



Learning Strategy Model through Santri Seating Management at Anwaha

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Article Info	Abstract
Article history: Received: April 23, 2026 Revised: July 22, 2026 Accepted: August 22, 2026 Keywords: Contextual Learning Strategy, Pesantren, Santri, Seating Management.	Seating is often treated as a logistical matter, but in pesantren learning it intersects with traditional instructional practices, teacher supervision, peer interaction, and the social organization of learning. This study explored how ustadz (teachers) and santri (students) at Pesantren Anwaha experienced and interpreted seating management and how these interpretations informed learning-strategy selection. A qualitative phenomenological design was used, with data collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation and analyzed through significant statements, thematic categorization, textural and structural description, and synthesis of experiential meaning. Five contextual seating patterns were identified: classical, halaqah or circular, group, paired, and rotational seating. Classical arrangements supported direct explanation and monitoring; halaqah and group arrangements supported dialogue, musyawarah, and collaborative discussion; paired seating facilitated memorization, reading, correction, and peer support; and rotation was used to distribute positional experience and participation opportunities. Across participants' accounts, seating became pedagogically meaningful when aligned with learning objectives, material characteristics, santri conditions, and intended interaction patterns. The resulting model positions seating management as a contextual component of instructional decision-making in pesantren. The findings describe site-specific experiential relationships rather than causal effects.
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INTRODUCTION

The physical organization of a learning space is easy to dismiss as a matter of furniture, yet seating determines who can see, hear, approach, and respond to whom during instruction. International research increasingly treats the classroom as an active component of pedagogy rather than a neutral container, because spatial configurations can enable or restrict interaction, movement, collaboration, and teacher access (Baars et al., 2023; Basdogan & Birdwell, 2024; Jin & Peng, 2022; Kokko & Hirsto, 2021; Reinius et al., 2021). At the same time, the evidence cautions against assuming that flexible space automatically produces better learning, since pedagogical practice and teachers' ability to use spatial affordances remain decisive (Hao et al., 2021; Frelin et al., 2025). This tension is especially relevant in educational settings where several instructional traditions coexist within the same institution. In such settings, the central question is not whether one seating arrangement is universally superior, but how spatial organization is interpreted and adapted for different pedagogical purposes.

At Pesantren Anwaha, this issue is visible in everyday learning because santri participate in activities that differ substantially in interactional demands. Direct explanation, bandongan, sorogan, halaqah, memorization, musyawarah, group discussion, peer tutoring, and practical activities do not require the same degree of teacher centrality, peer visibility, movement, or conversational access. The original field account also identifies an uneven learning experience associated with position: santri seated in front are more readily observed and addressed, whereas those at the back or in corners may be less immediately engaged or noticed when difficulties arise. Research outside the pesantren context similarly shows that physical proximity is associated with peer relationships, classroom social dynamics, and academic engagement, although the direction and magnitude of these relationships depend on context and instructional purpose (van den Berg & Cillessen, 2015;

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Gremmen et al., 2018; Faur & Laursen, 2022; Hoekstra et al., 2023). Seating management is therefore relevant not only to order but also to the distribution of attention, interaction, and opportunities to participate. Treating it as a pedagogical decision may help explain why the same instructional strategy works differently under different spatial conditions.

The pedagogical significance of seating becomes clearer when flexible and participatory learning are considered. Studies of flexible classrooms report that movable furniture and adaptable layouts can support transitions between individual, pair, group, and whole-class work, and can create conditions for interaction and behavioral engagement (Attai et al., 2021; Ozkan Bekiroglu et al., 2022; Kariippanon et al., 2019). Small-group research further indicates that the shape and orientation of seating can influence eye contact, participation, and the organization of collaborative work (Hayashi et al., 2023). However, flexible arrangements can also introduce distraction, management demands, or unequal experiences when spatial choices are not aligned with learner needs and teaching practices (Bluteau et al., 2022; Sasson et al., 2022; Morris & Imms, 2025). These findings shift the issue from furniture choice to pedagogical alignment. For Pesantren Anwaha, the practical problem is consequently how ustadz recognize when a particular arrangement supports, rather than obstructs, the learning strategy being used.

