

METROPOLIS

LONG ROAD TO SIMPLE

A new line of school furniture capitalizes on extensive research into the changing dynamics of the classroom.

The new Verb line consists of a student table, a teaching station, and whiteboards. The two-person tables can also be pushed together to form four-person team arrangements.



by **Marc Kristal**

Considering Steelcase's new Verb classroom system, I am reminded of (who else?) Frédéric Chopin. "After playing immense quantities of notes, and more notes," the composer declared, "then simplicity emerges with all its charm, like art's final seal." The product line, which makes its debut at NeoCon this month, seems, at a glance, to be simplicity itself: variations on a table for students, a "teaching station," and individual whiteboards. Yet Verb is the outcome of immense quantities of research and more research—as well as prototyping and testing—all aimed at perfecting a classroom tool that supports nothing less than the future of learning.

The Verb saga begins with Steelcase's unusual approach to product development, which starts with open-ended research. Typically, the company decides on a potentially profitable market—in this case, classrooms—then studies trends within that market to understand the direction in which it's headed. "Four years ago, when we started to focus deeply on education, we discovered a growing outcry for greater student success," Sean Corcorran, the general manager of Steelcase Education Solutions, recalls. "Then we asked, 'How do we get there?'" According to Corcorran, Steelcase found that although "students have different backgrounds and experiences than they did fifty years ago, and they're deeply immersed in diverse technologies and multimedia environments," the classic sage-on-a-stage classroom model, with people fixed in columns and rows, still predominates. Coupled with the company's secondary research into how information is absorbed—which revealed, Corcorran says, "that people learn best when they construct their own knowledge, as opposed to just having it given to them"—Steelcase came to the conclusion that the twenty-first-century classroom needs to be a more "flexible, active, multimodal" environment that helps students to learn in a broad range of ways.

Released in the summer of 2010, the first Steelcase product to respond to this need was Node, a tablet arm-chair with casters, a swivel seat, and, beneath it, a dish capacious enough to hold a backpack. These small but transformative changes to traditional classroom furnishings permitted students to look around easily and thus better relate to one another, to rapidly arrange themselves into small or large groups, and, thanks to the under-seat dish, to not waste precious time gathering up their things whenever they moved.

Yet, while Node facilitates the swift reconfiguration of a classroom to accommodate different styles of learning, it remains, says Lennie

Scott-Webber, Steelcase's director of education environments, "a chair-based solution. You need to provide different choices for different scenarios, and some people want a table-based solution." Accordingly, Verb—the name is derived from Steelcase's overarching focus on active learning—scales up the Node concept for situations requiring larger work surfaces, but does so without sacrificing flexibility. "It allows many different kinds of teaching modalities, as well as an easy switch between those modalities," Scott-Webber says. Corcorran calls it "a classroom ecosystem."

Verb's signature component is a two-student table that's V-shaped on one side, flat on the opposite, and slightly angled on both ends. "We tried hundreds of different shapes, and built prototypes and tested them with students, before landing on this one," Corcorran recalls. This particular iteration carried the day because, as Steelcase discovered, it successfully balanced privacy, communication, and flexibility. The V-shaped side lets students sit next to one another at an angle, facilitating eye contact and collaboration, but preserving a sense of separation. Two Chevron tables (as they're called) can be pushed together so that their flat sides touch, forming a four person team table. And when they're butted end to end to form rows—"we call that 'lecture mode,'" Corcorran says—the angled table ends produce a gentle curve that enables students in the row to see and to communicate with one another more effectively. (In keeping with Verb's goal of maximizing utility, student tables are available in five widths, three depths, and three shapes, including four-person "double chevron" and rectangular team tables. All come with casters, to facilitate quick shifts between individual, team, and lecture situations.)

The student tables can also be accessorized with side hooks and board holders, which allow students to hang up the Verb system's individual whiteboards when they're not in use, or to mount them for display. There are also small center troughs for stashing markers and erasers. "I call it a 'team machine,'" Corcorran says of the fully equipped table. "When you move, everything can be stored and nothing gets in the way."

As for Verb's double-sided, ceramic-and-steel whiteboards, in Corcorran's view, "they hold the whole system together," enabling students to take notes or sketch individually, to share information with a desk mate or a

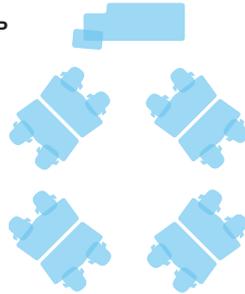
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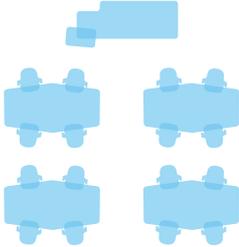
CONFIGURATIONS

The line was developed after years of extensive research. “We came to believe that we needed to create a more flexible environment that could adapt to many modes of teaching and learning,” says Sean Corcorran of Steelcase.

