Effective Room Arrangement

When you watch natural teachers, you typically see students working while the teacher strolls among them in a most unremarkable fashion. Only after you watch a lot of classrooms and note the differences between effective and ineffective teachers does the importance of this strolling become clear.

The most basic factor that governs the likelihood of students goofing off in your classroom is their physical distance from your body. You remember. When the teacher was standing next to you, you cooled it, but when the teacher was on the far side of the room, you talked to your neighbors.

WORKING THE CROWD

The most basic technique for managing the behavior of a group is called "working the crowd." Natural teachers instinctively work the crowd. They use proximity as an instrument of management. They know that either you work the crowd, or the crowd works you.

ZONES OF PROXIMITY

Imagine walking among your students. Picture three zones of proximity surrounding your body in concentric circles. We will use the colors of a stoplight -- red, yellow, and green -- to represent those zones.

The red zone is nearest to you. Red means stop. Students in the red zone cool it. Outside the red zone is the yellow zone. Yellow signals caution. In the yellow zone, students cool it as long as you are facing in their direction, but, when your back is turned, the light turns green. Beyond the yellow zone lies the green zone -- green as in go! When students in the green zone look up to see that you are on the far side of the room, particularly if you are preoccupied, it is goof-off time.

DISRUPTING DISRUPTIONS

When you are working the crowd, two or three steps will switch a student from the green zone to the yellow zone or from the yellow zone to the red zone. Thus, through mobility, you are constantly disrupting the students' impulse to disrupt.
Of course, neither you nor the students monitor this at a conscious level. It is subconscious -- on the edge of awareness. Only when you watch previously well-behaved students in the classroom of a teacher who does not exploit proximity, do you come to appreciate the importance of working the crowd.

TRIPPING OVER THE FURNITURE

Once the importance of mobility and proximity become clear, the next logical step is to make working the crowd as easy as possible. Are there obstacles that might make working the crowd difficult? Look around a typical classroom and you will see a whole room full of obstacles. The biggest impediment to working the crowd is typically the arrangement of the furniture.

EFFECTIVE ROOM ARRANGEMENT

The Teacher's Desk
Arranged the furniture to make working the crowd as easy as possible. Carefully analyze space, distance, and movement.

First, get your desk away from its traditional location in the front of the classroom. Why? Because it costs you almost eight feet of proximity with every student in the classroom! Next, bring the students forward so you can write on the board and then turn to talk comfortably to the front row.

Where should your desk go? Most teachers just shove it into the corner so they can conveniently lay things on it. Other teachers place it in the back of the room.

The Students' Desks
I will show you some sample room arrangements. Do not jump to the conclusion that they are "correct." They simply make mobility easy. Once you become familiar with a few basic principles, you will be able to rearrange your own classroom in a way that is best for you.

The most important feature of room arrangement is not where the furniture goes, but, rather, where the furniture does not go. The objective of room arrangement is to create walkways. You want to be able to get from any student to any other student with the fewest steps possible.

Proximity and Supervision
The diagram pictured on the left below has four rows running from side to side, with eight students per row. Imagine yourself working the crowd during guided practice as you supervise students' work. What is the shortest distance you can walk that will allow you to read the work of every student in the class? It is indicated by the red line in the diagram. We will call this pattern of movement an interior loop.

You also might wish to have students work together in small groups as in cooperative learning or committee work. The diagram to the right below shows a room arrangement in which students are working in groups of four. They may be seated at large tables, or they may have shoved their desks together.
An interior loop allows you to work the crowd with the fewest steps. An interior loop with large tables arranged in a semicircle.

As you can see, the room arrangement to the right looks very different from that on the left. However, when you start working the crowd, you will find your interior loop soon enough.

In closing, remember that both room arrangement and mobility are only means to an end. The objective of room arrangement is proximity. If you already have proximity without moving, you needn't go any further. For example, primary teachers might have all the proximity they need sitting on the carpet reading to students at their feet.

This article is condensed from Dr. Jones' award winning book Tools for Teaching. Illustrations by Brian Jones for Tools for Teaching.

Meet Fred Jones

Dr. Fred Jones received his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from UCLA, specializing in work with schools and families, and has pioneered research into classroom management in both regular and special education classrooms. The non-adversarial management procedures Dr. Jones developed are presented in his books Positive Classroom Discipline and Positive Classroom Instruction. His most recent book, Tools for Teaching, offers an updated description of classroom management in which the prevention of discipline problems and training children to be responsible place discipline management within a positive and affirming context. Click to read a complete bio.

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