Design Pattern 1.1: Provide Different Informal and Formal Learning Settings

Problem:
A classroom’s repetitive, homogeneous, simplistic design with the teacher’s desk at the front of the classroom and student desks in rows assumes that all students will learn the same thing at the same time from the same person in the same manner.

The traditional model of the classroom embodies an easily navigable double loaded hall that emphasizes supervision and control. “Cells and Bells” describes how students were to interact within this environment. When the bell sounded, the children as a whole class would rise and move to the next area of study appropriately coined as a “cell”. Although this allowed for an efficient and adequate education, it was truly a factory based education, reminiscent of Henry Ford’s mode of car production. It taught only one way to learn and did not cater to the individual. Children need a more dynamic education and way of learning about the world around them. Evidence today from the frontiers of brain-based research illustrates that learning is not linear, but holistic, and that it is not uni-dimensional, but multi-faceted. Under the new learning, we need to look at different students learning different things from different people in different settings at different times.

Solution:
Create learning environments that differ in size, scale, configuration, material quality, and activity type (open learning studios, outdoor classrooms, breakout spaces, project rooms, and flexible-use areas) to provide a variety of multi-purpose spatial settings in which to learn. Replace inflexible classrooms with “learning studios.” Design spaces to enable a range of activities from quiet, reflective personal study to large, hands-on, collaborative projects. Provide flexible, easily accessible breakout areas where social interaction, incidental learning, and informal opportunities to discuss, display, and celebrate student work are encouraged.

Best Practices

Sidwell Friends Middle School
• Hallways at Sidwell Friends Middle School are wide enough to provide built in counters and chairs for students who wish to independently study or learn.

Camino Nuevo Charter Academy
• Camino Nuevo Charter Academy is located in a crime-ridden, busy neighborhood. Inner courtyards that are “protected” by the classroom walls allow students to enjoy the sunny, warm days of the California climate in an outdoor learning “classroom”.

Denver School of Science and Technology
• At DSST, students are given numerous, flexible, breakout spaces that are located in the center of the classroom pods. A morning meeting space at the entry of the school, called the “commons”, allows students to gather at different times of the day.

Interdistrict Downtown School
• A typical classroom or hallway at The Interdistrict Downtown School provides multiple learning settings that are divided by moveable half walls or by moveable cubbies and lockers.

Perspectives Charter School
• A multipurpose centrally located “commons” at Perspectives Charter School allows students to gather when not in the classroom. This space is very important to students and teachers because the school’s dense inner-city context does not allow for any exterior informal or formal learning settings.

Figure 3.1.1.1: A student and teacher gathering space called the “commons” for morning meeting activities and announcements at Denver School of Science and Technology.

Figure 3.1.1.2: Diagram showing the differences between the traditional “cells and bells” layout method vs a layout with breakout spaces, flexible spaces, “L” shaped classrooms, and outdoor classroom settings.

Figure 3.1.1.3: A section of the main level plan of DSST illustrates the differing learning settings designed to be formal, informal, small and large group.

Charter School Patterns of Innovation
A Building Better Communities Project
Design Recommendations

- Evaluate standardized classroom design and consider ways to personalize learning by utilizing the shape of the classroom to create areas for different activity centers.

- Give students a choice of informal and formal learning settings by creating a flexible classroom with distinct areas.

- Blur the boundaries of the classroom and hallway by creating breakout spaces just outside the classroom entrance.

- Blur the boundaries of the classroom and the outdoors by giving students access to easily accessed and controlled outdoor terraces or courtyards adjacent to the classroom.

- Arrange two or more learning studios into a learning suite, providing for more opportunities for interaction and different scaled and sized learning settings.

- Provide informal spaces for breakout areas, flexible-use space (for seminar, quiet individual work or collaborative work) and active zones (for project-based work) in common and classroom areas.

- Give students freedom in choosing different learning settings. Students can still be monitored through informal surveillance via large windows or open floor concepts.

- Create interesting hallways with many nooks or niches for student collaboration, learning, or independent studying.