

# Designing Classrooms with Students in Mind

## How have you changed the physical arrangements within your classroom to create an optimal learning environment?

The number of manuscripts submitted for this month's column illustrates once again the ingenuity of classroom teachers. Mary Sasse (Carbondale Community High School, Carbondale, Illinois), Patricia Spencer (JFK High School, Cedar Rapids, Iowa), and William Romeo (Greenbriar Junior High School, Parma, Ohio) suggested the use of trapezoidal tables to maximize classroom space. Lou Orfanella (Webutuck Junior/Senior High, Amenia, New York) advised that teachers "give students some ownership in their own working environment" by making the classroom "user friendly" with all supplies easily accessible to students. Ellie Esler (Citrus High, Inverness, Florida) has discovered that placing desks in a horseshoe shape with her perch (a worn bar stool) in the open end is effective for her ninth graders.

For ideas from outfitting classrooms with comfortable sofas to hanging an eight-foot branch from the ceiling, read on. *ED*

### Eliminating a Barrier

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During graduate work, I took a business course designed to teach the implementation of nonthreatening change. An implicit idea was that the arrangement of an office speaks volumes about an executive's attitudes toward employees and is an excellent way to change perceptions. Tom Romano's *Clearing the Way* states, "... secondary English teachers' classrooms will reflect their personalities, ... philosophies of education, knowledge of writing, commitment, and understanding of teenagers" (59). Convinced, I approached learning atmosphere through classroom arrangement.

My desk faces the wall in the corner, eliminating a barrier between my students and me. I have no lectern

or designated spot from which I speak; this tells my students that the focus of the room is not on me but on them. All of my personal books (texts and reference materials) are mixed in the bookcases with books for students. This says that all of us share resources, and I trust everyone to use any text.

The atmosphere I create through room decoration is nontraditional for high school. All my windows have sheer white curtains which let in sunlight and soften the institutional feel of the classroom. Mnemonic devices, mobiles, plants, prompts for writing, publishing areas, illumination supplies, colorful posters, computers, and hundreds of examples of contemporary, multicultural prose and poetry fill our space. As the year progresses, student writing takes over wall areas and bulletin boards called the "author wall" and "power lines." Student desks are never in straight rows, and they are arranged differently every week.

When students arrive the first day of school, my bulletin board says, "Welcome to Room 156 Where We Learn from Each Other." Before leaving the last day of school, they take one more look at a place where they felt safe, cherished, and free to be honest with themselves and with me.

### A Circle of Learning

Mary Britton-Simmons  
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Like my teaching philosophy, the physical arrangement of my classroom has evolved. Twenty years ago, straight rows and the teacher as the "sage on the stage" were the norm. Today my classroom reflects my belief that we form a community of thinkers where student opinion is central, encouraged and respected. Student desks are arranged in one large circle. In the center is a table where I take roll and where I work with medium-sized groups of students. My teacher desk is in a corner of the room facing a window from which I can enjoy fresh air and sun (rare in Seattle) after students have left for the day.

As the teacher, I facilitate, not dictate, the learning in my classroom. To fulfill this role during class discussions, I sit at a student desk in the circle. I do not have my own desk but rather move to whatever desk happens to be empty, so I sit next to many students in the course of the trimester. Facing one another facilitates communication. Students readily share their thoughts, questions,

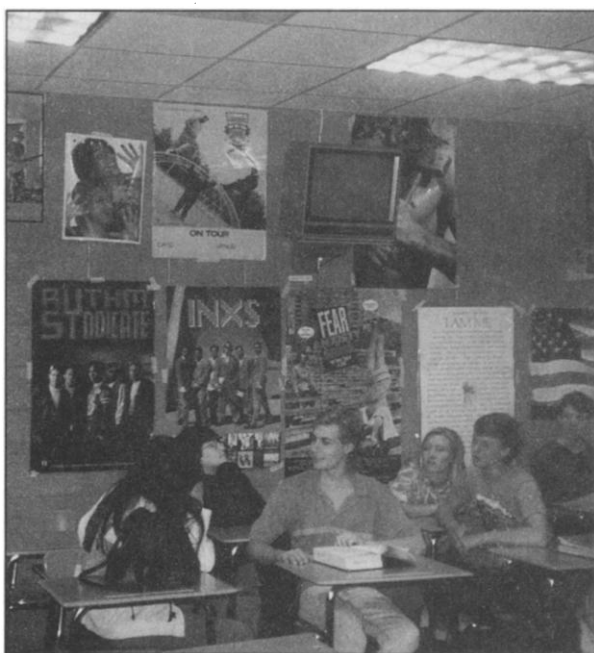
and feelings. I become just another member of the group who may or may not have a question or a comment. In addition, in a circle, unmotivated students cannot hide. Everyone is in the front row!

### Every Little Bit Helps

Richard Williams  
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The most important physical arrangement I've made is the walls. I haven't changed them; I allow the students to.

At the local record store, I explained to the manager that I needed posters for my room. So she started collecting the numerous promos that accompany each record release. I asked students to choose their favorites, had the posters laminated, and let students decide



where to put them. They usually decide to put their favorite posters near their own seats. I can't prove it, but this does seem to give them some territorial rights.