Pesantren education makes this alignment distinctive because learning combines cognitive, social, moral, and religious formation within a shared institutional culture. Traditional forms such as *bandongan* and *sorogan* remain important, while contemporary pesantren also incorporate discussion, collaborative activity, and more adaptive learning practices (Wasehudin et al., 2023; Karman et al., 2023; Sopian et al., 2025; Kartini et al., 2026). This coexistence means that seating cannot be evaluated only through models developed for conventional school or university classrooms. A row arrangement that supports attentive textual explanation may be appropriate in one session, while a circular or grouped arrangement may better support *musyawarah*, peer correction, or dialogical interpretation in another. The pedagogical meaning of space is therefore inseparable from the instructional tradition, the learning objective, and the social relationships expected during a particular activity. A context-sensitive account is needed to understand how these elements are actually connected in pesantren practice.

Existing international research provides strong evidence that learning spaces matter, but it has concentrated mainly on conventional schools and higher education. Studies have examined flexible furniture, active learning classrooms, student engagement, collaborative attitudes, learner agency, inclusive design, and the relationship between innovative spaces and teaching practice (Byers et al., 2018; Clinton & Wilson, 2019; Talbert & Mor-Avi, 2019; Kariippanon et al., 2021; Mameli et al., 2023; Putman et al., 2024; Bautista & López-Costa, 2025). Other work has investigated how space affects classroom management and social relationships, including seating-chart interventions and teacher strategies for positioning learners (van den Berg et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2020; Hoekstra et al., 2023). Across this literature, a recurring conclusion is that spatial flexibility is most meaningful when teachers can translate it into purposeful pedagogical action. Yet the dominant evidence base rarely considers educational environments in which traditional religious pedagogies and participatory approaches operate side by side. This leaves uncertainty about how the general principle of pedagogical-spatial alignment is interpreted within pesantren learning.

A second limitation concerns the level at which seating is usually studied. Much of the literature evaluates outcomes associated with flexible versus traditional rooms, whereas fewer studies examine teachers' reasoning about matching specific seating formations to specific instructional strategies (Hao et al., 2021; Hoekstra et al., 2023; Detyne et al., 2025). Recent work also shows that innovative spaces are not self-executing: teachers and learners continuously negotiate how physical environments become usable learning environments, and the same design may be experienced differently across activities and learner groups (Vijapur et al., 2021; Woolner et al., 2022; Clemson & Coyle, 2025; Mohammadi & Zandi, 2025). Research on educational change similarly emphasizes that transitions to innovative environments require changes in practice rather than spatial redesign alone (Fletcher et al., 2020; French et al., 2020; Young et al., 2022). What remains underexplored is a qualitative account of seating as an explicit decision variable connecting instructional aims, learner conditions, and traditional or participatory learning strategies in a pesantren. This gap is consequential because a seating model that ignores institutional pedagogy may be conceptually neat but practically weak.

This study therefore explored how seating management was experienced and interpreted by ustadz and santri at Pesantren Anwaha and how those interpretations informed the selection of learning strategies. It focused on three connected questions: what seating patterns were used, what learning strategies accompanied those patterns, and how seating management was considered when determining strategy appropriateness. The study does not test whether one arrangement causally improves learning outcomes; instead, it develops a contextual model from participants' experiences and observed learning practices. Conceptually, the study extends learning-space research by locating spatial decision-making within the pedagogical traditions of pesantren rather than treating seating as an isolated classroom-design variable. Practically, it provides a structured way for ustadz to consider learning objectives, material characteristics, santri conditions, and intended interaction patterns when arranging seats. The contribution is therefore an interpretive model of pedagogical-spatial alignment grounded in the learning practices reported at Pesantren Anwaha.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to understand how ustadz (teachers) and santri (students) experienced, interpreted, and assigned meaning to seating management in the learning process at Pesantren Anwaha. The design was appropriate because the research focus concerned participants' lived experiences and pedagogical interpretations rather than statistical estimation of effects. The analytical unit was the experience of arranging, occupying, and using seating configurations in relation to instructional strategies. The study therefore treated seating management as a contextual practice whose meaning emerged from the interaction between learning objectives, material characteristics, santri conditions, and expected patterns of interaction. Causal claims were not made because the design was qualitative and site-specific.

