

# Seating Arrangements for BETTER CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

**BY PAUL DENTON**

**C**lassrooms are complex, busy places. They must accommodate many people and activities each day. The physical arrangement of a classroom has significant implications for discipline and classroom management.<sup>1</sup>

Advice to teachers about classroom management, until recently, consisted mainly of contradictory testimonials or untested theories about “what works for me.” In the past 20 years, however, research has produced some principles that can help teachers make decisions about classroom management.

Misbehavior does not occur in a vacuum. Events or conditions unrelated

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to instruction can help to shape student behavior. Teachers must understand the kinds of conditions that affect the instructional process if they want to prevent inappropriate behavior.

The physical organization of the

classroom strongly influences learning. Careful use of physical space can positively affect teacher and student attitudes. The classroom should present a cheerful, inviting, motivating, and purposeful setting for learning.

The setting can, in large part, determine the efficiency of teaching. It must provide for clustering of students, movement within the classroom, display and distribution of instructional materials, and arrangement of desks for effective drill and practice.<sup>2</sup>

## **Classroom Environment**

When deciding how to arrange the class-

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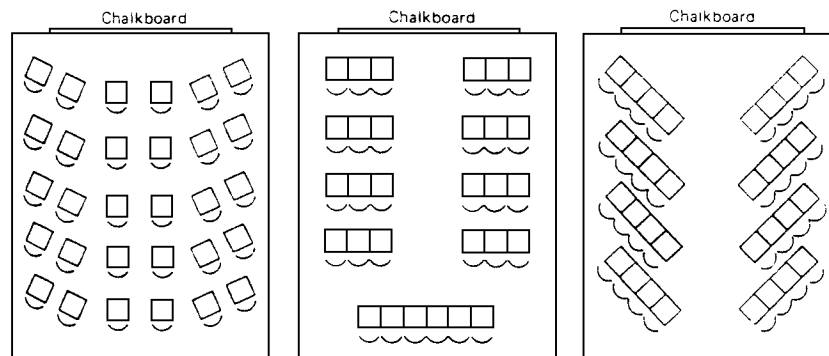
room, several considerations must be taken into account. First, what is the curriculum? Its content will strongly influence the way the room should be organized. Elementary curricula would probably include Bible, reading, language arts, spelling, mathematics, social studies, science, art, physical education, and music. The classroom organization must allow for each of the activities required by these subjects. Many secondary classrooms serve more specialized uses and so would not require as versatile an arrangement.

The teacher's philosophy and methods of teaching are a factor in choosing a physical organization for the classroom. Different methodologies lend themselves to different spatial arrangements. Some teachers prefer a rigid classroom arrangement that is equipped with few materials. They use only props that they consider directly helpful in the subjects studied. Others prefer a richly furnished environment, which they view as more stimulating to students. This includes a variety of materials, charts, pictures, slogans, decorations, and bulletin boards.

Gregorc<sup>3</sup> suggests that students with different learning styles prefer different classroom arrangements. Unfortunately, classrooms must accommodate students with various learning styles. Gregorc says that one type of learner prefers a predictable, stable environment that is ordered and quiet. Another type of learner will choose an environment that is mentally stimulating and ordered but devoid of distracting colors and objects. Yet another learner needs an environment that allows for creative expression, freedom of movement, and emotional experience. A plain environment may stifle this student's creativity. A fourth type of learner works best in an environment that can be easily rearranged. He or she will purposely seek to change the scenery, associations, and opportunities.

*Flexibility* is the key word in arranging the classroom for effective instruction. That does not mean moving the furniture arrangement weekly. It does mean being aware that certain variations will best facilitate particular teaching and learning tasks. Regular changes in furniture or student arrangements should be made if

**FIGURE 1**  
**ROOM ARRANGEMENTS WITH INDIVIDUAL DESKS**



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these changes will produce a productive learning environment.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Floor Space**

In arranging floor space, the teacher must consider seating, work and activity space; special centers, corners, and areas; the teacher's station; special-effect areas; as well as traffic patterns.

Although little can be done about the amount of floor space in which a teacher has to work, different arrangements will make the space more workable.<sup>5</sup>

Seating arrangements are an important concern. According to Jones,<sup>6</sup> the best arrangements put the least distance and the fewest barriers between teacher and students. No matter what seating arrangement is used, it must be flexible. In this way the classroom will more readily accommodate the various learning activities planned by the teacher.

Classrooms usually contain one or more types of furniture: individual desks, small tables seating two students, or large tables for four to six students. The individual desk gives the most flexibility, as it allows for easy rearrangement and groupings for different lessons. Three common U-shaped arrangements are shown in Figure 1.

