

Uncovering the Lessons of Classroom Furniture

You are where you sit

BY TOM MCKENNA

Imagine the following scenario: Students enter a classroom with the desk and chairs neatly arranged in straight rows. They hesitate at the door, make a quick assessment of the room and choose a place to sit. They work their way down narrow rows of chairs, careful not to disturb the tight arrangement of furniture. They sit quietly, deposit backpacks under their seats, place a notebook on the desk, and look straight ahead to the front of the room and the much larger teacher desk that stares back at them.

Shortly before the class is scheduled to start, an adult figure enters the room, writes their name on the front board along with the name of the class, and assumes a seat at the big desk or the podium standing by its side. School is in session.

Welcome to day one of lessons about power, pedagogy, and relationships to physical and symbolic capital.

I watched students file into my classroom for 35 years. Never have I witnessed students attempt to change the arranged furniture, nor ask to do so. Instead, they arrange themselves according to the teacher's pre-arranged design.

I normally conduct my classes at Portland Youth Builders, the high school completion/GED school where I teach in one of Portland's poorest neighborhoods, with chairs arranged in a large circle. This day, I arrange the chairs in rows. Students walk in the door, stop suddenly, look at me and ask, "What's this all about?"

I simply ask them to take a seat and offer no explanation for our newly arranged room. I take attendance and ask if anyone has any thoughts they want to share before we start class.

Deavon says: "I don't like this. I have to turn around to see who's talking. Can we change the chairs back to the way they usually are, please?"

I ask how other students feel about sitting in rows. Darren says: "I don't like it either. It feels like school."

A chorus of "Yeah, I don't like it" affirms Deavon and Darren's comments.

"OK, let's do this." I offer a compromise to my grumbling students. "Let's change the chairs around, but I want you to talk about various classroom seating arrangements when we make the change." I hold up architectural drawings of five different classroom arrangements to illustrate what I want them to discuss. "We are going to divide into small groups, each group is going to get one of these drawings, and I am going to ask you to talk about some of the implications of classroom furniture arrangements."

"Tom, you're going deep on us today," says Robert.

"Yeah, what are you up to?" asks Alexxis.

What I'm up to is this: I'm trying to provide students with an opportunity to think about ordinary things in their lives, like classroom furniture arrangements, and push them to find connections between how they sit in a classroom and how they learn to view themselves in a larger political world. I want them to think about what other than math or English is being taught in a classroom divided into rows. What "hidden lessons" are being imparted about power, learning, and equality, what lessons do students learn about who they are from the material shaping of their space?

I ask the students to count off — "one, two, three, four, five" — and put them into five small groups. Then I give each group an architectural drawing of a different classroom design. I give group one a drawing of chairs in rows; group two, chairs in a circle; group three, chairs in a forum arrangement; group four, small groups of four students per group; and group five, chairs facing the wall as one might find in a computer lab.

I ask each group to answer the following questions about its respective classroom arrangement:

- What does your arrangement suggest about student-student relationships in the classroom?

- What does it suggest about teacher-student relations?
- What does it suggest about how learning occurs?
- What does it suggest about power?
- How do you feel when you find yourself seated in your respective arrangement?

At first, students give me quizzical looks. I walk them through the first question about a classroom arranged in rows. “When you were sitting in rows earlier in this class, how did you feel in relation to each other? Remember Deavon’s comment that she couldn’t see people when

they talked? Well, take that comment a step further, how does the arrangement of furniture define how you connect with other students in the room? About how the power is distributed?

Chairs aren’t arranged by accident or

by magic. They are arranged for a purpose. What’s the purpose? Who defines that purpose and for what reasons? I want you to think about things you might otherwise take for granted.”

Eventually students begin to take their task seriously and engage in thinking about something that they might not have before considered on a conscious level, especially in school — what is the “hidden curriculum” of material school settings?

While the students work, I rotate from group to group, listen to their conversations, take a few notes, and intervene when they get off track.

Group four gets stuck early. Their drawing is one of students seated in small groups.

Emily says: “I’m not getting this. What does how we sit have to do with anything?”

“Let’s start with the last question on the handout — yes, I gave you all a handout — ‘How do you feel when you work in small groups with other students as opposed to sitting in rows?’” I ask.

“I like it.”

I ask Emily why she likes it.