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at Pesantren Anwaha, which was purposively selected because its learning activities include classical classroom instruction, halaqah, sorogan, bandongan, musyawarah, memorization, and group discussion. Participants were selected purposively from pesantren leaders, ustadz/teachers, santri, and other individuals involved in managing learning activities because they had direct experience with learning processes, seating arrangements, and instructional strategy selection. Ustadz/teachers served as the primary informants because they conducted learning activities and made instructional decisions, while santri served as supporting informants who described their learning experiences in relation to seating positions and classroom seating patterns.

Data Sources and Research Instruments

Primary data were obtained through observations and in-depth interviews with ustadz/teachers and santri, while secondary data were collected from pesantren documents, learning schedules, records of learning activities, regulations, photographs of learning spaces, and other documents related to classroom management and learning practices. The researcher served as the primary instrument in collecting, interpreting, and constructing meaning from the data. Observation guidelines, interview protocols, and documentation checklists supported the data collection process. These instruments were developed according to the research focus, namely santri seating management patterns, instructional strategies employed, and the meaning of seating management in determining the appropriateness of learning strategies.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection combined observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to examine santri seating management patterns, interactions between ustadz and santri, peer interactions, and the instructional strategies implemented during learning. In-depth interviews with ustadz/teachers explored their experiences in determining seating arrangements, the rationale for instructional strategy selection, and the meanings attributed to the relationship between santri seating positions and learning effectiveness. Interviews with santri explored their experiences related to comfort, concentration, willingness to ask questions, discipline, and learning

engagement based on seating positions. Documentation complemented the field data through archives, photographs, schedules, and learning materials.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data were analyzed phenomenologically in a sequence that preserved participants' accounts while moving toward thematic interpretation. First, all observational, interview, and documentary material was read repeatedly to establish an overall understanding of the field data. Second, significant statements concerning seating management and learning strategy were identified and grouped into categories. Third, categories were developed into major themes concerning seating patterns, teachers' considerations in arranging seats, instructional strategies, learning interaction, santri engagement, and the appropriateness of strategy selection. Fourth, the researcher prepared textural descriptions of what participants experienced and structural descriptions of how those experiences occurred within the learning context of Pesantren Anwaha. Fifth, the recurring meanings across these descriptions were synthesized into the essence of the experience and used to formulate the learning strategy model based on santri seating management. Trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation across pesantren leaders, ustadz/teachers, santri, and institutional documents; technique triangulation across observation, interviews, and documentation; and member checking of preliminary interpretations with informants. The overall research procedure and phenomenological analysis process are summarized in Figure 1. The figure illustrates the sequential stages from defining the research focus and selecting informants to data collection, thematic interpretation, synthesis of participants' experiences, and trustworthiness checking.

