

TECHNIQUE 11

DRAW THE MAP

There's a final piece to effective planning that almost every teacher already uses. The problem is that teachers sometimes forget they're using it or use it once per year and then forget to adapt and adjust it. That piece is the planning and controlling of the physical environment, which should support the specific lesson goals for the day rather than using the best approach to support the most lesson on average or, worse, to support ideological beliefs about what classrooms *should* look like. I refer to it as **Draw the Map**.

Teachers in many classrooms seat their students in pods of desks that face each other because they believe that students should be socialized to interact in school. This is a general (in fact, overgeneralized) belief about the nature and philosophy of schooling. With the exception of the fact that some teachers realign desks for tests, this classroom layout often doesn't change even if critical parts of the class period involve, say, taking notes on what the teacher writes on the board. This often erodes outcomes. Though students should interact in school, the time when they are supposed to be constructing a record of key information in writing may not really be the time for that. And with desks in pods, some percentage of students must now look over their shoulders to see the information they are accountable for and then swivel to write it down in front of them. Furthermore, students now must ignore the student directly across from them to attend to the teacher behind their back. If the teacher's goal is to be attended to for much of the lesson, she has created a strong disincentive for that. The classroom layout has made the primary lesson objective harder to accomplish in deference to philosophy.

What if, rather than asking whether students should interact in school or opining that they should, a teacher with this classroom layout asked:

- *When* should students interact in school?
- *How* should students interact in school? (There are lots of ways, and it doesn't take much imagination to realize it's worthwhile to avoid conflating them.)
- *What* should the way students sit signal and incentivize about the various kinds of interactions?
- *Which kinds* of interactions support which kinds of lesson objectives?
- *What other* kinds of ways can students be socialized to interact appropriately without necessarily building the classroom around that one idea every day?

It might be that a teacher wants students facing each other only for some lessons. It might be that a teacher wants interaction for only part of the lesson. It might be that asking students to turn to one another and discuss an idea will suitably accomplish the goal at exactly the moments when interaction is warranted without structuring the classroom so that some student always have their backs to the teacher. I'm giving my own biases about classroom layout away here, but you don't have to agree with me to use the technique. *Draw the Map* means making space planning part of your lesson planning.

I am in fact a big fan of rows as the default classroom structure—specifically three paired columns of rows (see Figure 2.1), mostly because I see so many teachers I watch use it. This layout is tidy and orderly and socializes students to attend to the board and the teacher as their primary focus. It allows teachers to stand directly next to any student they want to or need to as they teach in order to check work or ensure being on task. It gives every student a place to write that is directly in line between them and what they are supposed to be writing about in most cases. Teachers who want them to interact more directly ask students to “track the speaker” (look at the person who's talking) or have them turn their chairs accordingly or have them move their desks quickly to another formation.

Regardless of the layout you use, where the aisles and alleys are is at least as important as where you put the desks. You have to be able to get anywhere in the room (preferably to within a foot of any student so you can whisper in his or her ear without leaning across anyone else) without a word—while you are teaching, in fact. Once you have to say “excuse me” to ask students to

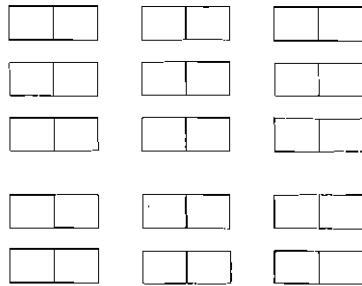


FIGURE 2.1. Paired Columns of Rows

push in a chair or resituate backpacks in order to get where you want to go, you are essentially asking permission. You have to interrupt your lesson to be where you want. You have ceded control of and full natural access to parts of the room. This will limit your ability to hold students to high behavioral and academic standards. So no matter what layout you choose, think as intentionally about aisles and alleys as about desks.

Finally, planning walls is important too. The first rule of thumb for walls in the best classrooms is that they should help, not harm. This means that they should avoid clutter and overstimulation. A few critical things should be up, and they should not distract students' attention from the primary instructional space by being too close to it. Posted items are best when they focus on useful tools: reminders of key steps in adding fractions; examples of common themes; seven types of conflict in a story; pictures representing recent vocabulary words; rules for bathroom use; phrase starters for agreeing or disagreeing with a peer during discussion. Once you've taught a key skill, posting a tool quickly after helps students review it and use it frequently. Though most teachers are frequently told to post student work, posting tools like this is at least as important.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't also post student work. You should. But be sure to post work that is both exemplary and provides a model to other students. Often there's important work to be done in making this visible. Can you make comments on posted work specific and aligned to learning goals? Can you replace writing “great job” in the margin with, “Great job starting your paragraph with a clear topic sentence,” or even “Great topic sentence—clearly previews the key issue in the paragraph”? If you can, it will help make success replicable to other students.



REFLECTION AND PRACTICE

The following activities should help you think about and practice the techniques in this chapter.

Choose an especially large learning standard from the state in which you teach. Try to guess before you analyze it how many objectives you'd need to truly master it. Now break it up into a series of manageable, measurable objectives that flow in a logical

sequence from introduction of the idea to full mastery. Next, try to increase or decrease the number of days you have available by 20 percent. How does this change your objectives?

2. Make a building tour of your school, writing down the objectives. Score them as to whether they meet 4 Ms criteria. Fix the ones you can, and then ask yourself where as a school you need to improve objective writing.
3. Think of a recent lesson you taught, and write out all of the actions from a student's perspective, starting in each case with an action verb: "Listened to" and "Wrote," for example. If you feel daring, ask your students if they think your agenda is accurate. Even more daring is to ask your students to make a list of what they were doing during your class.
4. Make an action plan for your classroom setup:
 - a. What should your default layout be, and what would the most common other layouts look like? Will you use them enough to justify having your students practice moving from one to another?
 - b. What are the five most useful and important things you could put on the walls to help students do their work? Are they up?
 - c. What things are on your walls that don't need to be? Nominate five to take down.