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Room for Improvement

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Becoming more intentional about classroom design can help teachers manage behavior, build community, and improve learning.

The conversion started with Jared (not his real name), a student who asked me if I could tell his teacher that the classroom was a very distracting place for him. I wasn't expecting the request, since I was only visiting the school to talk to students and teachers about learning spaces, but I could tell that he was genuine and in need of someone to champion his voice. When I asked him why he couldn't tell the teacher himself, he said that he didn't want to disappoint her. He said that she talked every day about how beautiful her classroom was, and he felt bad telling her he thought there were too many colors, too many posters, and no place to move with so many things in the room. Later, after I finished helping Jared discuss his reality with his teacher, I realized there were probably students like him everywhere, students who were negatively impacted by the design of their learning space.

Designing learning spaces that meet the needs of our students can be a high-leverage classroom management strategy, especially if the students themselves are involved in some of the decision making. Research documents how a classroom designed with student feedback can positively impact emotions, engagement, and learning (Gremmen et al, 2016). It can also have a positive effect on behavior. Students don't want to see spaces that they helped create or design used for unintended purposes. When they have more choice and ownership, they tend to self-regulate and support the positive behavior of other students (Teaching Tolerance, 2016).

Simple changes to both the perimeter and the floor plan of the room can help manage day-to-day behaviors and allow students to find comfort in the space, as well as encourage students to think more deeply and work harder. Here are some ideas to try.

Rewriting Routines

While flexible learning spaces—classrooms that aren't furnished with rows of desks, but rather contain different types of seating that can be rearranged as needed—are gaining in popularity, they also come with challenges. We can't assume that students know how to act in these new spaces. Consider that we explicitly teach students how to walk in hallways and line up for lunch, but we often don't provide that same level of detail when we introduce flexibility and choice into learning spaces. Take time to practice moving furniture into three or four different configurations, and make sure that students understand that there are different levels of choice around where and how to sit or stand in the learning space. Let them know that sometimes choice is free and open, while at other times there need to be limitations.

Behavior and learning can be initially difficult to manage in classrooms that have never felt flexible and agile to students before. But students can quickly adapt from a teacher-centric to a student-centric design if the way learning is presented


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also shifts. New flexible spaces should be mirrored by new flexible learning models to move past any initial period of discomfort for teachers and students.

Establishing new, flexible norms in terms of both the physical space of the classroom and the instructional model of learning should be done in a positive, welcoming, and inviting way. Learning-space norms should follow familiar language for the classroom, complete with guidance. ("We choose spaces that can best allow us to learn," or "We recognize that movement is an essential part of learning.") In addition, it is important to showcase new routines visually. Small table tents or posters with positive language such as, "Space for creating is an amazing opportunity to showcase your learning through making" or "Be considerate of the supply needs of others and celebrate the hard work of those students sharing your space" can promote and reinforce the purpose of a space. Doing this allows students to think about concepts like collaboration in different and deeper ways.

One school I worked with developed new space norms by having students think about how behavior also shifts in different spaces in their own communities. They discussed how there are norms for going to temple, having dinner with family, or hanging out on the front porch. As students made the connection to the fact that they were moving between behavior conventions outside of school, it helped them realize that learning spaces can and should have a variety of expectations inside the school. It was amazing to see these students record videos about the learning space for next year's students. They could be overheard talking about being compassionate, cooperating with others, and using the space to create new understandings and connections.



Cozy chairs can offer alternatives for students to immerse themselves in learning or to conduct group work in different and exciting ways.

The Power of Quiet

Our students carry a lot of stress with them. This stress can come from many sources—including trauma, poverty, or academic pressures. In "The Neuroscience of Classrooms" (2016), Timothy Holmes argues that learning spaces need to be designed to offer caring and healing to students. When students feel cared for, they can trust the learning process. Caring spaces create a sense of belonging, and they recognize that life outside of school impacts every moment of learning.

Simple classroom configurations and pedagogical shifts, through which all students have an opportunity to support others in learning and listening, can help erode feelings of isolation or loneliness that students experience in the classroom.

Many students need quiet for reflection, processing, and decluttering their working memory. Quiet isn't about taking a decibel reading in the classroom, though. It is a vibe. It is a flow. It's a reflection of a way of learning that allows students to feel a level of creativity, imagination, and play in their learning.

This can mean starting class with some quiet moments of mindfulness, but it can also involve creating a space in the classroom that supports quiet work. For some classrooms, this might be a soft seating area blocked from the normal flow of the room, but in other spaces, it might be a particular desk and the common understanding that if someone is sitting there, they get time without distraction from others.

Teachers looking to expand the quietness in their classroom should explain to their students, leadership, and parents the "why" for such spaces, including the need for mindful learning, reducing stress, and the importance of reflection. Teachers who take a few seconds to discuss this purpose every few weeks have the most success. When cocreated expectations exist around the purpose and design for classroom quiet, powerful learning can emerge.



Color choice is important to a classroom design. Avoid too many colors by choosing one base color and blending it with two accent colors.

Around the Campfire

Humans are wired both to listen to and tell stories. The learning that sticks for students is often a result of the stories that teachers use to facilitate learning. Learning spaces designed to emulate a feeling of sitting around a campfire can lead to lower incidents of off-task behavior because they create a soft sense of accountability. With desks arranged in a circle or semi-circle, or students standing or sitting on the floor, eye contact increases and everyone can find a fresh level of connection.

One high school student spoke to me about how these configurations in class gave her a chance to know the "invisible" people in her classroom. She talked about how rows promote anonymity, and even as uncomfortable as she was at first in these more socially connected spaces, she appreciated knowing the names and stories of every student in her civics class.