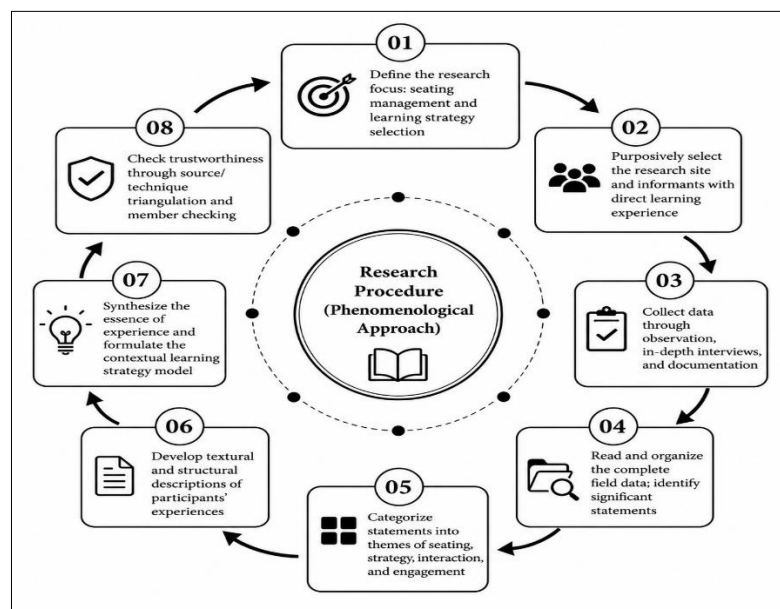


Figure 1. Research procedure and phenomenological analysis flow

As shown in Figure 1, the analytical process was conducted iteratively rather than as a strictly mechanical sequence. The stages were connected through continuous comparison among observational data, interview accounts, and documentary evidence, allowing recurring meanings to be refined into themes and ultimately synthesized into the contextual learning strategy model based on santri seating management.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. Patterns of Santri Seating Management

The field data indicated that seating at Pesantren Anwaha was managed flexibly rather than standardized across all learning activities. Five recurring patterns were identified: classical seating, halaqah or circular seating, group seating, paired seating, and rotational seating. Ustadz adjusted these patterns according to the type of material, the number of santri, the objective of the session, and the form of interaction they intended to create. Classical seating placed santri facing the ustadz

and was used when learning required a common focus, direct explanation, introductory concepts, or general guidance. The arrangement also allowed ustadz to observe the class more readily and maintain order during teacher-led activities. Within the participants' accounts, its value lay mainly in concentration and monitoring rather than in maximizing peer interaction.

Halaqah or circular seating was used when learning required closer guidance and two-way communication. By reducing the formal distance between ustadz and santri and allowing learners to see one another, this arrangement supported reading, guided discussion, and responses to peers. Group seating was used for musyawarah, problem-solving, and collaborative discussion because small groups made exchange and peer assistance more accessible. Participants also recognized a management trade-off: increased interaction could produce off-task conversation if the activity was not closely guided. Paired seating was associated with memorization, reading exercises, simple question-and-answer activities, and peer correction, allowing santri with stronger mastery to support peers. Rotational seating served a different function by preventing fixed positional advantages, reducing boredom, and providing santri with experience of different places within the learning space.

2. Learning Strategies Implemented

Learning strategies at Pesantren Anwaha combined traditional pesantren practices with more participatory forms of learning. The field data identified lectures, question-and-answer sessions, bandongan, sorogan, halaqah, memorization, musyawarah, group discussion, peer tutoring, and practical activities. Lectures and bandongan were generally accompanied by classical or semi-halaqah arrangements because santri needed to attend to a common explanation and, in kitab learning, follow the ustadz's reading, translation, and interpretation. Sorogan was used for individual reading, memorization, presentation, or correction and therefore required closer teacher-santri interaction. Halaqah supported guided reading and dialogical reinforcement, whereas musyawarah and group discussion required arrangements that enabled santri to see, hear, and respond to peers. Peer tutoring appeared most naturally in paired or small-group arrangements, while memorization and practical activities required configurations that allowed repeated practice together with teacher supervision.

3. Seating Management and the Appropriateness of Learning Strategy Selection

Across the observed practices and participant accounts, seating was one of the considerations used by ustadz when deciding how a learning activity should be conducted. When the objective was to establish foundational understanding or deliver a structured explanation, classical seating was interpreted as compatible with lectures, question-and-answer sessions, and bandongan. When the objective shifted toward argumentation, expression of opinion, peer exchange, or collaborative problem-solving, group or halaqah arrangements were considered more compatible with musyawarah and discussion. Materials requiring accurate reading, memorization, or individual correction were more often associated with sorogan, paired work, or peer tutoring. Seating also supported classroom management: santri needing closer attention could be positioned where they were easier to monitor, dominant interaction patterns could be disrupted, and quieter santri could be placed in positions that encouraged participation. These practices indicate that seating functioned as a means of coordinating instructional purpose, learner condition, and interactional demand rather than as a fixed environmental feature.

