

‘Investigating the Emotional and Physical Aspects of the Language
Classroom’

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Introduction

What exactly do we mean by classroom management?

The way I see it, we have to split this particular subject right down the middle: we have the emotional side (*the people*) and we have the physical side (*arranging furniture, placement of the whiteboard, seating plans, etc.*).

The various theories I'll be introducing and discussing over the course of several chapters in the first half of this book focus on the former, encompassing the methods of organization, administration, teaching and enforcing discipline in our classroom.

These 'emotional' chapters shall consider how particular theories provide models for explaining how students learn, thus suggesting techniques for enhancing learning and decreasing distraction in our learning environments.

I follow these with four chapters focusing on the physical nature of classroom management, looking at rooms I like, rooms I don't, and discussing the nature of the perfect classroom.

I hope these chapters will collectively help show you how knowledge of classroom management can help you investigate how you function in a classroom, and how you might reflect on changes you'd like to make to how you manage things.

Chapter 1: Investigating the emotional side of the classroom: introducing classroom management

In this chapter I'll briefly introduce and summarize some of the things I'll be discussing throughout the first half of the book. We'll start off with some of the key issues pertaining to the emotional management of your classes.

1. The notion of teacher presence

When we are managing our classrooms, the kind and amount of presence we as teachers uphold are important in establishing - and understanding - the dynamics of the learning environment. So, what's best?

- Domineering teachers can ruin a learner's sense of autonomy, reinforcing the notion that they are not as important a part of the class as the teacher.
- On the other hand, being too free with students can result in a state of anarchy in which no learning can occur.

As teachers we must achieve some kind of equilibrium; we need a noticeable physical presence in the classroom, while still focusing on getting learners to self-impose positive norms. What we are aiming for is learners developing appropriate behavior through self-discipline, rather than the danger of punishment.

2. The notion of assertive discipline

How we might best keep control in our learning environments is the central theme that many theories of classroom management attempt to address. As a teacher you might often feel the need to maintain strict discipline in your learning environment by threatening students with some form of punishment or other assertive techniques.

Such thinking is based heavily on the behaviorist notion that learning is a process of negative or positive reinforcement. While such an approach may be effective in certain situation (I will be looking at the good and the bad of behaviorism soon), a number of other techniques have shown to be more helpful in the long term.

3. The notion of learner self control

Not all theories look at the notion of discipline, however. In the ‘other camp’ are those theories that focus on learner control; these suggest that it’s better for learners to discover internal control, to learn how to take control of their behavior and take responsibility for the choices they make.

Is there a downside to this? Nurturing and facilitating self control takes considerably more time than adopting threatening behaviorist stance; nevertheless, it is unquestionably more valuable to learners in the long run.

4. The notion of teacher organization

The more organized we are as teachers, the more effective we can be in our learning environment. As a general rule of thumb, all learners are likely to respond positively to a structured environment; this is especially the case for adult learners.

Put simply, learners are more receptive when the guidance given is more focused; they behave better because they have respect for teachers, rather than because they fear negative consequences.

Summing up and looking forward

A range of theories hint at the conditions in which learning best occurs; generally, this means structured environments, through demonstration, observation, and through classroom activities that focus on doing, rather than merely memorizing rules.

We will be exploring these, plus the points I’ve introduced today, in upcoming chapters. Let’s get things underway in chapter two, where I’ll be giving an overview of the theories of Behaviorism, Choice, Student-Directed Learning and Assertive Discipline.

Chapter 2: Four Major Classroom Management Theories

In chapter one I introduced the main themes of classroom management theory. Over the course of five chapters we'll be considering the major theories in turn, each of which has its merits and weaknesses. As teachers we can use the theories to define, support, reflect on and even develop our own philosophy of education and classroom management style.

As noted previously, effective classroom management brings about a smooth-running classroom where learning can occur. For this reason, we as teachers need some form of plan to manage our learning environment by anticipating and preventing problems, facilitating appropriate behavior and addressing problem behaviors as and when it's necessary to do so.

1. Behaviorism: The Skinner Model

In the Skinner model teachers strongly guide learner behavior to reach desired outcomes. Within the context of classroom management, behaviorism is firmly established in practice.

Key points

- Constant, consistent reinforcement of the rules is required in order to make it work properly.
- Good behavior has to be rewarded, whereas bad behavior must either be ignored or –preferably - punished without delay.
- The theory provides the theoretical support behind such practices as Behavioral Intervention Plans, learner contracts being a prime example.

Basically, any teachers who use classroom rules are engaging in the behaviorist practice of negative reinforcement.

2. Choice Theory: The Glasser Model

The Glasser Model views the role of teachers as helpers of those in their learning environment. The idea behind it is that all behavior is an issue of choice; teachers should merely serve to facilitate the making of good decisions.

Key points

- Teachers create environments - and curricula - that cultivate appropriate behavior through meeting learners' needs for belonging and the feeling of empowerment.
- Classroom rules and their enforcement remain a key factor in making learners responsible for their behavior choices.
- Discussion, reflection and even making amends are positively encouraged, rather than the administering of simple rewards and punishments.

Choice Theory was designed so as to assist learners in understanding the motivations behind their behavior, so that they might learn to make better choices.

3. Learner-Directed Learning: The Jones Model

If all this discipline is just too much for you to handle, hope is at hand! The Jones Model necessitates that teachers work with learners in helping them to develop a sense of self-control.

Key points

- Developing a sense of self-control empowers learners and prepares them for their future lives and careers.
- By employing appropriate body language, making use of an incentive system and efficiently assisting learners, teachers help them learn to control themselves.
- Learner-directed learning places classroom management in the hands of the classroom community rather than just that person at the front of the room.

Such democratic classrooms as those in which the Jones model prevails adhere to the social learning theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, empowering

learners by giving them both control of and responsibility for their own learning. The teacher's role is that of facilitator.

4. Assertive Discipline: The Canter Model

The Canter Model is an assertive classroom discipline model in which rules and behavior expectations are clearly stated and consistently enforced.