“Because I get to talk with my friends rather than listen to some boring teacher. Don’t worry, I’m not talking about you, Tom.” Emily says.

“How do you and your friends learn things when you work in small groups?” I ask.

Emily shrugs her shoulders, and Kauri answers instead. “We actual-

ly learn from each other, we figure it out.”

“Right! So, you guys are the source of each other’s learning. How is that different from what often happens when you’re seated in rows?”

Kauri puts the eraser end of her pencil to her cheek, looks up to the ceiling for a moment, and then says: “You know, I really never paid much attention when I was sitting in rows. I drew a lot instead.”

“Do you pay attention in small group settings?”

“Most of the time,” says Kauri, “you really don’t have much choice but to pay attention. Plus, I want to hear what someone else says. It’s a lot more interesting.”

“You guys get it. Just think out loud with each other about these questions. I’ll check back in on you in a little bit.” I move on to another group.

After the students complete their work, they report their thoughts back to the larger group. Before each group begins sharing, we arrange the chairs in configurations that mirror the particular drawing the group considered. For instance, before group one reports out about the hidden curriculum of chairs arranged in rows, we arrange the chairs in rows. When group two shares their critical reflections of chairs arranged in a large circle, we arrange the chairs into a large circle.

We start with group one, chairs in rows. The group shares that most of their classroom lives have been spent seated in straight rows. Alexxis recalls a time when she was surprised to find a friend who was seated on the far side of the room from her. “I didn’t even know she was there for the first couple of weeks of class.”

Jason says that he always felt left out. “There wasn’t enough room up front for everyone. Only so many students got to sit in the front rows. The rest of us had to fill in the back.”

Darren agrees with Jason. “It was like a hierarchy. The same kids go the best seats while the rest of us spaced out in the back.”

Deavon added, “I could never talk with anyone, and you know I love to talk.”

“Yeah, that was school,” added Darren. “The teacher talked and then we were just supposed to listen.”

A number of students commented that chairs in rows suggested a classroom where learning begins and ends with the teacher, where power was located up front in a setting that wasn’t equal.

“How wasn’t it equal?” I ask.

“There was an order,” Alexxis says. “Everyone knew who the teacher’s favorites were. The kids in the top reading group, the ones who got to monitor recess, they all sat in front. And like Jason said, there was only

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so much room at the top and that's the way it was."

We move our chairs to form a circle and group two shares its thoughts. I ask Jose to begin. "We like circles because you can see who's talking without having to turn around."

"Yeah," says Zong, "I feel a lot less confined. I can breathe."

Slavic says, "It's like there's room for all of us. We can talk if we want or just listen if we want to, like I always do."

Robert looks directly at me. "And you're not controlling everything. We get to talk with each other."

Herman shares that he's not always comfortable in a circle. "I feel exposed."

"I sometimes do too," says Karley, "but I also feel much more together with everyone else in the class. We can all think out loud together. I feel included."

Perhaps the most interesting and profound reflection that students discuss is the fact that they never before considered classroom arrangements of furniture as anything more than an arbitrary and benign circumstance of learning. The chairs are where they happen to be. Students adjust themselves and their consciousness to a given reality without giving much thought to, as Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critically "considering reality."

The simple act of moving classroom furniture can offer us a point of critical reflection in regard to the first material reality we experience in a school setting, the room in which we sit. We find that we assume that we don't have the power to arrange the material nature of the room to fit our needs. Someone else owns it. Someone else arranges it. Permission is necessary in order to radically change the relationship of desk to desk, student to student, student to teacher. Permission is needed to change the nature of how we learn together in an educational community.

The activity is an initial critical exploration of classroom learning. Simple transformation of furniture will not in and of itself change pedagogy, but it can provide an easy way to think about the places in which we hope to transform ourselves as teachers and students.

I finish the activity by asking my students the "so what?" question. "Given what we did today, what are the larger lessons to be learned? We spent a whole class period looking at classroom furniture designs. Why? What's to be found when we look beneath our desks? Desks and chairs can be arranged in a variety of ways. So what?"

Chance is the first to respond: "Why don't you tell us?"

Deavon says, "I just never thought about any of this before. It makes

me think, what else did I miss along the way that has somehow shaped me?"

"You know a lot of us never thought we were very smart and we also thought it was our fault that we weren't doing all that good in school. But maybe it wasn't all our fault, maybe being put in the back row had something to do with it. I don't know." Jason shakes his head as he ponders his words.