From a phenomenological perspective, the meaning of seating differed but converged across the two principal participant groups. Ustadz interpreted seating as a way to read classroom conditions, distribute attention, and create the interactional structure required by an instructional strategy. Santri experienced seating through comfort, concentration, proximity to peers and ustadz, and the ease or difficulty of asking questions and participating. The essential relationship identified in the data was therefore not that one seating pattern produced a single outcome, but that a pattern became pedagogically useful when it was aligned with the learning activity. Misalignment was described as constraining the strategy: rigid rows were less suitable for interaction-intensive discussion, while uncontrolled group arrangements could reduce focus during centralized explanation. The proposed learning strategy model consequently positions seating management between instructional intention and the learning experience of santri, with the appropriate configuration determined contextually rather than universally.

4. Contextual Learning Strategy Model Based on Santri Seating Management

Across the three sets of findings, the study synthesized a contextual learning strategy model in which seating management operates as a decision point between pedagogical considerations and the learning interaction that an instructional strategy requires. The model begins with four considerations repeatedly identified in the field data: learning objectives, material characteristics, santri conditions, and intended interaction patterns. These considerations inform the choice among classical, halaqah or circular, group, paired, and rotational arrangements. The selected configuration is then aligned with strategies such as lectures, question-and-answer sessions, bandongan, halaqah, musyawarah, group discussion, peer tutoring, sorogan, memorization, and peer checking. Figure 2 summarizes this alignment while preserving the central phenomenological finding that no seating pattern is pedagogically preferable in every situation.

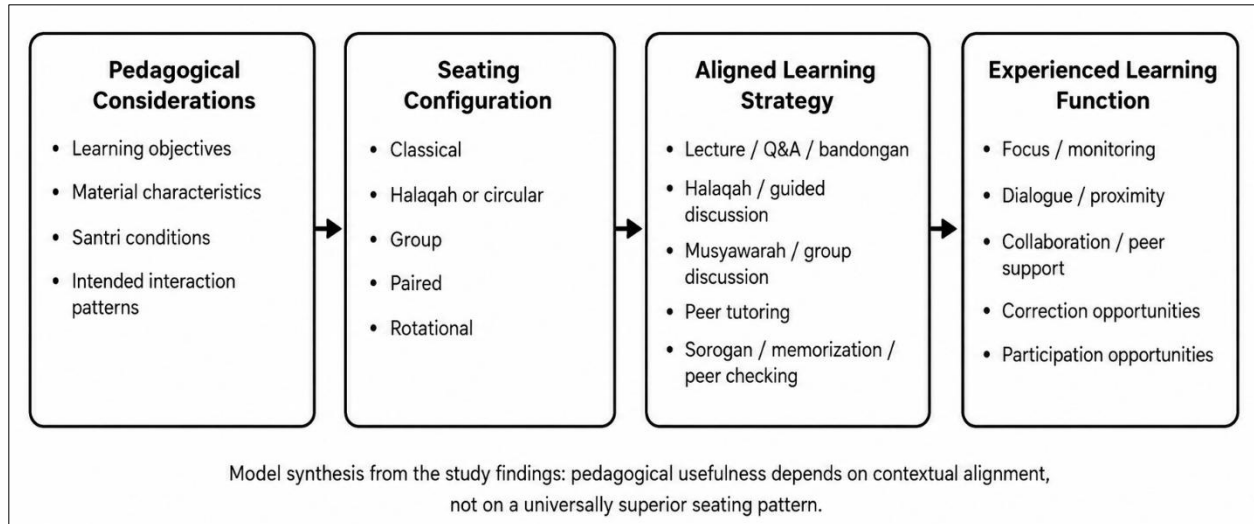


Figure 2. Contextual learning strategy model based on santri seating management at Pesantren Anwaha

The model should be read as an alignment framework rather than as a causal sequence. Classical seating was associated with common focus and monitoring during centralized explanation, while halaqah and group arrangements were associated with dialogue, musyawarah, and collaborative exchange. Paired seating supported reading, memorization, correction, and peer assistance, and rotational seating was used across activities to broaden positional experience and participation opportunities. The pedagogical function of each arrangement therefore depended on the activity for which it was used and on how the ustadz managed the resulting interaction.