Key points

- The basis of this theory is that teachers have the right to teach without interference and learners the right to learn without disruption.
- Responsibility for bad learner behavior is on the teacher. Most learner behavior is deemed appropriate: the notion of assertive discipline reminds us to recognize positive behavior as a way of encouraging more of it.

Teachers must clearly communicate their expectations and expect compliance, acknowledging learners who comply, while redirecting those who don't.

Considerations

Giving some serious thought to these classroom management theories will provide you with the background knowledge that enables you to aim for best practice in the classroom. Don't forget, though, that creating a positive learning environment takes work, and sustaining it in the long-term even more.

Whether you adopt one or combine practices from each of the theories, learners will always reap the rewards of a classroom environment based on principles, free of distraction and conducive to learning. Over the course of the next four chapters, I'll look at each of these in more detail, before summing up with a chapter looking at how you might analyze your own classroom management style.

Chapter 3: What can we learn from Skinner's Behaviorism theory?

Continuing our look into the emotional side of classroom management, it's time to focus on behaviorism, as popularized by the famed psychologist B.F. Skinner. Generally, behaviorism is the idea that people respond as expected to stimuli; those who control the stimuli control the person.

The basic suggestion behind behaviorism, therefore, is that if you want to deal with unwanted behaviors, you must make certain that the unwanted behavior is punished. In contrast, the desired, or rational, behavior should be rewarded. As time goes by, the unwanted behavior stops as it is realized that this only ever results in a world of pain. In our classrooms, behaviorism states that we assume the role of controller of learner behavior, deciding what is appropriate and how to deal with what we consider inappropriate.

What does this mean in terms of language development?

Skinner's ideas on language development don't really differ from his general theory of behaviorism. The theory itself is simple, based, as with all of Skinner's work, around a structure of reward and punishment. Each reward and punishment serves to reinforce certain types of good or bad behavior. In other words, people tend to repeat actions that lead to pleasure, while avoiding actions that lead to discomfort. We refer to this as conditioning, which is basically the same thing as creating a habit. Help learners develop the right habits, Skinner suggests, and classroom management will be easily facilitated.

What's more, there seems to be a precedent for this in first language acquisition. At first children speak "nonsense" words, what we refer to as babble. Typically, we don't regard these as being anything impressive, so none of these are provided with any reward. As soon as the child begins to mimic the language of their parents, however, the parent starts to take notice and get excited. Consequently, when children speak a recognizable word, they are rewarded by their parents. As a result, these words - and then phrases - are remembered, while the nonsense words that receive no positive attention are forgotten. Skinner therefore suggests that behaviorism is a key component of first language acquisition.

How might we utilize Skinner's ideas in class?

At the surface level, a lot of ‘classroom rules’ agreed upon by the teacher and learner at the start of a course might seem to lend themselves to a behaviorist approach. For learners, for example, the positive behavior of not using phones during lessons is encouraged through the promise of rewards. The negative behavior of spending the lesson constantly texting results in negative consequences.

When these policies – which ideally have been agreed on by teacher and learner - are applied regularly over time and without excessive modification, the classroom can operate smoothly. As any organization can be treated in this fashion, the only real necessity is that the incentives be applied habitually and predictably.

Benefits of behaviorism

If you’re new to teaching, seriously consider how behaviorism can help you get to grips with life in the language classroom. The main benefit of Skinner's theory is that it’s extremely simple and easy to apply. People do respond to rewards and to being punished, especially over time, and language learners are just the same as people in any other situation. If you’re going to go down the behaviorist road:

- set out your rules early on,
- make sure learners understand what you expect and
- be consistent.

Criticisms of behaviorism

Skinner's approach is much criticized. The main objection to Skinner’s ideas is that they treat human beings as if they were lab animals. In fact, according to such critics as Kohn, most of Skinner's experiments were done with lab animals. What’s more, applied on a worldwide scale, Skinner's theory would lead to Orwellian totalitarianism in which every thought and act of the individual would be the subject of scientific control.

Forgetting totalitarian nightmares for second, critics have also rejected the use of Skinner's approach in the language classroom, stating that learning itself cannot be facilitated within a framework of rewards and punishments. Quite simply, learning doesn’t occur when people are merely responding in

order to receive or to not be punished; learning is a fundamental part of the human makeup that should be nurtured freely, not by coercion.

Summing up in three sentences...

- Don't underestimate the fact that people respond to positive and negative reinforcement, but don't let it rewards and punishments rule your learning environment.

- Try to help learners develop a sense of self-responsibility, so that they know themselves what is acceptable.

- If you feel that your classroom management style is too rooted in behaviorism, I recommend that you read the following chapter, in which I look at Fredric H. Jones' Positive Discipline Model

Chapter 4: What can we learn from the Jones model of positive discipline?

In the last chapter I looked at Skinner's behaviorist theory of classroom management. My hope is that you all found that a little too extreme and desire something a little less authoritarian. If that's the case, this chapter is for you! The Fredric H. Jones Positive Discipline Model is a classroom and school management system. Jones is the author of 'Positive Classroom Discipline', hence the name of his model. His system focuses on;

- 1) teacher body language and the teacher as an example of appropriate behavior,
- 2) the presence of firm, easily understandable rules, and
- 3) having a backup plan for when things don't go to plan.

Let's consider each of these in detail.

The teacher models what is considered appropriate behavior

The main tenet of the Jones positive discipline system is that the teacher models the kind of behavior that is expected:

- The teacher adopts a calm tone of voice that assumes that the learner will follow directions.
- The teacher uses positive language that nurtures a learning environment in which learners are encouraged to speak with one another thoughtfully.
- The teacher focuses on the learners and what they are doing in the learning environment, organizing the classroom so that they are able to quickly assist any learner.

What this all means for the learner is that their teacher provides a role model of acceptable adult behavior in an environment that supports their ability to learn.

Simple to apply rules, posted clearly

Another significant element of this model is that the rules are straightforward, direct and placed within the learning environment where they are visible at all times. Commonly, classroom rules might include; not talking when the teacher is talking or other learners are responding; coming to class with all the necessary class materials, such as coursebook and notepaper.

