

Saturday, September 30, 2006

Top Tips

Classroom Layout and Design: It's not too Late

School has started. Is it too late to make changes to your classroom's layout and design? Not if you do it step-by-step. Not if you and your students think differently.

And, you may be able to motivate your students toward increased achievement and stimulate your students sense of mastery over their environment. Change Psychology Change psychology involves both the cognitive reframing of the changes, and the physical labor of moving things.

Stress is generated when anything changes because adjustments now take effort. There is little or no stress when our minds are on automatic habit-pilot. But, when things change, we have to think and adjust.

But, a corollary to the stress of change is the "Hawthorne Effect." This is the tendency for motivation (and output) to improve when people believe that they are treated as "special."

Using the Hawthorne Effect by making your students feel special (you are doing that anyway) is easy because you just have to leave indirect hints that the changes are experiments to see how changes affect a (special, top performing, motivated, street smart, you fill in the descriptor of your students) group.

Even if the change fails, or if the change proves to be more trouble than benefit; there are payoffs to your students (knowing, believing, feeling, acting like) they are special. Historical Goals for Change The goals for our classrooms have not changed since the days when rows of desks were screwed to the floor, i.e., to maximize learning for every student. But the teaching environment has become more dynamic, and even full-sized rooms seem small if a sector must be reserved for every instructional activity and function.

Amazing when you realize that the attached to the floor, teacher-only-talked factory school design (comfortably?) accommodated a class size of 45 students. The answer: Modular Design. Of course some restraints exist that prevent complete adaptability. For example, the location of data ports and power outlets, projection screens, windows (this is not referring to the operating system on the computer), doors and bulletin boards.

For course, a modular design for classroom components is consistent with Classroom Toolkit's recommendation for the modular design (and use) of instructional materials. (See our Instructional Management page on the Classroom Toolkit site.

On the face of it (face validity), classroom layout and design would seem to be "space", but, in reality a more effective focus is on time and use.

What is the timeline of learning experiences? What delivery mode will the time accommodate? Choices include: whole group, small group, learning center, individual work or individual or group conferences, group projects...

"What uses will the time be put to?"

Answer these kinds of questions, and space will coalesce around time and use. Focus upon space, and there will never be enough. Focus upon use, and there will never be enough time, but there will be plenty of space. Focal Points In the old days, the teacher's desk was the focal point of the classroom, and the desk needed to be placed in the front of the classroom (for control and authority purposes). Today, the teacher's desk could be placed at the side, or even in the back of the class.

In the control days, students could not sit at the teacher's desk, and could only approach when invited. Today, a "student teacher" (one of the students) may be assigned as a classroom helper and be found using the desk.

The classroom library is a recommended focal point (see Classroom Newsletter article Develop or Upgrade your Classroom Library Multi-Use Areas What are some multi-use areas that you can create in your classroom?

Choices come as fast as you can imagine them. Here are some ideas: Library

Learning Centers

Conference Center

Study Hall

Laboratory

Office Complex

Research Park

Employment Office

Brokerage

Lounge

Retreat Center

Store

Bank

Auction Barn or Trading Floor

Jail (Just kidding!)

Church (You'll lose your job) Further Research Dan Butin of the University of Virginia offers a comprehensive four page white paper for the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities. Link to the Classrooms article.

Suggestions found in Dan Butin's article include: Allow 20 sq. feet (5' x 4') for each computer, table and chair. A classroom may need 15% more space to accommodate technology needs

Wall mount a television, VCR and DVD.

Consider access to outdoors as a part of the room plan. (Note: Remember the Naturalistic Multiple Intelligence) (Quip: And you thought that being sentenced to a portable building just meant that you didn't have any seniority on the campus, or that the principal had it in for you.)

For areas with sliding walls (to facilitate team teaching) ensure that the walls are composed of acoustic material to deaden the sounds that emanate from the other space. Creative Thinking During the era of "Open Concept" schools, teachers used book shelves, desks, dividers, boxes, curtains and other devices to partition the space into their own "room."

Now, with walled rooms in vogue, teachers can consider the hallways outside, the library, gym, computer lab and any other space as another "schedule-able classroom annex." Involve Students Involve students in the design and planning of their classroom's space and time, and when you can accept their suggestions, do. And, train students to a schedule of time use at a certain space. (Ordinarily, students are trained for a subject/ content area association for time (i.e., a schedule).

When students are interact with learning activities and each other, as they manipulate time and space, as they focus upon feeling special, and as they integrate activity and outcome...they develop a sense of mastery of their world.

Show students how, when they hold their attention upon their intention to learn; that time and space seem to mold experience so that there is an abundance of each.

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