Discussion

The first finding is that seating management at Pesantren Anwaha operated as an adaptive pedagogical practice rather than a permanent classroom arrangement. The five patterns identified in the field data were used for different purposes, and their meaning depended on what the ustadz wanted santri to attend to, discuss, practice, or perform. This interpretation is consistent with Hoekstra et al. (2023), who found that teachers use seating to pursue both academic and social-emotional goals and may select different strategies for similar objectives. It also accords with Kokko and Hirsto (2021) and Baars et al. (2023), whose work shows that physical spaces become learning environments through the practices and interactions organized within them. The present study extends that argument by showing how spatial adaptation occurs in a pesantren where classical and participatory forms of instruction coexist. Within this setting, flexibility is not simply the availability of movable furniture; it is the ustadz's capacity to reorganize proximity and orientation in response to pedagogical purpose.

The use of classical seating for lectures and bandongan illustrates why a contextual model should not treat teacher-centered arrangements as inherently inferior. In the field data, front-facing organization supported a common attentional focus, orderly textual explanation, and teacher monitoring when material required systematic guidance. Research on active learning spaces similarly warns against attributing learning quality to room type alone; pedagogical approach can account for more of the observed benefit than the physical environment itself (Hao et al., 2021), and

teachers' interpretations of space determine how its affordances are realized (Frelin et al., 2025). Byers et al. (2018) also showed that changing space without changing teaching does not automatically improve learning, while Woolner et al. (2022) caution against design assumptions that detach spatial form from educational practice. In pesantren learning, this point is particularly important because bandongan and related practices depend on concentrated attention to a shared textual explanation. The finding therefore supports a principle of functional fit: the pedagogical value of classical seating lies in its alignment with particular instructional demands, not in its universal superiority.

Halaqah, group, and paired arrangements, by contrast, were interpreted as enabling more reciprocal forms of interaction. Their relevance can be understood through proximity, visual access, and the opportunity for santri to direct attention to peers as well as to the ustadz. Faur and Laursen (2022) found that classroom seat proximity is associated with friendship formation, and earlier work showed that seating distance is related to peer status and classroom social dynamics (van den Berg & Cillessen, 2015; van den Berg et al., 2012). In collaborative learning, the geometry of seating also matters: Hayashi et al. (2023) reported differences in process performance between round and crescent-shaped arrangements, while Clinton and Wilson (2019) found that active-learning spaces were perceived as better suited to collaboration. The Anwaha findings are compatible with this literature, but they add a culturally specific dimension because halaqah is not merely a flexible classroom configuration; it is an established pedagogical form with relational and instructional meaning in pesantren practice. The implication is that spatial proximity should be interpreted together with the cultural form of learning that gives that proximity pedagogical purpose.

The pairing of group seating with musyawarah, discussion, and peer tutoring also suggests that spatial organization can redistribute participation and instructional support. International studies report that flexible learning spaces may facilitate movement, collaboration, interaction, and on-task behavior when combined with student-centered pedagogy (Kariippanon et al., 2019; Kariippanon et al., 2021; Ozkan Bekiroglu et al., 2022). Attai et al. (2021) similarly found that flexible furniture can support reconfiguration of elementary classrooms, while Morris and Imms (2025) connect flexible furniture with learner agency and opportunities to meet individual learning needs. In the present study, peer support was not described as an abstract benefit of flexibility but as a practical mechanism: paired and small-group arrangements allowed santri with stronger mastery to assist those needing correction in reading or memorization. This interpretation is also consistent with Gremmen et al. (2018), who showed that near-seated peers can be relevant to academic engagement. The contribution here is a more specific account of how seating may organize who becomes available as an immediate learning resource within a pesantren lesson.

The findings nevertheless show that flexibility introduces management demands and should not be equated with unrestricted movement or choice. Group seating could create off-task conversation, and classical seating could produce passivity when used without interactive elements; both observations indicate that each configuration has affordances and constraints. Bluteau et al. (2022) found that flexible seating experiences can differ across learners, while Sasson et al. (2022) linked innovative learning spaces with classroom-management and pedagogical conditions rather than with a simple spatial effect. Recent studies likewise emphasize that inclusive and innovative spaces require deliberate adaptation to learner needs (Clemson & Coyle, 2025; Bautista & López-Costa, 2025) and that engagement emerges from socio-material relations among people, objects, and activities (Detyna et al., 2025). The Anwaha data support this more cautious view. Rotational seating, for example, was useful not because movement itself was beneficial, but because rotation was used to reduce persistent positional advantages, interrupt domination, and broaden participation opportunities.