When applying the Jones model of positive discipline, the number of rules should be as few as possible and should deal with precise, concrete actions that are appropriate to making the learning environment a safe place to learn.

Responding to misbehavior

Even in the finest of classroom situations, learners sometimes behave inappropriately, or in a way that disturbs others. In the Jones Model, the first step in correction is a timeout in the classroom. If the learner is being sufficiently disruptive, they can be sent to another room to give them and the teacher time to calm down.

If the behavior is persistent, such as not bringing materials to class or distracting other learners while the teacher is talking, the teacher might work with a counselor or administrator to develop some kind of observation checklist.

Summing up in three sentences...

- As with behaviorism, this approach depends on there being a right and a wrong way of behaving in the classroom; again, this is dependent on a set of rules.
- Unlike Skinner's theory, though, this approach positively assumes that the learner is able to recognize the right way to act and respond to an exemplary example of behavior, i.e. that of the teacher.
- Although a much diluted down version of Skinner's behaviorism, you may still feel that this approach is too disciplinarian for you (the rules dictate behavior, even if they have been agreed upon by the learner); if so, please proceed to the next chapter when I'll examine William Glasser's theory of classroom management.

Chapter 5: What can we learn from Glasser's Choice Theory of classroom management?

Having focused on the discipline-based theories of Skinner and, to a lesser extent, Jones in the last two chapters, it's definitely time for a shift of gears! What better way to do that than with psychiatrist William Glasser's theory of classroom management, an effective blueprint to enable teachers to organize and sustain a flourishing learning environment.

Glasser is a world away from Skinner in particular; he asks that we as teachers educate our learners as to how they can make good choices and take responsibility for their behavior in the classroom. When adhered to, Glasser's Choice Theory can make education a rewarding experience for both learners and teachers alike.

The features of Glasser's Choice Theory

The theory is based on the notion that the classroom environment - and the curriculum - should create a safe place for learning by meeting the needs for freedom, a sense of belonging, a share of power, and the need to have fun. Glasser furthermore stresses we are, in fact, helping learners achieve success by teaching them to make appropriate behavioral choices.

According to Glasser, behavior boils down to a matter of personal choice. A learner's behavior stems from their choices; it's the teacher's duty to help the learner make good choices, resulting in first-rate behavior.

In this framework, teachers should;

- stress the importance of learner responsibility,
- the establishing of rules that lead to success,
- accept no excuses for inappropriate learner actions,
- require value judgments from learners,
- suggest suitable alternatives,
- bring into play responsible consequences, and

- carry out continual review with the class.

The benefits of Choice Theory

Glasser believed in providing learners with a choice in deciding not only classroom rules but also in the curriculum itself. This helps the learners take ownership of the learning process, leading to increased enthusiasm, confidence and participation, or so the theory goes!

We're still not left with a magic solution, though

Nevertheless, this theory alone won't eradicate all classroom behavioral issues. Glasser suggests that we as teachers need to organize our learning environment in the best way possible to meet the learners' needs and then intervene to 'improve' behavior as and when it is deemed necessary. Indeed, Glasser concedes that even when the theory is adhered to, about a quarter of your learners may remain unproductive.

Considerations

The Glasser Theory enables – or, rather, requires - us to deviate from the conventional learning environment structure to attain success. This is not necessarily an easy thing, especially if you're new to the profession. It does promote a lot of what I consider to be good classroom practice, nonetheless, meaning that even new teachers can employ elements of Choice Theory. Glasser, for instance, favors learners working together in small groups. This;

- helps foster a sense of belonging,
- motivates learners to work towards the group goal, and
- reduces learner reliance on the teacher.

According to the theory, when divided into smaller groups, the stronger learners will help the weaker ones, which enhances classroom relationships.

Summing up in three sentences...

- On a cline of extreme discipline through to trusting the learner to control themselves, this theory lies on the exact opposite end to that of Skinner's behaviorism.

- If you are a new teacher, think carefully about mastering the physical aspects of classroom management before you jump head long into giving too much choice to learners: it might spell disaster if you lose control of things.
- Using group work in class is a great way to get started with the Glasser model, as this necessitates that learners take some responsibility for their learning.

In our next chapter we'll have our final in-depth look at a classroom management model, this time that of Lee Canter.

Chapter 6: What can we learn from Canter's Assertive Classroom Management Model?

The assertive classroom management model was developed by Lee Canter in the 1970s, based on the notion that learners react positively to fair and well thought-out rule systems. Unlike Behaviorism, the assertive model is not necessarily an antagonistic model, nor does it suggest that teachers should over-discipline learners. In fact, the model uses four elements to determine a learning environment in which learners operate under clear rules, which carry specified benefits or consequences depending on their willingness to follow them.

The four elements break down as follows:

1. Establishing rules

Write down clear classroom rules that require no interpretation. Include specific rules, such as;

- turn off your phones when you enter the classroom,
- ask for permission before leaving the classroom for any reason, or
- clean your desk area before leaving the classroom.

If you incorporate general rules, ensure that you write them clearly, with specific elements. For example, you may write the following:

‘Respect other learner's opinion in the class by listening when they speak, considering what they are saying and responding to the statement without making personal attacks to the speaker.’

This is a general rule, but one which can't be misinterpreted.

Clarify and talk about each rule on the first day of class, and let your learners ask questions about the kind of actions that may violate these classroom rules.

2. Predetermined Affirmation

Reinforcing your learners' observance of your rules is desirable, and can be achieved with affirming statements as well as the kinds of specified benefits listed on your list of rules.

Making sure that the advantages for complying with your rules are clear is paramount in the assertive classroom management model. For instance, you may specify that if each learner treats their fellow learners with respect, as per your rules, during the week, you will give each learner some kind of bonus over the course of the coming week or semester. It's imperative that you act in accordance with your promised benefits for good behavior, showing your learners that you are fulfilling your responsibilities from the rules.

3. Predetermined Negative Consequences

Designing specific punishments for each broken rule is important, but making sure your punishments are both fair and reasonable should remain the priority. Also, handling discipline in a straightforward and matter-of-fact method is extremely important.

