upload, and just generally slow to respond to the user. And it's extremely basic, too, lacking for novelty or even wit, to say nothing of innovation.

Interactions of virtually any kind in Google Classroom are almost ascetically un fancy. Need to complete an assigned worksheet? Google Classroom treats coursework almost entirely as an attachment—little more than a database entry—without recognizing its intrinsic content in any way. So those helpful previews of attachments or links that have become common in everything from Slack to Facebook posts are entirely absent. There's also no way for the work to be done directly in the app. Teachers can set up assignments so that each child has a "personal copy," but that really only allows you to open up a linked document in Google Docs. Otherwise, assigned worksheets must be downloaded, printed, scanned or, more likely, photographed with a smartphone (thereby removing all semantic information) and uploaded. If the work consists of multiple pages, then students or parents need to take multiple snapshots and—this is one of the more egregious feature disparities between Classroom on an iPad and in the browser—each must be manually attached to the assignment, one by one, because even making multiple selections for uploading is beyond what the app is capable of. (In fairness, this is partially the fault of iPadOS's file picker, but plenty of other products have found elegant workarounds.)

Everything Else

Even search features, maybe the most crucial navigation affordance for users of any kind of productivity software, is curiously missing from Google Classroom. It's impossible to search across the app, even for the work that students have created themselves (there's also no single view of all of a student's work), much less across all of the various assignments and materials created by the teacher. When the world's foremost leader in search can't be bothered to provide search to students, this alone speaks volumes about how we value learning.

The bigger context of this poverty of common user experience affordances, though, is Google Classroom's utter lack of humanity. The app isn't just spare, it's barren; it's task-oriented and optimized for assignments, not learning-oriented and optimized for people. At a low level, the lack of native support for (and lack of encouragement for the use of) emojis or animated GIFs is particularly deflating, though not entirely unreasonable in school environments. But at a higher level, students looking at Google Classrooms all day see virtually nothing of themselves reflected back.

Teachers can attach a poster image for their classes and students can set their own avatars, but beyond those rudimentary customizations, there's nothing. Give a child a physical notebook and by the end of the semester it's sure to be doodled over, colored, pasted on top of or decorated and embellished in some deeply personal way. Yet in Google Classroom, there's no analogous method for a student to customize this interface that they look at for hours each day, no way for a student to make the space their own. They can't collect or mark favorite assignments or materials or even classmates or teachers, much less assemble the wide variety of visual stimulus that kids thrive on in a collage or Pinterest-like display. There are also no stickers, no filters, no sound effects, and no profile view to show off your personal flair anyway.

You could argue that these kinds of features are superfluous to learning, but even accepting that stringent view of the educational experience, Google Classrooms is missing so much. Want to teach a child about the world? Maps are a good way to do that, and as it happens Google also has an industry-leading maps product. But maps are not embeddable inside of Classroom. YouTube videos get slightly better treatment, but in the iPad app they just open up in a separate view while in the browser they open up inline—neither experience feels particularly native and takes the student out of the context of the teacher's own lessons. For that matter there's even less support for videos not uploaded to YouTube or other embeddable content. You can do little more than just link to web pages, slide decks, sound clips, interactive articles, spreadsheets, and the rest of the Internet's wealth.

Winning the Education Market

What's confusing about all of this is that Google itself is clearly committed to the education market. They've gone to great lengths to equip countless schools with easy access to their productivity suite, and they've also invested heavily in turning Chromebooks into nearly standard equipment for a generation of students. So it can't be that the company is disinterested in building an industry-leading classroom product.

There is a difference though between building market share and building humane products. To win in education, Google surely has to contend with innumerable safety, security and privacy constraints that prevent the company from infusing Google Classroom with the full richness and variety of the open Internet. On top of that, balancing the requirements of educators and administrators from all kinds of institutions at all kinds of levels is surely no easy feat. The fact that Google Classroom works at all for as many different kinds of schools as it does is a testament to the company's success navigating those challenges.

At the end of the day though, that is all that Google Classroom amounts to: a tool built to meet lowest common denominator requirements from a sprawling community of administrators. Not a tool built for students. In Google Classroom, students are an afterthought and their experience of using the app amounts to little more than a formality. What seems to matter more is the vast complexity of the educational market and building a solution that works for as many institutions as possible. The app is for organizations, not students. And when you build a space with those priorities, how little you value people is abundantly clear.

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