Jeremiah springs to life and says, "It's kind of like the worksite [students spend time building low-income housing while at Youth Builders]. We're put in crews and have to figure out things by ourselves. I mean, sometimes the boss isn't around, and something happens that you have to deal with. We work in small groups to figure it out ourselves. I was thinking of that when we were sitting in small groups. We could never build a house if we all just sat and listened to someone tell us how to do it. I figure out how to do it when I do it."

"Like I said before," says Darren, "it's about control."

"Tell me more, Darren, how are chairs in rows about control?"

"You learn early on who's in control and who's not when you are just put in rows and told to remember things. You get the feeling that the kids in the front rows deserve to be there and that the kids in back deserve to be in the back," Darren answers.

I direct a question to Jason, "You said earlier that there just wasn't enough room in the front for everyone. How is that similar to what we find in society?"

Jason thinks about my question for a minute before he says, "Now it's like musical chairs out there. Heck, there isn't enough room for all of us in the back row. Forget about the front."

Chance says: "What I want to know is who sets up the chairs? I don't mean here, but out there?"

"What do you mean, Chance?"

"For all my time in school I just tried to find a seat in a room arranged by someone else. I feel like I'm trying to do the same now with my life. I want to know who sets up the chairs out there." Chance points out the window. "How do we get to do something else other than try to find a place in the back?"

"Let's start by trying to understand as much as we can about the structure, the arrangement of things, and then let's see who is making

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progress turning some of those rows into circles.” I know the answer won’t satisfy Chance’s curiosity, but it’s a start.

We can start to uncover a complex system of relationships both in school and “out there” by simply taking stock of where we find ourselves in the world — how we are placed in relation to each other. Once aware, we can try to turn our perspective upside down, to suggest to students like Jason, Darren, Chance, and Deavon that maybe their previous academic and personal failures weren’t all their fault, that maybe there are viable strategies that can help students navigate their way through a system that casts them to the rear, a system that teaches them to adjust to a given reality rather than create one. Rather than ending up at the bottom, blaming themselves for their “failure,” maybe my students can begin to envision a system, an arrangement, that better suits their collective needs.

And like rearranging classroom furniture, maybe we can think about and change that system one chair at a time. *

RESOURCE

Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.

Getting Your Classroom Together

BY BOB PETERSON

For years the top of my desk at school looked worse than the floor of my teenage daughter’s bedroom, which was quite an accomplishment. But despite my desk’s appearance, my entire classroom was well organized. This meant I had more time to plan my teaching and my students had easy access to materials and supplies — all of which laid the basis for successful student-centered projects and, at least for some students, the belief that our classroom was a home away from home.

And given that my social justice beliefs compelled me to regularly teach outside the textbooks and find or create my own curriculum, it was essential to keep materials well organized.

Learning from Others

It took time to figure out how to do it. I learned a lot from more experienced colleagues. During my two semesters of student teaching and six long weeks of substitute teaching, I filled half a notebook with copious scribbles and messy diagrams on what I thought would be good for my ideal classroom. I could hardly wait to start.

However, I got a dose of reality when I finally received my permanent teaching assignment. I walked into a nearly empty room with little more than an old set of dictionaries and a cupboard full of ancient curricular guides and tired posters.

Not deterred, I picked up my notebook and went to introduce my-

self to other teachers in the upper elementary unit. I wanted to see how they organized their classrooms and what materials they had. I asked them what suggestions they had for me as a new teacher. Most were willing to talk and I gleaned worthwhile advice ranging from generalities (“Don’t do any extra cleaning or organizing in your classroom that students can do — they love to help.”) to where in the bowels of the school I could find pull-down maps, bookshelves, filing cabinets, and an extra table.

Asking Hard Questions

One suggestion was that I ask myself basic questions when organizing my classroom or thinking about my teaching. “Why am I doing it this way?” “How does this enhance my vision of quality teaching and learning?” “Does this speak to the needs of *all* my students, especially those who are struggling?”

For example, how I organize seating arrangements has a profound impact on classroom life. A “theater-style” seating arrangement assumes a more lecture-based, teacher-centered approach to teaching, while other seating arrangements may promote group work and amplify discussion. These differences in classroom setup are part of the “hidden curriculum” and convey powerful messages to students.