You should handle such situations by quietly informing the offending learner how they broke the rule and exactly what their punishment will be, based on the rules you handed out. For example, you may decide that if a learner leaves class without permission, they must return to your classroom at the end of the day and help you clean up the classroom. As we will see at every step of this model, standing by what you say is vital. In this case, stand by your punishments and assert them equally to each learner who breaks your rules. If not, prepare for anarchy!

4. The teacher as leader

Your role as a teacher in this assertive classroom management model places you as the leader of your learning environment. As such, you must show your learners how to follow the rules by demonstrating them yourself. For instance, showing learners how to be respectful of other learner comments by treating each comment as you describe in your rules is a good way to exemplify how things should work.

As teachers, we need to follow and enforce our rules consistently, because the goal is for our learners to make behavior decisions based on punishments

and benefits they can count on, such as knowing that if they leave class without permission, they will face the punishment you have assigned.

Summing up in three sentences...

- On a cline of extreme discipline through to trusting the learner to control themselves, this theory lies at the exact opposite end to that of Skinner's behaviorism.

- As a teacher, you lead the way, and as such get to set the tempo as to what is right and wrong: if things go wrong, it's probably down to you!

- If you are a new teacher, this theory might be the best approach for you, as it takes the good parts of behaviorism, but still trusts the learner to inherently be able to sense what is appropriate.

Chapter 7: What is your personal classroom management profile?

Now that we've reached the end of our epic classroom management journey, I hope we can define it as a system for establishing order and routine in the classroom so that learning can take place with the minimum of disruptions. Any teacher's personal classroom management style will determine the order and rules their class will follow and how they will interact with learners.

While I've tried my best to present you with a comprehensive introduction to classroom management over the course of these last few chapters, I hope you'll take it into your own hands to continue your voyage to classroom management nirvana! Researching classroom management styles and experimenting with different approaches will help you find your preferred techniques and enable you to create a positive environment for both you and your learners.

Making a start: learn what kind of classroom manager you are

My advice is to start with my wonderful series of book chapters, then, if that's not enough for you, conduct a bit more online research into the various classroom management styles. Commonly defined styles of classroom management are "authoritarian," "authoritative," "laissez-faire" and "indifferent": the majority of educators fall into one or more of these management styles.

Let's now look at the following 'typical' teacher descriptions: do any of them strike a particular chord with you?

Are you an authoritarian teacher?

Strict discipline is good, right? Well, learners in general dislike authoritarian teachers for the reason that they view them as cold and excessively firm.

How to tell if this is you?

Such teachers tend to forcefully control their classrooms while showing little involvement with their learners. The rules are there to be complied with. These teachers quickly punish learners for misbehavior. Such classroom environments can become quiet and seemingly orderly places. However, this comes at the expense of learners' happiness. Teachers who seek full control

and little opposition from learners will adopt an authoritarian management style.

Are you an authoritative teacher?

The authoritative teacher places limits on learners' behavior, yet still encourages learners to think and act independently.

How to tell if this is you?

Such teachers firmly redirect disruptive learners but do not shout or dish out overly harsh consequences for misbehavior. Authoritative teachers are those exerting high levels of control, but, more importantly, also showing high levels of engagement with their learners. Such teachers are strict, but importantly are also compassionate. Teachers wanting to be effective and respected by learners tend to adopt this style of classroom management.

Are you an indifferent teacher?

If indifference is your thing then you are probably characterized by the small degree of control and learner involvement in your classes. Fortunately, no teachers intentionally adopt this style! Nevertheless, newbie teachers, or even just those who lack training, confidence or dedication, may fall into indifference.

How to tell if this is you?

Such teachers use the same lesson plans over and over again and show no interest in extra-curricular activities or going 'the extra mile' with learners. Also, there is usually a lack of any kind of discipline in the learning environment, leading to disinterest and absenteeism.

Are you a laissez-faire teacher?

Teachers adopting the laissez-faire classroom-management style enjoy time in class with their learners, yet place few if any controls on them.

How to tell if this is you?

An alternative but equally applicable term to describe such teachers would be "indulgent": such teachers indulge their learners and refrain from

disciplining them for misbehavior. It is pertinent to remember, though, that the term comes from the French expression meaning ‘let the people do as they choose’. Learners will initially enjoy their time with such teachers because they have freedom without much responsibility. Nevertheless, laissez-faire teachers revel in being the ‘cool teacher’ at the risk of their learners' development. Such teachers need to think carefully about the extent to which such a management style actually benefits learners, for the simple reason that it mostly doesn't.

What you need to do: planning for development

1. Focus on your classroom discipline procedures

Decide if you feel you need to address the balance between the need for order and the need for a nurturing atmosphere. When I looked at my classroom management style, I needed to make changes; the chances are, you will, too. Think about which management style you are using when disciplining learners, as well as when praising them. Does the management style you exhibit in the classroom correspond with your personality and your preferred style of teaching?

2. Talk to other teachers, inviting them to observe your teaching style in the classroom

Getting the perspectives of trusted colleagues will be invaluable and undoubtedly tell you more about your classroom management techniques than any other method. Get your colleagues to make notes on any weak or strong points as part of your personal classroom management profile. A fresh set of eyes on classroom management practices is an asset to every teacher.

3. Put together a list of your strong points, as well as those requiring attention

Doing so will unveil your particular style of classroom management and will give you insights that will make lesson-planning and discipline methods easier to carry out. Write down your classroom management philosophy, including the changes you feel you need to make, and write a plan for how you intend to achieve it.

Final tips for adapting your classroom management style

- Don't be afraid to undertake different management styles for different situations. No one single style works in every situation for every classroom environment.
- Be aware that classroom management styles and theories evolve over time, over the course of your career: be willing to adapt to new styles and keep up to date with the latest ideas.

Chapter 8: Dealing with the physical aspects of the classroom

Deciding how to plan activities is both incredibly easy and horribly difficult. We might have a good idea of how we want our classes to unfurl over the course of a series of lessons, but we perhaps don't always give enough consideration to the physical size and shape of the classroom as we should. While we might recognize that the shape and size of our classrooms dictates how our classrooms are arranged, we also need to understand that these factors should influence our choice of activities.

