

# At the **Core** of the Apple Store: Images of Next Generation Learning

The physical, psychological, cultural, social, and organizational elements of a learning environment are as important as the learning opportunities themselves. So what can educators learn from an Apple Store's learning environment?

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It's a good half-hour before the Apple Store at the local mall opens, yet a small, motley group is already queued up outside the door. No, these folks aren't stalking the iPhone. That's no longer necessary now that Apple has increased supply and the current state of the economy has reduced demand. These early arrivals have a different mission, with their laptops, iPods, and iPhones tucked under their arms — one has even brought his desktop with him, keyboard and all. Their intent is not to buy but to address some vexing challenge with their computers, to learn about an application they can add to their repertoire, or just to explore a curiosity or interest.

We help create highly innovative schools in large cities throughout the United States and around the world, so we're constantly looking for innovative designs for learning. We had visited an Apple Store and were intrigued by what we saw. What's going on here, we asked? Have the Apple folks created an innovative approach to learning *as well* as to retailing and technical support?

After several visits to several stores throughout the country, we've concluded that what goes on in the Apple Store is a harbinger of what many learning opportunities might look like in the 21st century, wherever they take place. Every learner and anyone who considers himself a teacher (that's just about all of us, right?) might want to think about this as well.

## **A LOOK INSIDE THE APPLE STORE**

The typical Apple Store has three spaces: one for play, one for purchasing, and one for learning. The customer typically encounters these areas in that order.

The play area is an uncluttered shrine to objects that invite play. Of course, all of the objects — iPhones, iPods, and Mac computers, even the accessories — are cool, must-haves for almost everyone over the age of two. This is a high-touch area; it's very difficult to break anything, though we did notice that there were a few young people who appeared to be working especially hard to do just that. Staff members linger nearby to answer questions, demonstrate a new application, and, we suspect, to prevent the high touch from becoming too heavy.

Moving further into the store, customers encounter "shrink wrap land," with lots of things to buy hang-



This article is available in mp3 or podcast format.

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ing on the walls or sitting on shelves. Here, also, Apple staff members are near at hand, ready to answer customers' questions and help with a purchase. In this area particularly, staff members serve as mobile checkout counters, with digital cash registers hanging from their hips.

At the back of the store, customers encounter the Studio, an area devoted to one-on-one and small-group instruction about all Apple products and software applications. Seminars are scheduled regularly, but much of what goes on here appears to be *ad hoc* and customized for whoever signs up. The Studio operates much like a seminar or workshop.

Also at the back of the store is the Genius Bar. There are no products to buy here, but many services are available, most for free and focused on learning. This space is for problem solving and troubleshooting — a qualitatively different kind of messing around than what goes on in the play area. At the Genius Bar, customers receive personalized technical assistance in addressing just about any problem. At least one staff member, the “Concierge,” patrols this area, determining customers' needs and helping schedule appointments to talk with one of the Apple-certified Geniuses, “experts in all things Apple.”

### THE APPLE STORE EXPERIENCE

We were particularly interested in interactions between staff and customers in the Apple Store's setting, which invites high tech and high touch and provides a low-key, highly personalized, customer-controlled set of interactions that can escalate quickly from casual play to serious learning. Many customers, even staffers, give in to their own kind of “flow,” simultaneously challenged and energized by the experience. Despite the ubiquitous technology, the Apple Store experience is not about objects, but about forming relationships with objects and people, reminding us of an old Apple ad: “The importance of technology is not technology.”

We were most intrigued by services available in the Studio and the Genius Bar by merely signing up, illustrating Apple's catch phrase, “the support you need, when you need it.” Customers have multiple pathways for learning and get a chance to demonstrate what they know — and don't know — with supportive observation by the resident Genius. Thinking and tinkering go hand in hand.