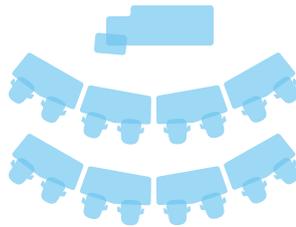
GROUP



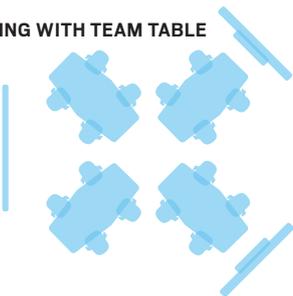
GROUP WITH TEAM TABLE



LECTURE AND TEST



LEARNING WITH TEAM TABLE



DISCUSSION



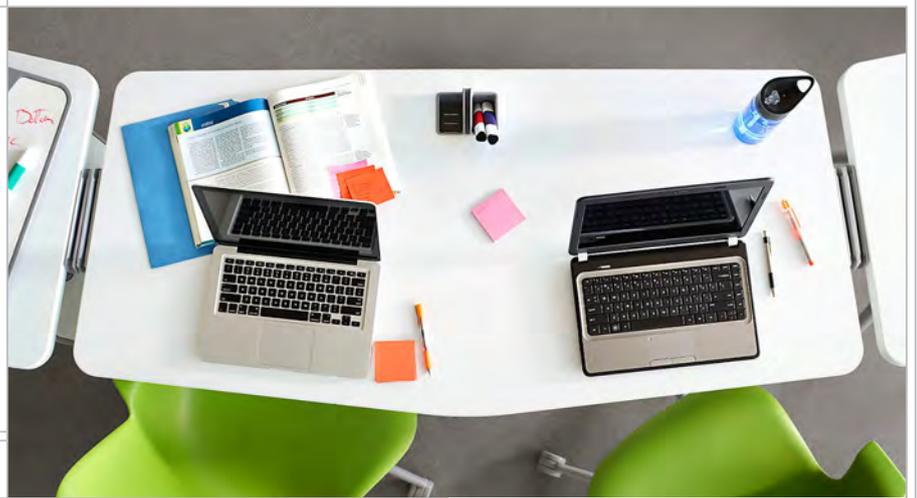
team, or to make class presentations using Verb’s mobile easel or wall-track display systems (on which the boards can be hung singly or in groups). When I confess to Scott-Webber that I come from the pre-whiteboard age, and don’t grasp the boards’ value, she explains that the Verb version is actually a new take on a popular, preexisting Steelcase product called the Huddleboard, which caught on “because it was giving students permission to actually use different tools in the classroom.” The whiteboard stresses the continuing importance, in an increasingly digital world, of analog capture and display. “More and more, 3M Post-it pads are used in generative, team-based projects,” Corcorran observes. The whiteboard “gives you a non-disposable, quite ‘green’ alternative to that.” (The whiteboards can also be attached at the midpoint of the tables and used as screens when students are taking tests.)

The teaching station—perhaps Verb’s most elegant component—grew out of what Scott-Webber calls “our ethnography research, where we spend time in the classroom doing participant observation and taking photographs, so we can bring information back, code it, and look for patterns.” One of the things this Margaret Mead-meets-Mr. Chips exercise revealed was that the head of a classroom is often plagued by what might be described as teacher-station creep: “We noted that there was often a lectern on the floor or a half-lectern on the teacher’s desk, and then there was a table you might have for a student conference,” says Scott-Webber. Verb’s solution is an object with different zones: a standard writing surface, a built-in lectern, and an end designed to make it comfortable for a student to pull up a chair for a one-on-one powwow. “In a much smaller footprint, you are enabling a teacher to work in three separate modes,” Scott-Webber says. The lectern, in particular, reflects the thoughtfulness with which the product has been crafted. Mounted on a curved arm that rises from one side of the desk, the lectern can rotate 360 degrees, allowing a teacher to use it above or beside the desk, and it has ample room for papers and pens, because teachers, Scott-Webber observes, “are always losing their stuff.” The designers also added a cup holder, and a bag or briefcase caddy to provide quick access to books and papers during lectures.

“Our overall focus is on doing research that leads to insights that we leverage into solutions,” Corcorran says. Or, as Scott-Webber puts it, the products consist of “evidence-based information implanted into design.” Verb, an active-learning system meant to support and encourage classroom success, represents that philosophy in action. ■

ELEMENTS IN ACTION

"We worked with IDEO on the front-end research and conceptual phase," Corcorran says. "They helped us envision all of the elements and build and test prototypes. Then we brought the design in-house, and completed the detailed industrial design and engineering." Here's a look at some of the furniture's key features.



BAG CADDY

The optional bag caddy, shown here, can hold a backpack full of textbooks, or smaller bags designed to accommodate laptops and tablets.



CHEVRON TABLE

"The curve of the table," Corcorran says, "improves the sight lines of the entire classroom, because each row is now a natural curve."

"I call it a 'team machine,'" Sean Corcorran says of the fully equipped table.

TEACHING STATION

The lectern and arm can rotate 360 degrees. "This movement enables different postures," according to Steelcase's Lennie Scott-Webber, leading to improved ergonomics.



WHITEBOARD DOCK

The two-sided board is sized for individual use, but is large enough for group display. It is slotted into a docking station for privacy during tests.



STORAGE

When not in use, the whiteboards are hung on tabs located on the side of the desks.