Before we get down to the business of moving desks and chairs around, we need to have a clear vision of what the room will look like and whether this will facilitate the activities we want to use. This chapter will act as the prologue to the next two which introduce the challenges and opportunities that different physical environments present us with. I hope you'll follow me on this journey...

The feng shui of the language classroom

Every classroom has a particular energy and flow to it. This isn't new age mumbo jumbo; it's common sense. Even in a place such as my school, where a number of rooms all follow a certain design, I find that there are little quirks in the shape and layout which make each unique.

The little differences can make or break an activity if you haven't factored the room into your planning. Here are a few preliminary questions that you might like to ask yourself about any given classroom.

- **Do you have enough seats for everyone?**

That sounds too simple to even bother considering, doesn't it? You'd be surprised.

- **How mobile is the furniture?**

If you want to rearrange the tables or get students to move their chairs, to what extent is this possible? Sometimes these are in a fixed position: when this happens it definitely affects what you can do.

- **Where is the board?**

I know there are those of you who think the some kind of teaching wizard if they can get through a lesson without writing anything on the board, but for us mere mortals the board, be it chalk, white or electronic in nature, is still of paramount importance. So, how often are you going to use it? If you have several points of focus in the room, students need to be able to see all of them without straining their necks constantly.

- **How mobile are you?**

I run around like a madman during some lessons and hate it when I don't have room to do so. For some activities you need a central position for demonstrating what you want to do, or just for delivering instructions effectively. Where is that space in the classroom?

- **How would you distribute handouts?**

How can you get paper to all of the people in class at approximately the same time? Of course, it's nice to give students the responsibility of helping in distribution, but sometimes you'll want to get this over and done with quickly. Where are the channels of distribution that will enable you to do this?

- **Are there windows in the room?**

A lack of natural light can put your students into a very strange mood sometimes and has an amazing effect on whether certain activities work or not. A general rule of thumb is this: nothing works quite as well in a room with no windows. Conversely, a room with blinding sun is terrible should you have any need to use a projector.

- **To what extent will the students engage with one another?**

There are indeed times when you want the students to either listen to you speaking or to give their attention to some other interlocutor. Naturally, if eye contact is needed, such as in a class debate or in practically every type of group activity, eye contact you should allow.

If you've answered these questions, you're off to a good start (if, while reading this, other questions came to mind, please feel free to make suggestions on [my blog](#)). Depending on the answers, you can now approach

how you are going to use your room to facilitate learning. You are now faced with a classic ‘either / or’ situation.

1. Making the **room** work for the **activity**: Bearing in mind what you want to do in class, you need to think about what adaptations you need to make to the room to best facilitate the outcomes you’re looking for.

2. Making the **activity** work for the **room**: If the room can’t be adapted, you need to think about what activities you can do within the constraints that the physical environment has placed on you.

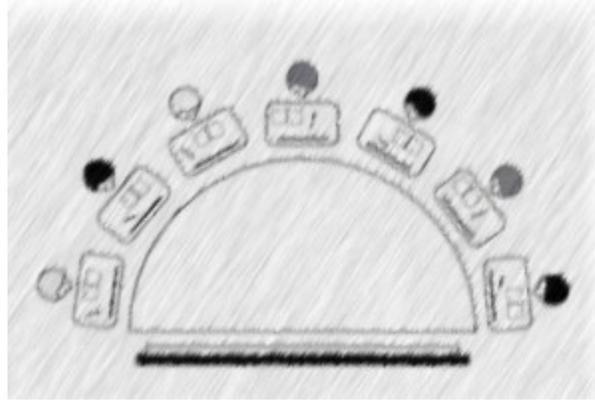
How do you get the room to work for you?

I find myself in a variety of rooms at present. Each presents a different challenge in terms of the questions I laid out above, but each also presents opportunities to get the room to work in your favor. I’ve given considered thought about what I can and can’t do in each of these environments, and over the course of five chapters I’ll be detailing how I go about the ‘art of teaching’ in each particular setting. During these chapters, I’ll be using the following four classroom layout models as points of reference, so the remainder of this chapter will be a look at these different models and what activities they facilitate.

1) The dance floor

As the name suggests, the dance floor is a layout that places the focus on an area visible to all. This layout can promote lots of student interaction as all the seats point toward a central focus point.

The large, open space in the middle of the room is traditionally in front of where a teacher’s desk might appear and is equally great for group activities and class discussions as it is for teacher talk.



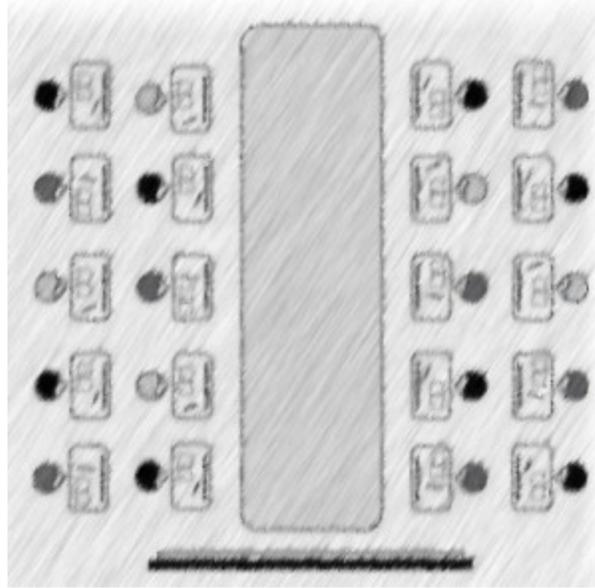
The 'dance floor'

On the downside, that big area might be regarded as a serious waste of space, particularly if you have a large class. Nevertheless, if you're looking to get a group talking to each other this can be a winner, because students are able to hold eye contact without constantly having to swing around in their seats. However, this seating chart requires a room with a lot of space in it.

2) The catwalk

As I mentioned, I walk around a lot during my lessons, mainly in the hope that my movement will instill motivation in my students, but also so that I can maintain eye contact with each of them and not leave anyone out when it comes to asking questions.