Many elementary teachers arrange their class so that there’s a carpet or meeting area where all students can gather in a circle or group for conversation. With older elementary students and larger class sizes that’s not always possible.

I varied seating arrangements depending on the nature of the particular group of kids, the number of students in my classroom, and the immediate goals for the class. Flexibility was key because at different times I wanted students to face the front looking at the whiteboard to observe a mini lesson, a video, or presentations and performances by classmates. Often I wanted desks in groups of four or six for cooperative activities and “base groups,” which helped with classroom management. At other times I wanted everyone facing each other for class discussions and meetings. Obviously no one seating pattern satisfies all those needs.

Modeling

I regularly modeled how I expected students to modify or change from one seating arrangement to another. For paired sharing I modeled moving chairs so students would sit “eye-to-eye” and “knee-to-knee.” While

clusters of desks are useful, that meant some students weren’t looking directly at the front of the room. I modeled how students were to turn their desks and chairs and look forward. And for classroom meetings, I modeled how to pick up and move their desks to the classroom perimeter and rearrange their chairs in a circle in a safe and quiet manner. Most of my modeling happened at the beginning of the year when I had class discussions about why different arrangements were appropriate for different activities. I also found it necessary to review such procedures from time to time.

The Politics of Bulletin Boards

I often asked myself: What messages were my bulletin boards sending? Whose history or point of view was I presenting?

For instance, instead of Halloween bulletin board I put up a provocative display about Columbus asking, “Who benefited from Columbus’ arrival in the Americas?” In February Black History bulletin boards dominated my walls instead of Valentine displays, in March women’s history instead of St. Patrick’s Day. To be clear, we talked about holidays and exchanged cards on Valentine’s Day, but I was aware that my decision on bulletin boards was a political decision.

The same is true for all aspects of the curriculum. When I chose books for my class, I asked: Who and what are represented in the books in the classroom? What books do I read aloud, recommend that my students read, include as part of the reading curriculum? My book choices represent conscious or unconscious political decisions.

Wall displays are always contradictory, especially in terms of available space: I tried to strike a balance between displaying student work and putting up challenging questions, posters, maps, and displays. I wanted my students to “see themselves on the walls,” both literally — the walls have pictures of students and their work — and figuratively, so the people students see reflect the nationalities of the classroom and the broader world. Given the highly segregated nature of many of our schools and the increase in racist incidents in schools since November 2016, it’s very

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My students helped create bulletin board displays. Their enthusiasm demonstrated that importance of “student voice” being not only spoken in the classroom but also hung on the walls. At the same time, I was aware that what and how such work is chosen might privilege certain groups of students and disadvantage others. (For example, if only the “best” work is always displayed, certain students would rarely have a chance to have their work displayed.)

Two quick ways I got my students “on the walls” were with name poems (see Linda Christensen’s “Name Poem: To Say the Name Is to Begin the Story”) and a map. During the first days of school students wrote a poem about their names, which after revisions they glued on colorful card stock with a photo that I took — all of which were displayed in the hallway outside the classroom.

And on a bulletin board inside my classroom on a large map of our city, under a large sign “Where We Live” each student placed a labeled stickpin in the map to show where they lived. In subsequent weeks we’d display essays about the students’ neighborhoods nearby.

Displaying Educational Posters and Class Notes

The display of educational materials is central to a successful classroom, but space is always a challenge. My classroom had a book corner, a writing center with various types of paper and story starters, a geography area, an art supply drawer, a dictionary and resource center, computers, and a math manipulative cart. I had a specific space for “the poster of the week” and a special display area for the daily agenda, announcements, and the song of the week.

One way to vastly expand the space for displaying word lists, posters, etc. is by stringing a strong cord at a height of about 8 feet between two perpendicular walls in the front corner of the classroom and creating a “poster line” (see diagram on rethinkingschools.org/NTB). Using store-bought

hangers (the kind with two movable clamps), one can easily hang 12” x 18” tag board sheets, where I listed words, math-solving strategies, etc.

Accessibility, Responsibility, and Labeling

Because my students were very often involved in projects, they needed access to materials, art supplies, books, rulers, and calculators. I found the easiest way to keep materials accessible and encourage students to be responsible for keeping them orderly and safe — I labeled everything.