Of the Studio, the Apple literature says, “There is no better way to learn more, or learn it faster, than with one-to-one personal training sessions.” Customers can “create a program that is customized to your level of experience” with “personal training sessions designed to move at your pace and provide the support and guidance you need, whether you are new to Mac or ready to master the latest pro soft-

ware.” Of their more-technical support, Apple boasts of highly personalized and just-in-time learning through “same-day service at the Genius Bar.”

The Studio and Genius Bar have turned technicians into teachers and tutors, sometimes therapists. Apple has elevated the technician to Genius level, whose job is not only to repair but also to teach and learn with and for customers. The diagnosis and treatment are simultaneously technical and personal.

### WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE APPLE STORE AS A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

Our several visits to several stores gave us a sense of how learning, work, and play might be merged in a wide range of venues, including, of course, schools. Some may think it odd to regard a retail store as a learning place or community and to view just-in-time learning for fixing computers as significant in-

*Students visit the Apple Store on West 14th Street in New York as part of Apple's Field Trip program, which is offered at Apple Stores worldwide. K-12 schools can book visits to their local Apple Store, where they can use Apple's Mac computers and get help from Apple staff for*



tellectual capital. But there is ample evidence that the Apple Store may be a prototypical learning environment, one in which an enterprising team of talented teachers could construct and implement a comprehensive and challenging learning program.

Yes, the store is designed to sell, but it's also designed to teach. Apple's culture — its knowledge and values — embraces learning and learners. The play area up front shares a lot in common with a typical kindergarten classroom, the Studio with a graduate seminar, and the Genius Bar with a graduate school laboratory. In its artfully designed store space, Apple merges products with services for a unique experience in which the customer sees himself as a learner able to master valuable skills. By developing this type of agency, Apple has created a community and a culture.

Experienced educators know that the learning environment — the physical, psychological, cultural, social, and organizational elements — is as important as the learning opportunities themselves. So

*digital projects ranging from video and photo editing to building web sites, creating presentations and more. Educators can learn more about the program, including how teachers can sign up, by visiting [www.apple.com/retail/fieldtrip/](http://www.apple.com/retail/fieldtrip/).*

**How might we design learning opportunities and learning environments so that every student chooses to engage in deep and sustained learning?**

what are the essential features of the Apple Store's learning environment?

**One customer at a time.** The Apple Store learning experience is highly personalized and focused on the interests and needs of the individual customer. Although the technology may be intimidating, it's the learner who controls the learning experience.

**Risk-free problem solving.** The Apple Store learning experience is based on an essential truth: Most learning comes from messing around — the trial and error that leads to understanding and insight.

**Relevance.** The Apple Store has built relevance into every nook and cranny of the customer's experience. Apple's staffers recognize that they must start with the customer and with whatever the customer knows. Then they can build on that understanding to move the customer to a new level of competence — and challenge.

**Relationships, relevance, and rigor.** The new Three Rs are integral to the design of the store and the experience. The Apple Store takes the relationship between customer, staff members, and store to a new level of retailing and learning. We observe authentic rigor in the Apple Store experience — authentic and respected, embedded in the customer's learning and work. This rigor results from engaging in solving problems in which the answers aren't immediately apparent and the challenges are significant.

**Authentic assessment.** Assessment is built right into the learning, focusing specifically on what needs to be learned or accomplished. The Genius checks to be sure the learner has mastered the new skill and has acquired new understandings about the software or hardware. There's also plenty of self-assessment going on here: The customer's questions guide the learning and reveal what's been learned and what's left to be learned.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR NEXT GENERATION LEARNING**

So, why is what Apple is doing in its stores so important? What does it mean for schools?

We're convinced that the traditional designs for schools and schooling are broken. We need innovation that looks beyond refurbishing those designs. We need a new learning culture based on reconstituting the relationship between teachers and learners. The Apple Store experience provides a very powerful image of how that relationship might be designed.

One question the Apple Store designers certainly addressed was: How might we design a store and an experience that gets customers to come back again and again? And buy again and again?