The catwalk is effective in preventing me from wandering aimlessly. While it narrows the area in which a teacher can easily move, it's extremely effective in rooms that have boards on opposite ends of the room. Bear in mind, however, that because you are teaching down the center of the room, you may have the unnerving feeling of being surrounded.



The 'catwalk'

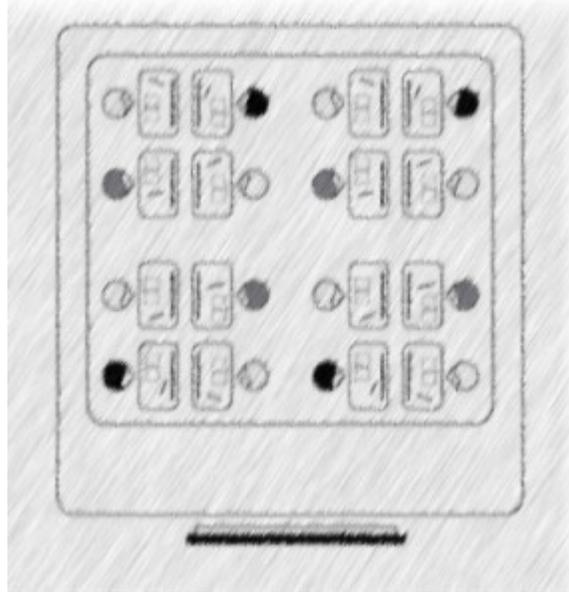
If you're planning on holding a class discussion or some kind of two-team game, such a layout is a practical way of arranging seating, as students will always face at least half the class.

Success with this layout depends entirely on the number of rows you use: the fewer the better. To maximize class interaction, make the rows of students parallel to the center lane as long as possible.

3) The independent-nation-state

Who doesn't love a bit of group work? If, like me, you see the benefit of cooperative learning, or even if you regularly split your class into teams for games, this layout is an essential.

This seating plan instantly tells students that you want them to operate independently from the rest of the class. It's important to bear in mind that students still need to be able to see the board easily without giving themselves an injury.



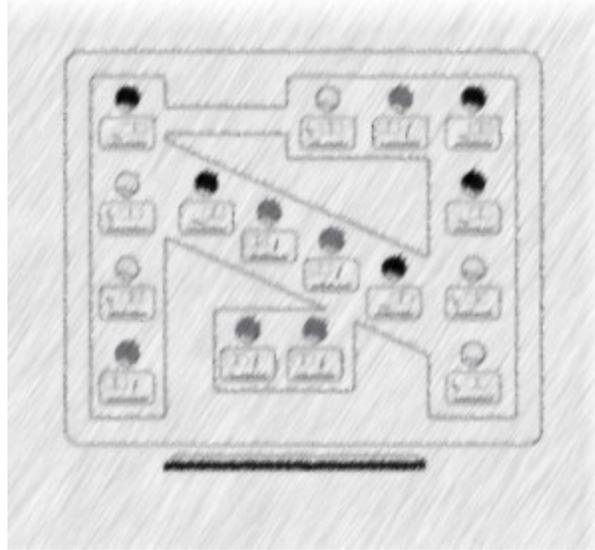
The 'independent nation state'

Using this too often will probably result in a fragmented classroom and a lack of dynamic among the class as a whole.

If your room is permanently set up like this, you might even find that each group forms their own classroom culture and is unable to work with students in the other groups. This is an effective layout, but should not be a permanent one.

4) The Battleship

Like the game and, I suppose, the – bloody awful – film, the battleship layout is all about the element of surprise. Consider the picture a metaphor for the battleship, the spirit of which is just to mix things up from the everyday norm.



The 'battleship'

This layout can be effective when trying to foster creativity, or even the polar opposite; this works when you have to administer a classroom quiz.

The battle ship will almost certainly be a single lesson one-off. If you change the seating too often you'll drive your students nuts.

Putting this into practice

I teach in five very different classrooms this semester. What's more, they are very spread out. Before classes started, I did a tour of my prospective rooms and it took me about fifteen minutes to visit each of them. I clocked up more than a kilometer in the process. Nevertheless, it was worth it to start making plans about how I would best utilize each of the rooms. Planning is the number one key to success in making the physical environment work to your advantage.

Chapter 9: The curious case of G062

How much does the physical environment of the classroom affect what we teach and how we teach?

Probably, I'd say, it has a bigger effect than it is given credit for. This is a shame really, when you think about how much attention is given to describing pedagogy and teaching techniques: rarely do you find such discussions taking into consideration the size and the shape of the classroom.

I hope this second half of the book helps to readdress the balance. I also hope that this is a theme that will be picked up by other teachers. With this in mind, I'm delighted to say that my comrade from across the pond, Tyson Seburn, has already critiqued his classrooms in the blog post '[What classroom is perfect?](#)' He has also prepared a checklist of things he looks for in a classroom, which I hope he doesn't mind me quoting here. His checklist reads as follows:

Tyson's ten requirements of the perfect classroom

1. long, solid desks in a semi-circle facing the front, enough room for everyone to spread out their work
2. capacity for about double the number of students in the class
3. ample chalkboards (or whiteboards), preferably that shift to reveal more
4. an electronic console controlling the audio system and ceiling-mounted projector
5. reliable internet connection
6. concrete architectural features
7. good lighting, preferably not too bright
8. a big window with a view of the outdoors
9. dark hardwood elements (e.g. floors or desk)
10. close proximity to my office

I think that's a very healthy list to get started on. To be honest, there isn't anything there that I would disagree with, although I would prioritize some points over others. Nevertheless, I think that we always have to work with what we have. This was something in the previous chapter. Allow me to reiterate:

1. Making the room work for the activity:

Bearing in mind what you want to do in class, you need to think about what adaptations you need to make to the room to best facilitate the outcomes you're looking for.

2. Making the activity work for the room:

If the room can't be adapted, you need to think about what activities you can do within the constraints that the physical environment has placed on you.

