LEARNING OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM:

APPLYING CREATIVE WORKPLACE TECHNIQUES TO EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

By Ben Loescher

Much of educational design has concentrated on what happens inside the classroom walls. But just outside these carefully designed and rigorously controlled environments, educational design leaves much to be desired. Having arrived early for their next class, students are encamped on the floor of a long corridor, flanked by classrooms. Periodically, a young woman looks up from vigorous thumb typing to peer through a narrow sidelight into the adjacent classroom—are they done yet? A few feet away, a sweatshirted gentleman snaps his laptop shut with the authority of a clapperboard on a film set—his battery is dead and there is nowhere to plug in. Emerging from a just adjourned class farther down the hall, three students exchange a few words and then scatter—working together on a group project will require them to meet at an apartment later that evening. The students may pass, but there is no question that the design is failing.

It's a problem that hasn't been solved because many institutions and designers fail to even recognize it for what it is. Recent developments in educational design have with few exceptions focused on either optimizing environmental conditions for learning (lighting, ventilation, acoustics, sustainability), or accommodating the architectural ramifications of ever increasing and changing technology within classroom spaces (smart lecterns, e-whiteboards, projection etc.). While both of these enterprises have value and without question improve specific learning environments, they are symptomatic of practices that narrowly define classrooms as the only spaces of learning, without acknowledging the "in-between" spaces as opportunities for a different kinds of work and learning, enabled by careful design.

Figure 1 *FIDM Orange County*

The recognition that non-classroom areas within many educational spaces are not properly serving their users is only the first step. Then what? Mercifully, there are techniques from workplace design that can be applied effectively to educational environments. Workplace designers recognized as early as the 1950's that homogenous, one-size fits all office environments stifled critical interaction between employees. It is now relatively common in progressive work environments to see collaborative work happening around a coffee table instead of exclusively within the conference room. The ping pong table that was purchased in a moment of dot-com excess is now used a standing height collaboration table. Where guest chairs once exclusively belonged in front of an individual's desk (a scene best suited for a job interview, loan application or duel), now guest chair and task chair are side by side, coworkers looking on a screen together. Common to all of these scenarios is an understanding (sometimes unconscious) that spaces where people meet, talk and collaborate are at least as important as the space where "work" occurs, and each special environment enables a different type of activity. The same is true of the spaces that lie outside of classrooms—capturing the potential of these areas to stimulate discussion, debate and collective work is to leverage the full potential of both a learning environment and its students.

Through over a decade of working closely with The Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising (FIDM) on four separate campuses, we've been able to combine their leading edge pedagogy with our longtime experience in designing creative spaces for advertising and technology companies. The outcomes have been remarkable: after completion of our first project together at FIDM's Irvine Campus, enrollment doubled within one year. Among the techniques that deployed there were conference type tables in open areas and mezzanines, and banquettes throughout classroom zones. Students don't check out these spaces—they can be used for homework, group projects, or even quiet time throughout the day. As technology has become more present in students lives, we've found these spaces being used for something else: research and online class work. **Figure 1.**

That these spaces present themselves as perfectly suited for this type of work is a happy accident that we can take no credit, but the lesson for technology heavy educational design is clear: Virtual work still happens in the physical word.

If that is what happens in common areas, what happens in the hallways and corridors that are conventionally used for circulation? In many schools, classrooms are treated as opaque boxes as a way to manage potential distractions. While mitigating the potential for distraction, this approach deprives circulation spaces from visual connection with spaces of instruction. There is an unquantifiable benefit of seeing other students learning—FIDM believes strongly that students learn as much from other students as from their instructors, and it is part of the schools mission to encourage such interaction. Fashion is largely a visual discipline, in our 2008 design for FIDM's San Diego Campus, the conventional boundary wall between classroom and hallway evaporates into a plane of glass, making those circulating past a participant in the activities occurring within. **Figure 2.**

Specialized technology spaces need variety as well. Students might need to work on computer projects together the same way they do other types of work. Not everyone is ready to encamp for a day in front of the monitor; some people just need to print a paper or check their email. Where the one-size fits all computer lab (seen everywhere) treats all of these tasks with one solution, the lab desk, at FIDM's Los Angeles campus we created technology settings for a full range of tasks. Checking your email? Students sit on furry pads in front of tatami-type tables, inches off the ground. Browsing the web? Lounge chairs with laptops on tablet arms are always in use, all semester long. Not every solution needs to be unique: a large quantity of conventional lab desks are provided for longer duration work. **Figure 3.**

These previous examples focus on techniques for making educational space more effective. It is an easy case to make. But in closing, allow me to leave you with a further thought about why schools need to think outside the classroom: with real estate costs, recruitment and retention increasingly serious considerations for educational institutions, can the schools of the future afford buildings that leave 30 to 40% of their floor area outside of their dedicated instructional areas underutilized and undesigned?

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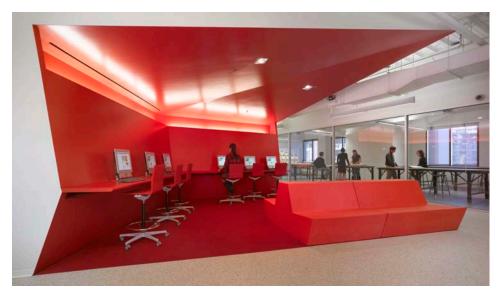

Figure 2 Top *FIDM San Diego*
Figure 3 Below *FIDM Annex*