In that spirit, we ask: How might we design learning opportunities and learning environments so that

every student chooses to engage in deep and sustained learning? And chooses to do that kind of learning for the rest of their lives?

What if, for example, we deliberately designed learning opportunities and learning environments that were deeply engaging and motivating and actually helped young people learn powerfully within their many areas of interest? What if there were lots of places where kids with similar interests could congregate to learn more, both within and beyond those interests, from experts and peers?

What if the most valuable learning places and resources existed *outside* of the schools, and these places and resources were increasingly more important than schools in helping learners develop important skills and understandings? What if there was a parallel and complementary system of learning resources that appealed to, and engaged, lots of kids in learning about learning? What if there were ways to provide, and give credit for, learning wherever and whenever it occurred? And what if many of the most expert "teachers" weren't formally certified and credentialed by the education bureaucracy?

What if we were able to create whole new forms of credentialing learning that were based on authentic demonstrations of skills and understandings and that recognized in some formal way learning accomplished in any setting? And what if employers got serious about looking beyond a high school diploma or undergraduate degree to focus on actual competence as measured by actual performances that demonstrate skill and understanding?

Addressing these design challenges would likely result in the creation of many alternative schools and alternatives *to* schools, or at least to schools as they're currently designed and operated. The Apple Store is one such alternative; to use Clayton Christenson's (2008) phrase, it is a disruption. It blends retail and school into a new type of learning environment that lets the customer learn anything, at any time, at any level, from experts, expert practitioners, and peers.

The Apple Store design helps us imagine different learning places inside all sorts of stores. How about:

- A genius bar inside a clothing store devoted to creating each customer's "look" using clothes the customer already owns and those she might buy?
- A studio for baking inside a local cafe?
- A tutoring center inside the local coffee shop? Free coffee for tutors?
- A health and nutrition learning center in a local market?
- An electronics school inside an electronics store?
- A store for problem solving?

A few examples provide images of the potential: Home Depot and Whole Foods provide classes. Borders and Barnes & Noble provide weekly lectures by guest authors. And 826 Valencia (826valencia.org), author David Eggers' storefront creation, provides support for young writers.

Others, including educators, have written of the time when anyone in any place will be able to learn practically anything at any level from anyone. It will take individuals and groups who know a lot about learning and learners to create the systems we need to support such learning. Of course, technology will be a critical enabler. Networks, social networking, and "wiki" capacities can be exploited to support learning. Thousands of how-to sites on the Internet allow anyone to learn and practice how to do just about anything. What all of these resources require is a framework, a system for helping each learner make sense of all of these resources and integrate them into a personalized learning plan. That is a task for schools.

We see the Apple Store design as an affirmation of what we do and try to do in our own Big Picture Learning schools, as well as a guide to possible needed innovations in our own design, such as more enlightened applications of these new and emerging technology tools.

So the line of customers for high-engagement

learning at the Apple Store starts early and runs late. The crowds have thinned a bit in the current economic morass, but our guess is that other retailers would love to have such numbers roaming their stores. No doubt, they're watching closely and thinking about their own adaptations of the design. As they do so, we recommend that they not overlook the power of the experiences they provide for learning.

"Out of patterns come variation," advises Cerda, the urban planner of Barcelona. And out of variation, patterns. We see the Apple Store as a significant variation in both retailing and in learning. It is hoped, at least for learning, that its variations will generate patterns that will permeate society and eventually find their way into schools and universities.

The sci-fi novelist William Gibson wrote that the future is already here; it's just not evenly distributed. If Gibson is right, then there's a big chunk of the future of learning in the Apple Stores just waiting to be more evenly distributed. And we all would do well to spread that future into schools and communities throughout our country. **K**

#### REFERENCE

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Some may think it odd to regard a retail store as a learning place or community and to view just-in-time learning for fixing computers as significant intellectual capital.

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