



Intentional design for makerspaces and libraries.

By Dr. Robert Dillon

Our largest learning spaces in a school can be a catalyst for change throughout the building. Libraries, makerspaces and all of their relatives, when optimally designed, begin to promote innovation through active learning. Designing these large spaces should include listening to student voice, partnering with the right designers and focusing on the educational mission. When all of these elements align, the learning environment can jump-start the modern learning that schools are seeking.

Maker Culture

Being intentional about the design of larger common spaces in schools, like makerspaces and libraries, is key to establishing the importance of learning environments as a school priority. Modernizing these spaces requires a close understanding of the needs of the students and staff, and one way to begin this journey is to build a design culture. Today's modern libraries, makerspaces and all of their cousin spaces should support a maker culture through their design. Making is a collective term for the activities that allow students to discover and explore their guided learning opportunities with high levels of joy and engagement. All schools need an incubator for this type of culture and positive learning energy, and large common spaces are ideal to serve this need. Consider these ideas that have been a success for other schools.

Limit the Purpose

Larger spaces are often so big they feel like they can serve a variety of purposes. They can be flexible and agile, but too often these spaces experience mission creep. We have to make sure these areas have a forward-focused mission while avoiding trying to be everything for everyone with the result being it serves no one. Build internal capacity about the normal learning actions that should take place in this space. Use signs to name spaces and build norms. This allows spaces to be envisioned in new ways without miscommunication about the purpose. Makerspaces can be great for generating ideas and building low- or high-fi prototypes. Libraries can be quiet sanctuaries and places to spread out on collaborative projects, but it is important to purchase items based on the purpose of the space, instead of just filling the room.





Need/Nice/Neat

Libraries and makerspaces are great places for students to fall in love with learning. This includes finding the perfect book, but also being introduced to modern technology, and fresh ways to think and learn. Consider balancing a collection of items in these spaces that fit into three categories. First are the need-to-have items. This includes materials for prototyping in a makerspace as well as supplies to cut, combine and craft solutions. In libraries, books are still an essential, along with spaces like portable whiteboards to draw and sketch new ideas. The second group of items are nice-to-have items like mobile technology, 3D printers and other tools. Lots of learning can happen without these things, but they truly enhance the experience. Finally, don't forget the neat-to-have things. Drones, robots and CNC machines all fill this bucket. The right mix can peak fresh energy and interest in learning.



Plan with Next Iteration in Mind

Many fresh designs for bigger common spaces like makerspaces and libraries are designed with new flexible furniture and soft seating options, and all of these play a role. Consider how you can purchase items that will not only serve this iteration of the space, but what the space could become. It is ideal that 75-80% of items purchased could be used again in the next phase of the space. Too much of the current generation of furniture has no purpose in the modern space, and it is hard for schools to pivot away from older, heavy and fixed furniture. Think nimble items with multiple purposes. Look for foldable, nestable and writable tables, and chairs that can be easily pushed aside or together. Space should be transformable by a group of students or adults in less than three minutes. Can you make a recommendation or two? Whatever the new space design is today, it will have new purpose in less than a decade.

Storage

Project-rich spaces need lots of multi-sized storage. Storage shouldn't house old curriculum or supplies, but it should have the capacity to hold projects for four to six weeks. Having a combination of storage slots, space with no doors, and areas that have doors can allow for the storage needs of multiple ages to be satisfied. It is important for teachers to establish a clean-out process that moves projects from home to school in a timely manner. Storage should support learning, not the collection of stuff over time.



Art and Artifacts

Students need to experience beauty in their learning environments. Makerspaces should have both 2D and 3D student and professional work to celebrate student hard work and provide a sense of what is possible. Libraries should have art and sculpture to inspire learning. Museums are incredible models for how to design the perimeters of these spaces. Blank walls crave a thoughtful design that showcase student creation, enhances the mission and bring a sense of coherence to the color palette of the space. It is important to choose these items wisely as a few items need to have a great impact. It is easy to fill walls and generate lots of negative visual noise. Allow beauty to be a driving force in your design process.

Space to Connect

Modern spaces have ratcheted up the decibels, and as spaces grow in active learning this is often the reality. Intentional design reminds us that we need to go beyond designing for average and look for ways to meet the needs of a variety of students. Libraries must remain sanctuaries for quiet reflection and mindful moments. Create comfortable space that feels like it is separate from the main energy of the library. Support the space with varied lighting and minimize the foot traffic that passes near the space. Use smart signs to establish the normal actions that take place in the space. Makerspaces often are a magnet for students needing belonging and a community of thinkers. Look for ways to have the space open during non-class hours, including before and after school, and during lunch. Many students can use this space for a respite from the intensity of the normal school flow.

Students who are engaged and joyful in their learning should be a focus for all schools as these are the elements that lead to academic achievement. Intentional learning space design is one of the many ways to truly leverage change in the work for modern schools. Continue to look for ways that grow excitement around optimized learning spaces and bring new ideas to your spaces, so students can grow as collaborators and creative thinkers.



About the author:

Dr. Robert Dillon has served as a thought leader in education over the last twenty years as a teacher, principal and director of innovation. He has a passion to change the educational landscape by building excellent engaging schools for all students. Dr. Dillon has had the opportunity to speak throughout the country at local, state and national conferences, as well as share his thoughts and ideas in a variety of publications. He is the author of five books on intentional design in learning.

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