Colors and Displays

Imagine a classroom in which every wall space, blackboard, and window is covered with charts, pictures, and writings. The items do not change throughout the year, and the classroom has a color palette that resembles a bag of skittles.

For students, absorbing all the details of a cluttered classroom can be intellectually exhausting and distracting. This was documented in research by Fisher, Godwin, and Seltman (2014), which showed that the details of the items displayed in a room can impact learning. Students in classrooms where displays were more thoughtfully planned were able to focus on tasks for longer periods of time, and the loss of instructional time was limited since students spent less time wandering around the classroom. Students in rooms that had less clutter and that were intentional about the color palette reported less intellectual exhaustion than students in "busier" rooms.

Teachers need to be intentional about every aspect of wall space. Rotate images and information instead of posting everything, and look for ways to leave open space on the walls, around the room, and on whiteboards to help students mentally breathe in a learning space. Too many objects, noises, and color can result in students experiencing unnecessary stress that can impact learning.

By contrast, using the right colors with intention can bring a peaceful, caring, comfortable feel to the classroom and a good flow and energy. This palette generally avoids the use of primary colors and blends a base color like tan or gray with two additional accent colors.

Students can focus better when everything in the room has a place. This is especially true for students with autism or who are on the autism spectrum (Heflin & Alberto, 2001). All students can focus more deeply and settle more easily into the ongoing work when they are learning in places that provide a certain level of order and calm. This doesn't mean that the room can't be flexible and reconfigured, but at the end of the day it should be reset and staged for the next day of learning.

Inertia, impulse, and tradition often play a large role in what ends up on classroom walls. Before teachers place any item, they should consider when they plan to remove it—or if the item is even needed at all. Some schools are beginning to use digital notebooks that teachers can access on individual computers or display through their projector as a way to showcase work without cluttering the room. There isn't a simple answer to the question of how much "stuff" should be on the walls, but one guideline might be: If an item hasn't been referenced for a few months, it may need to be rotated out.



Students who need time for quiet or reflection can be offered a soft cushion or chair away from the rest of the classroom. This can give them a sense of comfort or safety.



Fun, colorful signage can reinforce a teachers' learning space intentions.

Light and Sound

Even though these features may be beyond the locus of control of some teachers and leaders, it is important to think about the implications that light and sound have on achievement and behavior.

Natural light stimulates brain function, so it is optimal for students to have healthy doses of lighting from the outdoors as often as possible (Barrett & Zhang, 2009). If you have windows in your classroom, try to keep them open and free of restrictions whenever possible. If your classroom does not have a lot of natural light, try to think of ways to move your class outside on occasion or consider adding varied light sources to break up the fluorescent light shower that students are too often subjected to in classrooms.

Finally, think about the way that sound and noise can help or hinder your teaching. Computers and phones create a lot of visual noise for students, and this impacts attention. Learning-space design needs to present a "counternarrative" to the culture of constant buzz so students can see that focused work with less multitasking and interruptions can lead to excellence. This can include time when cell phones are turned off and remain out of sight. It can also mean taking a few minutes of mindful breathing to focus behavior and attention. Your classroom may be the only place students have where they can practice listening without distraction.

Another way to focus educational and reinforce positive learning behavior is to facilitate close, reflective viewing of educational videos and images. Students need practice slowing down to "listen" to images and to focus without the sounds of life stampeding them.

As educators, we must also ensure that our positioning in the room allows us auditory access to all learners. In a typical classroom with rows and desks, teachers are positioned primarily in the front of the room. In this format, students sitting in the back of the room may be missing a good portion of the teachers' instruction because of poor acoustics. This loss of details can lead to misbehavior and irritability.

To ensure all students are able to participate in and feel a part of conversations and discussions in the classroom, teachers should identify at least three focal points in the room from which they can share information with students. These points should vary so that all of the students feel some proximity to the sound of the conversations during each learning period.

Design a Classroom that Embraces Learning

All educators want to create a culture that supports learning in their classroom. This comes from the daily routines. It comes from the way that individual students practice kindness and compassion. It comes from teachable moments and positive reinforcement.

All of these ingredients can be amplified in a learning environment that speaks without speaking. In such environments, there is order to the space. It is tidy and clean. The space communicates that students are central, and it demonstrates that learning is demanding but fun. Classroom management becomes easier when the space showcases high expectations.

Consider identifying three specific items in your learning space that nonverbally support your classroom management strategy. For example, if you want to build the students' capacity to listen, do you have an image of an ear in multiple places in the room that you reference as a visual cue for behavior? Or consider the goals of your classroom. Are you trying to grow students as thinkers, scientists, and writers? If these are your focus, then how do the items throughout the room support these mindsets and learning behaviors?

Many teachers, as they consider these ideas for the first time, realize that there are mixed messages about the norms, purpose, and expectations of the classroom based on what is displayed. Reviewing the intention, purpose, and need for all items in the room can bring greater coherence to the nonverbal message that the classroom tells. Teachers who design their classrooms effectively will find that their students have greater clarity about the learning purpose and devote more attention to the work of learning.

Learning-space design can be a key amplifier for facilitating the classroom behaviors that contribute to learning. Modern classroom design featuring flexible furniture, a focus on creation and collaboration, and a dedication to student-led learning can support teachers in using engagement as a lever of better behavior. Such settings also make it more difficult to maintain a traditional teacher-led model where discipline is the dominant behavior-management strategy. Only when pedagogy, technology infusion, and learning spaces are in sync do issues around classroom management slide to the background.

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