Viewing the room in this way allows us to think of how we are going to utilize the room effectively, rather than assuming that we can make our plan first and assume that it will go OK regardless of the physical constraints.

Introducing G062

Ok, so let's take a short break from all this theoretical stuff, so I can introduce you to the first of my rooms for this semester. This is the delightfully named G062 in the Faculty of Management building. Please watch these short video clips and, while you're doing so, think about what might and might not work in such a room. There are five clips, one should play automatically after the other. Click [here](#) to go to the video.

Your homework for today is to think of one constraint this room would place on you in terms of planning, as well as one way you could use this room to your advantage. If you can't be bothered, then, well, please just keep reading!

Strengths

It's big (1):

I can move around easily and distribute materials quickly and efficiently. The students have plenty of desk space, too.

It's big (2):

There are enough seats for all of my students. There's a huge board: If at any point I get better at planning board work, there's huge potential in this room.

We're hooked up technologically:

The speakers and projector are in full working order and the projector screen is visible to all. Furthermore, there's a phone in the teacher's desk so I can call someone when there's a problem.

It's isolated:

We can make noise and do some interesting stuff without worrying about disrupting other classes.

Room to roam:

There's plenty of room for students to get up and move around, even if the seats don't follow.

There is a focus:

That big board and projector screen are a focal point of attention and lessons tend to revolve around them.

Weaknesses**The seating is fixed:**

Although the chairs swivel, they are mounted on a metal bar which keeps the person pretty much focused on the front of the room.

There are no windows:

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, lack of natural lighting is never a good thing.

We're away from the main School of Languages building (1):

Students like to mingle with other students on the same course during breaks, so the fact we're some distance from these other classes can be 1) dispiriting to those who don't want to walk to meet their friends, and 2) a pain when it comes to trying to start the class on time and your students are still in another building.

We're away from the main School of Languages building (2):

On days when I teach here I have to try and remember everything I'll need for the day, such as laptop, power cable, speakers, pens, paper, all handouts, books, etc.

How have these factors influenced my classes?

1. I have tended to do things which utilize the 'front of room' focus, such as PowerPoint presented activities, showing videos and focused board work. Such activities are particularly effective with Generation Yers, so it's great to be able to utilize the environment in this way
2. I have also used this room for 'information delivery', such as explaining exam criteria and the like. Again, the seating makes it hard for students to be able to avoid me. Although the layout is drastically different from what we saw of the '*dance floor*' in the previous chapter, it nevertheless delivers many of the same benefits.
3. We have, on a couple of occasions, co-constructed paragraphs in G062, by which I mean we look at the subject we've been studying and either 1) I write up the paragraph on the board based on student suggestions, or 2) the students co-create the texts themselves. This activity is a real winner, as it involves all of the students in spite of their ostensibly static position in the room.
4. This room has quite a somber and serious air to it (we've started making posters for the walls so as to cheer the place up a bit), which lends itself to administering end-of-unit quizzes. Although I have no control over the scheduling of course exams, I can work my schedule to make sure the 'unaccredited' quizzes can take place in this room. While this is never the greatest of things to do in any class, the pseudo-'*battleship*' layout of this room – compared to my other classrooms, at least – does lend itself to such work.

Would it surprise you?

We have done a good amount of group work in this room. There is a lot of space between each row, so students can stand up and gather around an area of one of the desks quite easily and comfortably.

What would you do?

You've seen the videos; you've read what I do, so... what would you do differently? How can I get the most out of this room?

Chapter 10: Is G045 a teaching paradise?

My favorite classroom out of all those I'm using at the moment is the functionally named G045.

Please take a look at the video clips [here](#) (there are four and one should play immediately after the previous one finishes) and you'll get a good idea why.

So, on first impressions it seems to offer me everything I could need to conduct any number of activities. It's big, the furniture is movable and yet comfortable. There is a nice area for me to conduct my business, while there is also space for the students to get up and move around when necessary. The room is also fully kitted out to meet my technological needs and those of the learners.

So, how does this room measure up to the perfect classroom?

When I was thinking about writing this book, I did a bit of research to see what had been written about this phenomenon. One really good report that I did find was one by the University of Oregon, which looked attempted to define the perfect classroom based on instructor and student use. Their findings are fairly comprehensive (and available as a [PDF download here](#)) and detail everything that you might consider were you trying to create the perfect learning and teaching environment. I've picked some of their descriptors here to give you an idea of what their report looks like. Look at these and think about the room I showed you in the videos. Also, try to reflect on the rooms you have to use: this might help you identify problems in your classes that you couldn't put your finger on before.

Room Size & Shape:

- Avoid rooms with long, narrow proportions
- Avoid rooms with low ceilings
- Avoid rooms with no windows
- Avoid rooms with columns or other obstructions

Ceiling Height & Shape:

- Provide minimum ceiling height of 10'-12'

- Avoid over-illuminating the ceiling or creating a shadow under the light fixture

Daylight & Views:

- Control daylight and views with opaque shades
- Provide motorized shades with simple control from the teaching area

Finishes:

- Provide carpets
- Provide colored walls
- Avoid white walls unless used with accent color
- Avoid hard, sterile surfaces and “timeless” color palettes
- Plan for room upgrades every ten years or less to keep the room “fresh”

Acoustical Control:

- Design the room so students can easily hear the instructor, but consider how students will hear each other as well
- Provide low-pressure air systems when forced air is used
- Provide sound-insulated walls
- Provide amplification so the room’s performance is not dependent upon enhanced audio
- Avoid movable walls
- Avoid hard ceilings

Furniture & Adjustability:

- Provide chairs that move easily, but are steady when in use
- Chairs with sled-style supports are recommended
- Position tables allow small groups to form around them, but be close enough to allow a “critical density” of students to create engaged lectures and discussions
- Assume that tables will not be regularly moved but that lecture format courses will have to transform into small groups easily and vice versa – arrange table to allow both uses easily
- Avoid round tables unless lecture style presentations are unlikely to ever occur in the space

- Avoid tablet arm desks
- Avoid room layouts that assume a high level of user-directed changeability

Connectivity:

- Provide robust wireless connectivity
- Avoid unnecessary costs of added hard wire data ports in classrooms

