

## ORGANIZING THE PHYSICAL SPACE

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Have you noticed that when you step into certain classrooms, you get a feel for the “climate” of the room that is mirrored in the teacher’s enthusiasm and students’ engagement. The “climate” doesn’t occur automatically. The teacher has set up certain conditions and organized the environment so that life in the classroom is positive and orderly. Interesting bulletin boards that reflect the content of the class; wall posters that announce the strategies emphasized in the class; posters communicating classroom expectations; displays of student work; technology for the teacher (e.g., overhead projector, document camera, LCD projector, SMART Board); technology for the students (e.g., computers, listening posts); bookcases filled with instructional materials and supplementary materials; and a general sense of order and care all come together to create a positive climate where teacher and students alike can thrive.

To begin establishing this positive climate for yourself and your students, you must consider the physical organization required for successful instruction. Although the requirements vary by subject and grade level, some general principles apply to organizing all environments for instruction. First, you should designate areas for specific activities. In the elementary classroom or self-contained special education classroom, these activities may include whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, gatherings on the rug, free-choice games and activities, quiet reading, and computer use. In addition, you must communicate behavioral expectations for each area. For example, you could teach students that access to the free-choice area depends on complete, accurate, neat independent work, and that students must be quiet and use materials appropriately in order to continue using the free-choice area.

Second, whether you are teaching small or large groups, you should be in close proximity to your students. When students are “up close and personal”, it is much easier for you to connect with them, to monitor their behavior, to maintain their attention, and to engage them in instruction. Close proximity is not a challenge when you are teaching a small group gathered around a rectangle table or a kidney-shaped table in the primary grades. However, it is not possible to have proximity to all students at once when you are teaching larger groups. Often students widen the gap even more. In many classrooms, particularly in high schools, students may choose to sit at desks on the periphery of the classroom that are as far removed from the teacher and class activities as possible. Frequently the students who sit furthest away are the students who most need the teacher’s proximity to gain and hold their attention. In addition, many secondary students, while self-selecting seats, engage in seating disputes and/or take too much time to figure out the best seat, both of which could result in lost instructional time. Assigning seats usually prevents all of these problems. In the primary grades, you can place students’ names on the desks. In secondary schools, placing names on desks is often not feasible, but an alternative procedure works well: Place a number on each desk. Make a seating chart that shows the desk numbers and the name of the students assigned to each seat. As students enter, hand them copies of the seating chart and ask them to locate their seats. Students can quickly locate their assigned seats with the seating chart, and they have a ready reference for learning the names of classmates. Assigning seats allows you to choose which students sit closest to where you will be standing when you are not moving around. Assigning seats also allows you to orchestrate optimum peer partners and cooperative learning teams that take into consideration students’ current functioning levels.

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Third, students should face you during instruction. This seems like an obvious requirement, but many teachers organize students in clusters of four, with half of the students facing their tablemates rather than the teacher. Obviously, students will be less attentive when it is difficult for them to make eye contact with the teacher and for the teacher to monitor their behavior. In addition, a recent review of studies on room arrangement concluded that rows were conducive than clusters to on-task behavior during independent work (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008).

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Fourth, you should arrange the seats so that students can easily share answers with a partner—one of the most effective active participation procedures. In classrooms with desks, place two desks together to facilitate partner work during teacher-directed instruction. When students are at a table, the students sitting next to each other can be partners.

Fifth, you should organize both teacher and students materials for easy access. You will want to have instructional materials at your fingertips—perhaps arranged on a table along with an overhead projector, document camera, or computer attached to an LCD projector or a SMART Board. As we have all experienced, in the time that it takes you to retrieve a missing teacher’s guide, blank transparency, or marker for your desk or a closet at the back of the room, management problems can erupt even in the best of settings. One motto that we teachers cannot afford to forget is “Avoid the void, for they will fill it!” Similarly, student materials should be close to students, either in their desks or in containers on their tables. Again, if students have to get up to retrieve instructional materials, management challenges are likely to emerge.

You should also teach students organization skills and routines that permit easy retrieval and storage of materials. In third grade and above, you can require students to have a binder with dividers for each subject, and pen-and-pencil pouch at the front of the binder for writing tools, and paper at the back of the binder. In addition, a calendar for recording assignments, tests, and projects can be placed at the front of the binder. In kindergarten through second grade, students can have a pocket take-home folder with one side labeled “Take Home” and the other pocket labeled “Bring Back to School” for parent notices and homework.