I'd like to dress up this idea in wording such as "empowerment" or "ownership." That's a bit much, I think. But I can't tell you the number of students, those not in one of my classes, who've wandered by and admired a poster of a favorite singer. The response is inevitably the same: "Hey, I wish I had you for a teacher!" No, it's not much. But it's something. Every little bit helps. Maybe it's a hook that gets our relationship going.

### Humanizing College Classrooms

Jim Brewbaker  
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When I used nylon fishing line to suspend an eight-foot-long oak branch across the ceiling in Room 209, my students asked, "What's with him?" In a few weeks,

the branch—spray-painted yellow, red, and white but with many of its late-fall leaves still intact, decorated with old spools, photographs, a pair of child's scissors, a lone brown mitten, and other items—took on special meaning. Now nicknamed "Sybil, the Branch of Learning," it helped define our class and the room as uniquely ours.

Inevitably, college teachers are room-sharers or floaters, a state self-respecting secondary teachers would find galling. Like it or not, though, college classrooms rarely reflect special functions, much less the men and women who work in them. No, they are bland, impersonal places affording minimal opportunity for personalizing.

This contradicts much that I need as a teacher. English classrooms are supposed to look, smell, and feel like English classrooms. And rooms where English methods are taught? They too should be distinctly English.

Bringing color and a "something-different-in-here" feel to Room 209, Sybil the Branch is flexible. Students in my writing workshop contribute artifacts which stimulate memory writing, while others, students in my field-based middle-school methods course, add objects that signify important events that occurred as they worked off-campus.

I use other tactics to define the place I teach. Displaying student work (my current favorites are literary coats of arms and silhouettes of class members with their responses to ice-breaker questions) humanizes college classrooms and sparks the curiosity of other students.

Though limited by traditions which run deep in higher education, college faculty can and should attend to the spaces in which they teach. The payoff is learning.

### Closer to the Action

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When Shakespeare wrote "All the world's a stage . . .," little did the Bard of Avon realize that this concept would apply to the ordinary, everyday classroom.

My classroom gradually transformed itself from the traditional five-row, six-seats-in-a-line arrangement to a three-sided seating arrangement similar to that of the Globe Theater—with the middle of the room set aside for the stage.

This arrangement enabled the class to be closer to the action. During the past four years, my classes have performed various scenes of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar* before an audience. They have experienced the philosophy that Shakespeare and other playwrights wrote their plays to be performed, not merely read. For the presentation of *Our Town*, it was simple to move in chairs for the funeral scene without disrupting the classroom arrangement. Students have also rewritten such short stories as "Lamb to the Slaughter" and presented them to the class.

What do students say about this seating arrangement? The majority like the closeness to the teacher and to their classmates. No one student is more than two desks away from center stage. With this arrangement of the desks, it is also easy for me to have students

work together. Students have said they look forward to class because no other classroom has this unique arrangement.

### Safe and Comfortable

Bernadine Tomasik  
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It is September, 1962, and I peek fearfully into a square classroom with one teacher's desk in front and thirty student desks in five straight rows. As my teaching years



pass, desks flash like little animations doing a dance of rearrangement in my memory. The desks whirl in circles and semicircles and clumps with increasing frenzy until they reach a kaleidoscopic climax.

It is 1980. Quiet. The desks are gone. Five throw-away cafeteria tables surrounded by second-hand chairs clutter the floor. They, too, have moved every day, like bumper cars, always ending up parked in new positions as the last student "driver" leaves the room.

Then one day a senior moans, "I'm so tired of sitting on hard chairs!"

"Hey!" Senior girl pipes up. "We're throwing away a sofa today. It's right there outside our house."

I'm in one of those time-for-some-outrageousness moods and I whisper, "Go for it." Three football players slip out the door. In less than ten minutes, they are back, carrying a brown plaid sofa.

Today, our classroom has pink and lavender walls accented with wallpaper. Water flute music flows from the boombox. A northwest window with perfect light nurtures a grouping of plants. Amid the greenery creaks an old rocking chair. Across the room two sofas and two tables form a "conversation pit"—designed as a place for up to fifteen students to sit, to work, and to discuss. An old furry afghan laps over the arm of one. A cardboard book shelf displays pamphlets, student work, and any-

thing designed to stimulate and facilitate student writing.

I believe a classroom can be a safe, comfortable room for learning. And now I believe I'll wrap that afghan around me, settle down, and seriously consider my next narrative. Maybe some students will drift in, and they can help me brainstorm.

### A Cozy Classroom Design

Kathy Proctor  
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Since I often incorporate cooperative learning, peer editing, and class competitions, I have designed the students' desks around these learning activities. The twenty-eight desks are arranged in seven groups of four, with about two feet of space between each group so the divisions are evident. To better define the groupings, I have arranged the desks in various ways, some facing the front of the classroom, others slanted, some in a straight line, others facing the opposite side of the room. In each group, students have clear vision of the board, the overhead projector, one another, and me.

Near my desk are the tables for an after-school writing center. It is far enough away from the other desks to seem separate, but close enough for students with a little extra time to peruse various current reading materials available there. Various posters about the writing process decorate the wall nearest this center and remind all students to revise and edit before they turn in final drafts.

An optimal learning environment emerges when teachers design classrooms that simply "feel right." For me, lessening student anxiety is essential, and the arrangement of my classroom is designed to exude comfort and informality while still emphasizing the learning process.

