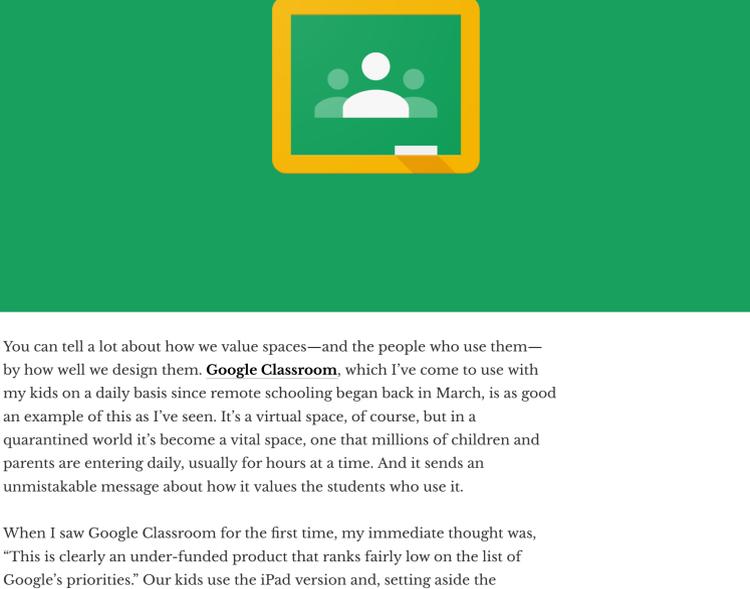


Google Classroom and How Spaces Value People

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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