A further contribution concerns the relationship between space and instructional decision-making. Existing learning-space research often compares traditional and innovative settings or examines how flexible environments influence engagement, agency, and perception (Talbert & Mor-Avi, 2019; Reinius et al., 2021; Putman et al., 2024; Mameli et al., 2023). Other studies emphasize that successful transitions to new learning environments depend on changes in teacher practice and the capacity to actualize spatial affordances (Fletcher et al., 2020; French et al., 2020; Young et al., 2022). The present study shifts the unit of interpretation from the room as a whole to the teacher's matching process among objective, material, learner condition, intended interaction, seating configuration, and

strategy. That shift is important because Pesantren Anwaha did not rely on one “innovative” room; it reconfigured ordinary learning space to fit different pedagogical episodes. As summarized in Figure 2, the proposed model can therefore be understood as a contextual decision model in which spatial organization is one component of instructional reasoning rather than an independent intervention.

These findings should be interpreted within the limits of the study design. The phenomenological approach offers depth about meaning and practice at Pesantren Anwaha, but it does not establish that a given seating pattern causes higher engagement, better achievement, or stronger discipline. Evidence from other contexts is itself mixed and emphasizes that physical design, pedagogy, learner characteristics, and institutional practice interact (Vijapur et al., 2021; Basdogan & Birdwell, 2024; Birdwell et al., 2024; Mohammadi & Zandi, 2025). The model is therefore best regarded as an empirically grounded framework for organizing pedagogical choices within this site, not as a universally validated prescription for all pesantren. Its theoretical value lies in connecting international learning-space scholarship with pesantren-specific instructional forms such as bandongan, sorogan, halaqah, and musyawarah, while its practical value lies in making the often implicit spatial reasoning of ustadz more explicit. Future studies could test the transferability of the model across pesantren settings and, where appropriate, examine learning outcomes with designs capable of evaluating comparative effects.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that santri seating management at Pesantren Anwaha is part of pedagogical decision-making rather than merely the physical organization of a learning room. Five recurring patterns were identified: classical, halaqah or circular, group, paired, and rotational seating. Each pattern was used in relation to particular learning objectives, material characteristics, santri conditions, and desired interaction patterns. The field data therefore do not support a single best arrangement; they support contextual alignment between spatial organization and instructional purpose.

The learning strategies observed at Pesantren Anwaha combined traditional pesantren practices and participatory approaches, including lectures, question-and-answer sessions, bandongan, sorogan, halaqah, memorization, musyawarah, group discussion, peer tutoring, and practical activities. Classical seating was interpreted as more compatible with centralized explanation and monitoring, whereas halaqah and group seating supported dialogue and collaborative activity. Paired arrangements supported reading, memorization, correction, and peer assistance, while rotational seating was used to broaden positional experience and participation. These relationships should be understood as qualitative patterns identified in one institutional context, not as experimentally proven effects.

The resulting learning strategy model places seating management as a contextual link between instructional intention and santri learning experience. Its contribution is to make spatial reasoning explicit within pesantren pedagogy by asking not only what strategy will be used, but also how santri should be positioned to support the interaction that the strategy requires. The model may assist ustadz in planning deliberate transitions among teacher-centered, dialogical, collaborative, and individualized activities. Given the phenomenological and single-site design, however, the model should be interpreted as a contextual framework rather than a universally generalizable or causal prescription. Further research across different pesantren settings can examine the transferability of the model and, where appropriate, use comparative or longitudinal designs to evaluate associations with learning outcomes.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Mahmud was responsible for research conceptualization, methodology, data processing, and funding acquisition. Syahrani was responsible for observing the field conditions, collecting field data, conducting data analysis, and completing the research process.

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