Lighting:

- Provide an easily controlled variety of lighting, including general lighting, perimeter accent lighting, and instructor area highlighting
- Provide dimmable or stepped lighting
- Provide override control for room occupancy sensor
- Avoid suspended lighting

Controls:

- Provide simple, intuitive controls that require no special knowledge to operate
- Use simple switches where possible
- Provide labeled switches
- Place light controls near the primary teaching area
- Limit the number of switches to about 3-6 switches

Student Arrangement & Area Requirements:

- Provide 40% internal circulation area
- Program space allocations based on the number of students, recommended instructor area and internal circulation based on observations

Electrical Supply for Student Use:

- Provide perimeter plugs evenly distributed around the classroom to allow use for those who need power
- Avoid column drop outlets
- Avoid hardwired data connections for student use

Instructor Arrangement & Area Requirements:

- Provide a generous teaching area (on average about 180 Square F)
- Position podium to provide good visibility of both students and the screen
- Assume that instructor will generally teach from one location regardless of teaching format
- Plan instructor area to have direct connection to the door of the room allowing the instructor to arrive late or leave early if necessary

Technology & Media:

- Provide a ceiling mounted projector
- Provide instructor podium with connection for instructor laptop
- Provide amplified speakers connected to the projector system
- Provide instructor podium with:
 - desktop mounted power supply
 - easy access to lighting and daylight controls
 - access to writing surface
 - under-desk storage for backpack
 - stool stored under knee space (to allow standing presentations for most of the time)
- Provide a large whiteboard near the instructor podium
- Provide additional whiteboard around the room for small group break out and teaming activities
- Provide a robust, high speed wireless system
- Assume that all technology is temporary and will be replaced in less than 10 years
- Assume that instructor will use personal laptop for media presentation
- Use surface mounted or easily accessed wiring systems where possible

See, I told you it was a comprehensive list, didn't I!

By now you can probably see why G045 is one of my favorite classes. I'm not sure, though whether I'd like to walk into any room with these descriptors as a checklist: I'm sure I'd come away from most feeling fairly despondent! Nevertheless, it is useful to look at these and consider the ways in which your teaching environment is most constricted, be it in terms of furniture, acoustics, or any of the other factors mentioned above.

How does G045 measure up?

I have only two gripes with this room...

Too darn big

Firstly, it's too big for the size of the class I teach. I have on any given day fifteen students in this room and they do so enjoy sitting way at the back. This can mean me moving to them to get their attention, although I also then have to return to the teacher zone as and when I need to utilize the technology. The white board is also very distant when they choose to sit at the back.

Solution

I pointed out that the furniture is moveable, so, guess what? Never be afraid of giving the furniture layout a good makeover before a class starts. If you're in a room that is blatantly too big for the number of people occupying it, group them together and group them fairly near you, otherwise the open space can be intimidating and even a bit creepy.

Lack of control over lighting

Secondly, the lighting is really clumsy and difficult to control. There are two light switches, one of which turns on the lights at the front and one the lights at the back.

Solution

As with the first point, group the students so as to try not to allow any of them to lurk in the gloom. Having them all operating in the same lighting conditions may seem like a small consideration, but, believe me; it can really

affect the dynamic of the class if you don't get them all in a well lit part of the room.

All in all, for a classroom that was built about twelve years ago, it has really stood the test of time in terms of how it is fitted out technologically. It is a bit gloomy when it's dark outside, and the limited control over electric light in a big room like this is an issue. Nevertheless, you can really go for it in terms of varying activities and it is an extremely flexible environment.

What's your take on all this?

So, what do you think about this room? How would you go about making the most of this environment? How does this compare to the rooms in which you teach? I'd love to hear your comments on this.

Chapter 11: Epilogue – The perfect classroom

When I started thinking about the classrooms I would be teaching in this semester I thought it would be a good idea to write a full critique of each, in terms of what opportunities they created and the constraints they placed on me. To be honest, though, after a couple of chapters on this subject I don't really feel the need to go on, as I'll just end up repeating myself.

My chapters on the rooms G062 and G045 probably contain everything I want to talk about. With this in mind, I thought I would round things off with a brief epilogue.

What better way to do this than with a visual display of what is considered to be the ultimate in early 21st century classrooms. Below you will see two images from a really good report that I found from the University of Oregon, which looked attempted to define the perfect classroom based on instructor and student use. Their findings are comprehensive (and available as a PDF download [here](#)).



As you'll notice, I've captured these screen shots from their report. There are annotations describing the features of the perfect classroom (those dashed lines that you can see in the pics). Here are a few highlights:

- Provide a shaped ceiling to create a sense of enclosure, maximize sight lines to screen, and improve acoustics.
- Provide wall mounted light switches and motorized screen and shade controls for easy access from podium.
- Provide integrated, quality sound system with even distribution to maximize student comprehension.
- Provide ample space for instructor movement at the front of the classroom and throughout student seating areas.
- Use sled base chairs and movable tables to allow for flexible use of space.
- Provide lightweight, stable tables but assume table configuration will not change regularly.
- Provide white board wall. Avoid covering with screen or use full wall white board.
- Provide evenly spaced wall outlets near student seating areas. Avoid cost of data jack at student areas by providing robust wireless connection.
- Provide clock- locate for easy visibility from students and instructors perspective.
- Provide color and interest on walls.
- Provide visibility into classroom from hallway.

So, how does your classroom shape up to this idyllic image? Looking at it from this perspective, I haven't got too much to complain about. I'd love to hear how this contrasts to your experiences.

Further reading

I'd also recommend these blog posts written by **Tyson Seburn** ([What classroom is perfect?](#)) and **Vicky Loras** ([The Ideal Classroom](#)).

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About the author

Adam has been fortunate enough to spend the last fifteen years of his journey as a lifelong learner working with others in what some call the 'language classroom'. He is currently privileged to have the opportunity to help young adults meet their educational goals at Sabanci University in Istanbul. His professional interests include flexibility within the curriculum and the considered use of technology in the classroom. He occasionally finds time to blog about his life.

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