

Preparing Teaching Environments for Art Education

by

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The instructional strategy of every teacher is assumed to include plans for creating the best possible conditions for learning. Many of the factors that effect how students work and behave in art classes are quite subtle and nearly impossible for teachers to control. One instruction-related variable that is easily accessible for manipulation by art teachers is the physical environment. Furniture arrangements, seating position, traffic flow and aesthetic quality are aspects of the physical setting under the direct control of art teachers. While the social architecture is the dominant factor in any interpersonal system, the physical context can serve to influence the conduct of all inhabitants. This paper will discuss a series of concepts, ideas and examples that can be used to guide decisions about how to prepare the most supportive physical settings for art education. When considering the many options available for arranging a classroom, three overarching concepts should be considered:

1. When considering the organization of the physical setting, one must assume that a reasonable relationship exists between the characteristics of the environment and the behaviors of inhabitants. Therefore, the organization and layout of the classroom must be pre-planned as part of the overall instructional strategy. Although the physical setting does not teach, it does tend to facilitate certain behaviors and hinders others.

2. The environment must be organized to function in unison with the teaching methods being used. No single room layout is ideal for all phases of an art lesson. A specific environment must be considered in terms of how it will be perceived, used and responded to by all inhabitants (Weinstein, 1981).

3. In most cases, the physical characteristics of a classroom should be expected to change several times during a lesson in response to the

shifting directions of student work and the progress of the lesson.

Room Arrangements for Art Lessons

Art lessons tend to be identified with two different modes of activity; expressive practices are associated with creating works of art; response activities are associated with the study of art history, art criticism and aesthetics. Each mode of participation requires distinctive environmental considerations. For example, during art making periods, students are usually expected to work individually at their benches, desks or tables, attending to the media being used and the concepts featured.

For expressive activities, spatial arrangement considerations should include:

- Providing students with an adequate amount of space to work comfortably.
- While many individuals perform well in crowded work conditions, others are uneasy in such circumstances. Micro-environments that are suited to the spatial needs and preferences of students can be developed to address this concern.
- Arranging room layouts which enable the teacher to visit each student during a class period. Plans should be developed to eliminate blocked aisles and congested areas around sinks and cabinets.
- Minimizing the unnecessary movement, noise, and commotion that routinely occurs in classrooms. While many youngsters are able to filter out annoying conditions in their work environment, others are not.

Arrangements that cluster seating into modular groups are poorly suited for controlling behavior. In these situations, students tend to have more interactions with one another and are

likely to waste time than when arranged in other seating layouts. The cluster plan seems to be best suited for small group activities (Feitler, Weiner, & Blumberg, 1970).

During lecture periods or when viewing slides, films, or video presentations, students are expected to direct their attention to a specific area in the room and behave as audience members. In these circumstances, verbal exchanges between the teacher and class members are infrequent. The row and column seating arrangement works best to support this mode of instruction. Students are seated in an arrangement that permits them to see the presentation, and the teacher can be in a position to monitor their behavior.

For discussions, critiques, and demonstrations, the circular or horseshoe arrangement is most functional. Interactions among class members are encouraged because students are able to make eye contact with classmates and the teacher can manage the flow of participation from a central point.

For short presentations, such as demonstrations or for introducing new parts of a lesson, students can sometimes be asked to stand, gathered around a large table or desk.

Research on Effective Teaching

Research continues on the classroom practices of teachers who have been described by their colleagues as being effective instructors. Arlin (1979) has described a variety of practices by effective teachers that include attention to physical environment variables, including:

1. Dividing the room into distinct zones or areas that are designated for specific functions or activities.
2. Perceiving the classroom as a flexible setting that can be tailored to best suit the behavioral and participatory requirements of the lesson.
3. Developing procedures that allow equipment that must be stored to be easily obtained and replaced.
4. Planning spatial arrangements to facilitate easy movement from one area in the room to another. The intent is to minimize crowding and congestion in high traffic areas.

Conclusion

The ideas presented here can be used to guide decisions about how to prepare efficient, safe and comfortable settings for art education. In most cases, what works best for any teacher will result from trial and error experimentation, mediated in part by the teacher's personal preferences and the physical features in the room that can be manipulated.

Once students have been introduced to the notion of adapting the environment to the characteristics of the lesson, the novelty of moving chairs and desks will quickly wear off. Over time, changing room layouts will become a regular part of class activity.

Effective teachers have been described by their ability to prevent problems rather than through their use of tricks and gimmicks for dealing with them after they occur (Brophy, 1983). Well planned room environments are an aspect of art instruction that can serve to prevent problems while promoting positive student behaviors.

References

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