I labeled plastic dishpans to categorize different genres and levels of student books; I labeled boxes, drawers, filing cabinets, and bookshelves so that students not only know where things are, but also where they should be returned. A computer, a printer, and some clear contact paper worked wonders when it comes to making neat-looking signs to keep things in order.

Organizing the Paper Load

A key part of classroom organization was managing my students’ paperwork — whether it’s handouts for daily lessons and activities, the homework, completed student work that needs to be assessed and returned, or school fliers that go home to families.

Eventually I realized I needed two filing systems — one that I had easy daily access to that would expand and vary throughout the school year and another that would become a repository of curriculum, handouts, sample student work, etc. that I would build on year after year. Given that I taught all major subject areas and wrote a lot of my own curriculum, this was essential.

Over time I kept more and more of my lesson plans and handouts on my computer, but I maintained hard copies as well — especially “master” copies of handouts that were essential to student projects and to the social justice content that I wanted to infuse into all curricular areas.

Organizing Student Materials

Of course my being organized as a teacher was only part of the battle. How was I to help my students keep their work organized, especially given that I used many non-textbook materials that I reproduced myself?

I struggled with this question for several years until I borrowed an idea from a high school social studies teacher who gave his students

many supplemental materials but was frustrated by their inability to hold on to them.

On the first day of school I gave my 5th graders a three-ring binder, which I called a “people’s textbook,” and dividers with plastic tabs to organize and maintain non-textbook materials. I asked students to write the divider categories — songs, poems, words, history, news, science, and math — and while doing so I described the wide range of really cool things they would be putting in their binders the entire year. In addition to dividers I gave students formatted sheets for writing down what would go in some sections — such as the song or poetry section where students list the singer and song, or poet and title of poem.

Tracking Student Progress

Part of classroom management is not only the grading and managing of papers and other forms of student work, but keeping all that assessment straight. Various forms of record and grade books exist, but what I have found helpful is a clipboard with a sheet of mailing labels. This allowed me to take notes on each child’s work and later I peeled off the label and put it into a three-ring binder of class observations and grades, which had a separate page for each student. Notes ranged from things such as “counting with fingers to solve problem” to “didn’t seem to comprehend passage in independent book.” These labels accumulated over time. They proved helpful when it came time to write report card comments or during student-led parent teacher conferences. I also used this binder to note any parent contact or student conferences.

I insisted that students keep track of their work and progress as well. Each student had their own hanging folder in a legal-size filing cabinet in front of the room in which they were expected to keep their major projects (which included self-evaluations). The students reviewed these works with their parents during the student-led parent-teacher conferences twice a year and displayed them for the whole school to see at the end-of-year 5th-grade student exhibition. As they left 5th grade for middle school they took their whole portfolio of work home. (See “Motivating Students to Do Quality Work” in Resources.)

Communication

Clear communication with students and parents is an essential part of classroom organization. Some students are visual learners, others are au-

ditary or tactile, most are a combination of all three. In our increasingly multilingual classrooms with students with many different abilities and needs, communicating effectively is essential. Providing handouts about key concepts (to be stored in their “People’s Textbook” binders) was a way I helped certain students. Similarly, writing key concepts, vocabulary, steps to a math process on tag board, and then hanging it on the “poster line” made it accessible to all students whenever they needed it.

Given that I wanted parents to know the homework and what was happening in the classroom, my day concluded with me writing down the homework (early in my career on the chalkboard, then overhead projector, then the smart board) for the students to copy on a special weekly homework form that contained items like “show family members flier about all-school parent meeting”; a family member would have to sign each day that they saw the homework listing.

Learning from Doing

Just as I expected my students to learn from their experiences, I worked to do that too. I tried to spend a little time at the end of the day or week, or at the end of a project or major role play, to reflect on how to better teach, organize, and manage my classroom. I had a Word file on my computer desktop — “better ideas for next year” — in which I wrote myself suggestions so that my students the following year would become even more engaged in classroom projects that build their capacity to think critically and problem-solve while nurturing their dispositions toward social justice and civic activism. *

RESOURCES

Christensen, Linda. 2017. “Name Poem: To Say the Name Is to Begin the Story.” *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word (2nd Edition)*. Rethinking Schools.

Peterson, Bob. 2004. “Motivating Students to Do Quality Work.” *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice, Volume 2*. Rethinking Schools.