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Sixth, you should organize the room so that you can easily monitor the responses of students and be able to provide valuable feedback. As noted earlier, when you are teaching a small group with students gathered around you at a kidney-shaped table, being close enough to monitor responses and provide feedback is easy. However, when you are teaching a large group of 28 students, monitoring is more a challenge. In this case, you want to be sure that no barriers impede movement around the room. You must be able to listen to students as they share answers with their partners, as well as to examine the students’ written response carefully. If a bookcase, a small-group table, equipment, or even a narrow aisle is a barrier to movement, your effectiveness will be reduced.

Seventh, you must be able to see all parts of the room and all students. Although this seems obvious, we often see students hidden behind bookcases, screens, walls of work stations, and free-standing blackboards. When a teacher cannot see some students and some students cannot see the teacher, management challenges emerge. Just think about the change in your own behavior when you spot a state patrol car next to the freeway.

Finally, you should post materials on classroom walls that support instructional efforts. A must in every classroom is a posted assignment calendar (or, at the secondary level, one calendar for each period). Either you or a designated student can record assignments, tests, and performances on the corresponding due dates on the class calendar. This calendar also serves as an effective communication tool for a student who has been absent, a student who is not sure of the spoken directions, the parent of a child who has been absent, or individuals who provide support to students (e.g., special education teachers or tutors). Next, materials posted in the classroom remind students of the critical content being stressed in the class and the strategies you want them to apply. This informative material can include (1) **word walls** listing the vocabulary terms introduced paired with a reminder of the content, such as a copy of the first page in the story; (2) **strategy posters** outlining the steps in a writing strategy, the order of operations in algebra, the steps in scientific inquiry, or the steps in a learning strategy; (3)

Adapted from: Archer, A., Hughes, C. (2011). *Explicit Instruction*. New York: Guilford Press

Crawford, D. (2011). *Top Ten Expert Teaching Skills*. Association For Direct Instruction News

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**rubrics** conveying expectations for written products or projects; (4) **content/reference information**, such as a maps, the periodic table of elements, a poster showing the branches of the federal government; or a list of strong verbs for writing, a list of overused words and their alternatives; (5) **rule/expectation posters** conveying desired school behavior; and (6) **notices**, such as lunch menus, announcements of performances, or a schedule of upcoming events. Many teachers also post sayings or adages that communicate attitudes for students to adopt. Here are a few examples from elementary classrooms:

- “Attitude = 100%. (Have children associate numbers with letters of the alphabet and add the numbers—for example, A = 1; T = 20;.)
- “Don’t REST until you do your BEST.”
- “The dictionary is the only place where *success* comes before work.”

The following examples, which include a touch of humor, can be used in secondary classrooms:

- “Boring is a choice”
- “Teachers open the door, but you must choose to enter.”
- “Floating is easy. That’s how all dead fish end up downstream.”
- “Time is passing. Are you?” (Posted next to a clock.)

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In addition to posting informative material, teachers should actively promote student motivation to achieve academically by devoting classroom space to celebrations of academic achievement.

A variety of systematic ways of reinforcing excellence in academics should be visible on classroom walls, such as thermometer charts, posting of excellent student work (and only excellent work), grades, awards, and 90% clubs. Celebrations and recognition of various forms should be in place. This is especially important in classes in which not all students are intrinsically motivated. Students should show pride and readily offer explanations of the various honors being earned on the walls of the classroom.

Displaying accomplishments that are worthy of special recognition on the walls of the classroom is one of the best ways for teachers to let students know what is important. Every display should be about achievements that took real effort by the students. Students should be striving to get their names or their papers up on the wall for accomplishing something—whether it is 100% on a test, excellence in handwriting, or perfect spelling.

Displays of student work communicate to students, parents, support staff, and visitors that the focus of the class is academic attainment. At the elementary level, consider displaying the best work of each student. In some schools, every room contains a “Personal Best” bulletin board. At the end of the week, students go through returned work and select the assignment for their space that represents their “Personal Best, post it on the bulletin board, and explain to their partner or the class why they selected the assignment.

In summary, the physical organization of your classroom creates a positive climate for you and your students and supports you in delivering high-quality instruction.