

Dr. Christine Davis, Editor

Arranging Your Art Room For Effective Learning

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Recently, I was given the opportunity to teach a course on the subject of classroom management for preservice art educators. Preparation for the course gave me cause to think back to my own experiences as a public school art teacher and all of the factors that facilitated or impeded student learning in my classroom. The purpose of this *NAEA Advisory* is to specifically discuss one of these factors, the physical design and arrangement of art room spaces.

Fred Steele (1973), a pioneer in the field of organization development, suggested that professionals should consider how the arrangement of their work environment impacts their performance, and that such spaces serve six basic functions: security and shelter, social contact, symbolic identification, task instrumentality, pleasure, and growth. Teachers can use these six functions as a framework for supporting their own decisions in arranging classrooms for effective learning (Weinstein, 2003). Below, I will discuss the functions of classrooms and introduce some suggestions for addressing these concepts when arranging an art room.

Security and Shelter

In consideration of the specialized materials and equipment frequently used in art education, it is particularly necessary for art teachers to rectify all possible safety hazards that may be present in their classrooms (Hagaman, 1990; Qualley, 1986). Potentially dangerous equipment and materials (such as paper cutters, kilns, and media containing chemical substances) should be stored away from children and with proper ventilation. Furthermore, art teachers should keep their rooms organized as excessive clutter may present hidden hazards and problematic situations for students who rely on wheel chairs or other adaptive devices to meet their special needs.

Beyond the need for physical security, art teachers should also attempt to create inviting atmospheres that provide a sense of psychological security. In this regard, teachers can consider the provision of color, soft comfortable areas, and a private (but visible) work station or two for select students to use when they need an escape from the hectic nature of a typical school day.

Social Contact

While it is common for students to sit together at large art tables in order to share supplies, a more suitable criterion for arranging seating may relate to the amount of peer-to-peer interaction that is expected for planned learning activities. Art teachers that plan activities that allow for student collaboration may wish to seat students together at larger tables. Art educators who expect students to work alone quietly, say, in preparation for an Advanced Placement Art History exam, may find individual desks to be more appropriate. In either case, the point is to arrange your classroom in a way that matches your learning objectives. Seating arrangements that conflict with expectations for social interaction can result in situations that are difficult to manage and confusing for students.

Symbolic Identification

Classrooms often appear bare, clinical, and say little about those who interact in such environments. With a little effort from creative teachers, however, art rooms can be designed to symbolically identify the experiences of the people who use these spaces. Art teachers often achieve this goal by displaying student artwork throughout their classrooms. Additional space can be used to recognize students for showing helpful behavior toward classmates or for sharing artwork and research completed outside of class (Ragans & Morris, 1996). Art teachers can also feature work from local artists or artists who come from cultural backgrounds that match school demographics. Finally, art teachers can display their own artwork or other symbolic items that relate to their personal interests. These displays may help students to see their teacher as a "real person" and can be used as a foundational step in establishing positive rapport.

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Task Instrumentality

Classrooms can be arranged in ways that help facilitate the daily tasks that art teachers expect of students. Teachers who use frequent demonstrations may wish to clear additional space around presentation areas so that students can gather closer for a better view (Ragans & Morris, 1996). Space should also be cleared around areas of high traffic, such as entrances and exits, clean-up sinks, and student storage areas. These storage spaces should remain organized and labeled to help facilitate student retrieval of supplies and artwork (Comstock, 1995). Art teachers should also consider how tasks conducted at adjacent areas may impact one another (Weinstein, 2003). For example, drying racks should not be placed next to sinks, as potential splashes could unintentionally alter student work.

Pleasure

When people are placed in unpleasant surroundings, the quality of their work often suffers (Steele, 1973). The creation of aesthetically pleasing art rooms may positively influence students' work habits and allows teachers to apply their creative skills to the art of interior design. When creating and maintaining attractive art rooms, it is recommended that teachers pursue variety in design, consult fire marshal codes on the amount of wall space that may be covered, and should avoid the myth that messy rooms fuel imagination in the form of "creative clutter" (Wong & Wong, 2001; Qualley, 1986).

Growth

Although classrooms often appear to be designed as places for passive listening (Dewey, 1900/1990; Weinstein, 2003), art rooms can be arranged as interactive environments that stimulate students' cognitive growth. Art teachers can set up learning centers that allow for self-directed research, reading, or experimentation with art materials and computer programs. The placement and time allotted for learning centers deserves careful consideration, and art teachers should reflect on all other functions of the physical environment when deciding where and how to arrange such stations. Fortunately, the open-ended nature of many art materials and assignments (assignments that do not always have one predetermined correct outcome) makes the art room an ideal place to foster student cognitive growth.

Further Suggestions

- After completing an initial arrangement of your art room, invite other teachers to give you constructive feedback on your layout; you can offer to evaluate their classrooms in return. Looking at each other's classrooms can be like looking at works of art; the process can stimulate new ideas and a fresh set of eyes can often notice things overlooked in the initial creation process.
- If a teacher's desk is used mainly for storage or completing paperwork, a centralized location is not necessary and may become an enticing place to linger when time could be better served circulating and assisting students (Ragans & Morris, 1996; Weinstein, 2003). Valuable classroom space can be obtained by moving your desk into a corner, office, or by removing it altogether.
- Treat the assemblage of your classroom as you might approach the construction of an installation in a gallery; both are temporarily assembled spaces that convey implicit and explicit meanings and rely on human interaction as an integral part of successful design. Viewing the arrangement of your classroom as a creative act may make the process exciting and enjoyable.

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