The world we live in is changing at a remarkable speed. Think back a decade and many ingredients of life today didn’t exist. The iPhone debuted in 2007; the internet has only been in general use for 20 years.

Who knows what tomorrow will be like – except that it will be different from today.

In preparing our children for that uncertain future, we inevitably need schools unlike the ones that prepared their parents. The industrial model of education served us well for many, many decades. Doors shut, bells ringing, everyone eating at the same time. We had factories like that once, too. That model has proved very hard to let go of, but now we know a lot more about how learning works, about other ideas from around the world, about little details like light and food, or big details like using search engines wisely.
Teachers can no longer spend all their days retelling facts to students who sit behind straight rows of desks and copy down notes.

Teachers – and increasingly students – are realising that schools need to be places in which complex learning happens, rather than where uniform education is delivered.

And they need spaces that encourage that learning and help develop the sorts of skills demanded by employers. Spaces for concentration and collaboration, to make and to mash-up. The world’s leading education systems know they need a lot more than a generation of kids who can recall a finite set of expected facts. Certainly, there are times when it remains appropriate for a teacher to stand in front of the class and offer old-school instruction. But that can’t be the only tool in their kitbag. Students need the opportunity to work on their own, often at a computer with high-speed internet access; they need to be able to work together in groups of different sizes; and they need areas for quiet concentration. They need small group collaboration, Skype links to others elsewhere sharing their project, comfortable seats to read from, places to stand and work.

This can happen much more easily in larger classrooms with rich access to technology, an agile layout with thoughtfully designed acoustics and quiet nooks. Spaces need to be able to change throughout the day and during the term, with furniture that can be reconfigured to suit the activity under way at the time.

We don’t know exactly what the classroom of 20 years’ time will look like and what it will need, so it makes sense to focus on agility in design with adaptability to the demands of new technology. Three walls are more than enough for a classroom – teachers and students need to be able to work with and see each other. Teachers in sight of colleagues learn from and with their peers. Sharing improves the quality of teaching as good ideas gain greater currency within a school.

The structures and strictures of education are being brushed aside by the engagement, seduction and delight of a new learning world. The business of schools is being reshaped by the new technologies in students’ pockets, the pleas from employers for employees comfortable with ambiguity and able to work in teams and the 24/7 connectivity of our world.

This is sweeping away the old factory schools of the last century. That is an enormous challenge but also a unique opportunity to shape what comes next – a world of learning I am sure will be both more engaging and extraordinarily effective. We might all wish we were back at school once more.

This article was written by Stephen Heppell – Stephen Heppell is Felipe Segovia Chair of Learning Innovation at Universidad Camilo José Cela, Madrid and and chair in New Media Environments at Bournemouth University. from Sydney Morning Herald and was legally licensed through the NewsCred publisher network.