Yes We Can! Designing for Literacy, Numeracy, and Personalized Learning

A Case Study of the Cristo Rey High School in Minneapolis

By Randy Fielding

“Yes we can!” Those famous three words of the Obama campaign could also serve as the theme for the culture of hope and excellence at the Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. Many of the students arrive in the 9th grade with reading and math skills at an early elementary school level. Others lack the basic life skills to look an adult in the eye, shake hands, dress neatly, and show up for school and work on time. The kids come from all across Minneapolis, many from gang-dominated neighborhoods.

The school is part of the Cristo Rey Network, featured in a 60-Minute documentary and in Newsweek Magazine. The network has transformed the graduation rate in under-performing neighborhoods from 20% to over 90%. Each student has a corporate internship, coordinated by Cristo Rey, and spends one to two days per week off site, honing professional skills.

Four students share one full-time internship, and the income funds more than 70% of the tuition. The 500-student Minneapolis school is personalized through division into four 125-student academies. A rigorous academic emphasis is rounded out through an athletic program made possible by collocation with the Colin Powell Youth Leadership Center.
Why 125-student Academies?

In wealthier districts, with high test scores and graduation rates, the value of small learning communities is less obvious. However, in lower income areas with at-risk students, a secure, family-like community is a foundation for improved learning outcomes. Fielding Nair International’s design experience with personal learning communities extends over two decades and includes notable successes such as Avalon School in St. Paul, and Harbor City International School in Duluth, Minnesota. Our anecdotal experience also draws on research that goes back for four decades.

In her research on Brazilian tribal culture, anthropologist Jane Goodall writes about the critical size of 60-70 person groups for maintaining a cohesive unit (**In the Shadow of Man**). Malcolm Gladwell, in *The Tipping Point*, writes about professional learning communities with a maximum number of 150 people “for a group to function effi-

Not A Citadel:
In colder climates like Minneapolis, it’s a stretch to ask inhabitants during winter to navigate outside between academies and shared resources. Compact buildings are efficient connectors and they minimize heat loss. However, they are more “Citadel-like” than a campus of individual buildings often enjoyed in warmer climates. At Cristo Rey, a combination of projecting bays and the curvy Agora break down the Citadel massing to a more personal scale.

The Agora: a connector that's not a corridor:
At Cristo Rey, we took a cue from Plato, who refers to the city and public marketplace as the most vibrant centers for learning (“Agora” means marketplace in Greek). Unlike the smaller common areas in each academy, the Agora is a more public realm, connecting all of the learning communities, the Colin Powell Center, and the public itself. The space was designed to accommodate project work, local artwork, student-run incubator businesses, project displays, and a cafe.
Above: students participate in a math graphing exercise in the common area, after a 20 minute introductory lecture in a smaller adjacent learning studio. The commons is also valuable for theme-based, interdisciplinary sessions, where Social Studies, English, Science and Math advisors collaborate to integrate topics that authentically engage students.

Below: Final Upper Level Plan
Learning Studios & Learning Suites

Mention the word “classroom” and many students think of long days of captivity, waiting for the bell. A “Studio” brings to mind an active, project-based environment where students take more responsibility for their use of time and learning. One might build something in a studio, or rearrange the tables, or capture a corner or bay and make it their own for a particular project.

Put two studios together and you get a Learning Suite. Students at Cristo Rey call the Learning Suite in the freshman academy the “Garage” because of the large glass overhead “garage” door into the commons. This is one of the best liked spaces in the school, because of its spaciousness and flexibility. When opened, it can accommodate the entire learning community in a meeting or presentation. One “teaching wall” has a large pull down screen and a solid, angled ceiling overhead to improve acoustics for presentations.

At Cristo Rey, students and advisors meet, eat, work corroboratively and independently in the cafe/commons.

Hi Tables, Low Tables, and Soft Seating

Look across a prison or school cafeteria and you are likely to see rows and rows of hard chairs or benches, all at uniform height. In contrast, your favorite restaurant or coffee shop probably has booths and tables of varied sizes. Visiting coffee shops around the world, ranging from Star Bucks in Abu Dhabi to The International Café in Prague, it’s apparent that these informal, varied spaces have become vital work centers in the global economy.

When FNI surveys students on environmental preferences, respondents invariably select these coffee shop-like environments for both independent and collaborative work ambiance.
Lockers and open closets in small family-like groupings:
We all need to feel connected to the people immediately around us, and we want to be able to visually survey who is coming and going. Long rows of metal lockers along corridors fail to meet our most basic needs for territory and space. It’s uncomfortable to have one’s back facing a corridor while digging into a locker. In the noisy traffic flow, it’s a poor environment for socializing. At Cristo Rey, small family-like groupings of lockers and open closets are distributed in each academy. Locker or “cubbies” are large enough to store a purse, Ipod and books. The open closets, shelves and hooks adjacent are intended for backpacks, coats, and athletic bags.

The design approach for Cristo Rey’s student storage is in consonance with the principles established by the International Association of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), where a culture of caring, responsibility and natural surveillance are emphasized as the foundation for a safe school environment.

Building a culture of excellence—an ongoing mission:
Cristo Rey’s Principal, Dr. Kristine Melloy, helped to plan the school while serving as a tenured professor in the University of St. Thomas College of Education. She agreed to take a leave of absence to launch the school and get it on its feet along with the school’s present, Rev. David Haschka.

After the first year Kristine realized that the development of a new school culture was a multi-year commitment, and left St. Thomas to give Cristo Rey her full commitment. It’s an unusual story to see an educator leave a tenured position to become a high school principal. It’s just that kind of commitment that is needed to build a culture of excellence that will grow into the new facility.

When I visit Cristo Rey, I can hear Kristine, Rev. Haschka, her dedicated group of advisors, and the students all saying “Yes we can!”

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