#### **Room Arrangements With Individual Desks**

1. *Maximum access.* The first arrangement places the desks individually. It can be adapted to a wide variety of lesson designs. This arrangement makes it relatively easy for the teacher to move around the room.

2. *Short horizontal rows around a walkway.* The middle room arrangement places desks in small groupings. It is the most popular arrangement in secondary classrooms, particularly for mathematics.

3. *Herringbone.* The herringbone arrangement is similar to the short horizontal rows, except that the desks have been turned at a 45 degree angle. This arrangement is often preferred by secondary English and social studies teachers. It allows students to face one another for classroom discussions.

Some classrooms have small tables where two or more students can work. Figure 2 shows how to arrange small tables for greatest efficiency.

1. *Rows*. This arrangement, with the tables in rows, is convenient and simple. However, in a large room some students are seated a long way away from the chalkboard and other activities at the front of the room.

2. *Double E*. This arrangement alleviates the long walk required by rows. By placing the tables at right angles, seating capacity has been increased, utilizing a small area with no loss of movement around the room.

3. *Semicircle*. This arrangement works well when the teacher gives a demonstration at the front of the classroom.

Rosenfield, Lambert, and Black<sup>7</sup> found that students seated in circles engaged in significantly more on-task behaviors than those in rows. Students whose desks were arranged in clusters engaged in more on-task behaviors than did those in rows, but less than those in circles. If classroom

## Careful use of physical space can positively affect teacher and student attitudes.

activities utilize a great deal of cooperative learning, several desks might be put together to facilitate these activities. If the teacher prefers a lecture and discussion format, the traditional rows of desks separated by aisles might be best.

Seating arrangements can be changed to accommodate different instructional activities. The most important aspect of room arrangement is not where the furniture is but where it *isn't*. The arrangement

must provide walkways between tables and desks so that the teacher can move among the students. Walkways need to run from front to back and from side to side. This lets the teacher circulate throughout the room quickly and easily. The classroom arrangement should allow the teacher to view the entire room from one point.

Lighting is also a factor in choosing a seating arrangement. Students should not have to face a strong light. Looking into the light for long periods shortens concentration time.

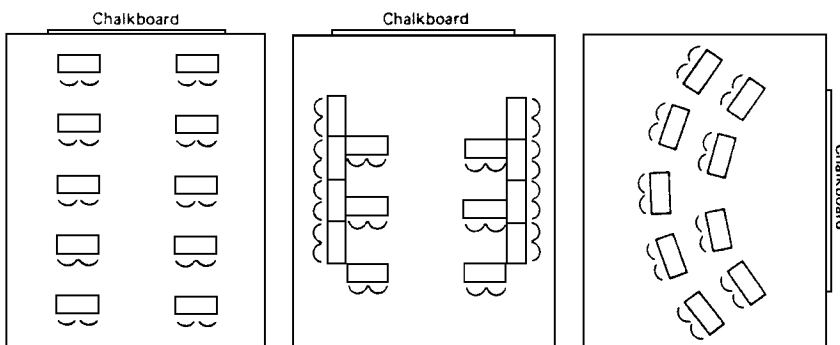
Although the teacher may want to utilize a variety of room arrangements, the traditional use of rows should not be ruled out in all cases. It has been shown in experiments with second and seventh graders to produce more on-task time than does seating at clustered tables.<sup>8</sup>

Most classrooms have the teacher's desk at the front. It thus becomes a barrier between teacher and students. Several other locations are more appropriate. For many teachers the side or the back of the room works well. This keeps the desk out of the way when the chalkboard is being used.

### Traffic Patterns

Teachers should study the traffic patterns in their classrooms to discover which seating arrangement works best for their students. The seating should allow the students to move around the room to get materials, sharpen pencils, visit learning centers, and exit the room without con-

**FIGURE 2**  
**ROOM ARRANGEMENT WITH SMALL TABLES**



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gestion. The best arrangement lets a student go directly to the door without having to pass against other students still seated. If students are allowed to sharpen pencils during the class period, the pencil sharpener should be placed in a location away from the study and work areas.

The teacher may need to plan classroom seating arrangements to suit the needs of particular students. For example, students with learning disabilities, such as those with attention deficit disorders, must be seated outside the main flow of traffic.

### Teacher Monitoring

Gaining and keeping students' attention is an ongoing challenge for teachers. Workable seating arrangements can help make this task easier. They also allow the teacher to more readily monitor students' activities. This can have a significant impact on student behavior and learning. ✍

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