

Seated and ready to learn: creating quality group learning experiences

In creating the optimum conditions for learning, one of the most direct changes to the environment that teachers can make in providing new ways of learning is in changing the pattern of seating in their classrooms. **John Beresford** details the effects this can have and advises on how to go about it

The key to education today is to personalise learning, to recognise different children have different abilities and in different subjects. Tony Blair, Prime Minister (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust Annual Conference, 2006)

High expectations of every child, given practical form by high quality teaching, based on a sound knowledge and understanding of each child's needs. It is not individualised learning where pupils sit alone. Nor is it pupils left to their own devices – which too often reinforces low aspirations. It means shaping teaching around the way different youngsters learn; it means taking the care to nurture the unique talents of every pupil. David Miliband, then Education Minister (DfES 2004b)

Technology continues to change at an extraordinarily fast pace. It creates the need for new skills and renders old skills redundant. The Government estimates that three million workers in the UK 'will find their skills out of date by 2020' (Hope, 2006). Versatility, adaptability and the willingness and ability to learn at various career stages are already virtues valued by employers. Every day, technological change creates new processes and new knowledge beyond the mastery of individuals. We have to learn to pass on our expertise to others, and listen to others ourselves. We need to work in teams to master and achieve complex processes. We need to become experts in social learning.

Current Government initiatives in the secondary school curriculum reflect the need to broaden its knowledge and skills base and to engage all students in learning by providing a wide and stratified curriculum. This needs to be delivered in a variety of ways that includes alternatives to teacher-centric transmission. The key skills curriculum equips young people with strategies to develop the ways they learn. The new specialised diplomas will enable students in Key Stage 4 and post-16 to develop general and work-related skills and knowledge in a range of career-related subjects and in a variety of

practical and academic ways. A-level reform proposals suggest a move towards stretching more able students. The Prime Minister's most recent pronouncement on secondary education suggests a willingness to broaden the curriculum of some post-16 students by providing more general access to the International Baccalaureate.

These proposals presage changes in the way lessons in secondary schools will look in the future. These are outlined in the box below.

These themes of greater access to a wider curriculum and a more extensive range of teaching methods persist in the plans that the Government has commissioned for Building Schools for the Future (DfES/Partnerships for Schools, 2006). The proposal is to provide:

flexible accommodation for different models of curriculum delivery and space that enable teachers to get the most out of the time they are guaranteed for preparation, planning and assessment. (DfES/Partnerships for Schools, 2006)

The five exemplar secondary school designs posted on the website (www.bsf.gov.uk/bsf/exemplars_secondary.htm) are characterised by the:

- juxtaposition of classrooms, workshops, resource and meeting places
- ability to vary the size of classrooms
- availability of breakaway group areas and individual multi-media workstations within each classroom
- organisation of cohorts of students into schools within schools.

Teachers today may feel threatened by this prospect of a learner-driven and less teacher-centred organisation of learning in schools. However, they will remain key figures in the education of our young in as much as they will:

- organise a variety of learning experiences in a variety of settings for students
- provide coaching in learning skills
- make multimedia accessible to students and advise on its use
- act as a source of information for students, as well as being able to direct them to appropriate resources

The low level of concern shown by many secondary teachers for classroom seating arrangements means that such arrangements are generally ceded by default to the students

Useful things to know: future secondary school lessons

Lessons will increasingly involve:

- a larger element of practical and work-related learning for all students
- more independent learning and less didactic transmission by teachers
- greater stress on the ability to work with and canvass the help of others
- the need for access to multimedia to research and present work
- greater use of outside 'experts'
- longer teaching sessions and greater versatility of classroom arrangements.

- advise and provide guidance to students on appropriate learning pathways
- continue to take part in student assessment.

Responding to new ways of learning

There is likely to be a time lag for most schools, teachers and students between the demands imposed by curriculum change and the response of the building programme to meet them. How can teachers respond, particularly in making the learning environment a more flexible place? In attempting to answer this, I will draw on some recent desktop research, some field research I have undertaken in the past with David Jackson, when he was head of Sharnbrook School in Bedfordshire (Beresford and Jackson, 2005), and personal observations of more than 1,000 lessons in schools over the past 10 years.

Instant student access to multimedia is becoming less problematical, with many schools employing laptops with wireless internet connections and school intranet. However, the lack of versatility of most school architecture means that many schools still have to rely on vacant capacity if teachers want to run a teaching activity that their normal classroom cannot accommodate. Organising teaching and learning sessions for whole cohorts of students, such as a year group, is still a major logistical exercise for most schools.

One way teachers can facilitate flexibility in learning is through varying seating arrangements. Advice in this is often contradictory – that students work better when teachers increase the physical space between them, that mixed-sex seating in rows produces the highest student on-task levels, that assigned seat places are more conducive or less conducive to a work ethic. There is even advice on a feng shui website – see: <http://fengshui.about.com/od/schooltips/a/classroomseatin.htm>

My own observations suggest that teachers of three- to 11-year-olds spend more time than secondary teachers on the arrangement of their classrooms. This is not difficult to explain: primary, reception and infant teachers spend all day nearly every day in the same teaching space with the same group of pupils. To that extent they ‘own’ and manage their own teaching spaces. Secondary teachers generally move from teaching area to teaching area, with no concomitant sense of ownership. They start teaching with the seating arrangements they find when they arrive in their rooms. If they wish to vary those arrangements, for example, to accommodate some groupwork, the subsequent rearrangement is often hurried, noisy and difficult to control. Classes take time to resettle and set to work. It is hardly surprising that many teachers do not rate groupwork as an effective method of learning, and equally unsurprising that many pupils do not like it for the same reasons.

The low level of concern shown by many secondary teachers for classroom seating arrangements means that such arrangements are generally ceded by default to the students. My research with David Jackson (Beresford and Jackson, 2005) suggested that students’ seating preferences were not dictated primarily by educational considerations. They sat with their friends, generally regardless of any academic or practical gifts that their friend might possess. Students developed a sense of ownership

Tips on accommodating new ways of learning

- Convey to students that it is important where they sit to you as a teacher and to them as learners
- Base seating arrangements on educational considerations
- Consult students on seating arrangements
- Support friendships, and avoid anti-work cultures
- Consider the classroom layout and seating arrangements separately
- Change seating arrangements according to purpose
- Integrate seating arrangements into schemes of work
- Change seating partners according to purpose

(and often status) of the place they occupied in class, and were often resentful when they were moved. They linked changes in seating arrangements with the maintenance of discipline rather than with learning effectiveness.

Students also identified certain seating arrangements with specific types of learning. They associated sitting around tables with groupwork, a horseshoe arrangement with class discussion and rows with teacher delivery. They were disorientated when asked to discuss in rows or to listen to a teacher when grouped around tables.

These findings gave rise to a set of guidelines that helped to transform teaching in the school. It should be stressed that they were the result of consultation involving all the staff. It would have been problematical for individual teachers to ‘go it alone’: action by only a handful of teachers to change attitudes to seating arrangements would have been regarded as extraordinary and possibly eccentric.

The guidelines adopted were as follows – for tips on accommodating new ways of learning, see the box above.

Inform students

It may be important to you as a teacher to group students of similar abilities for ease of group task allocation or to use complementary abilities for peer coaching. Alternatively, you may wish to allocate tasks that draw on the individual strengths of pupils. In a class teaching situation, you may want to place good listeners beside less good ones. It is always a good idea for teachers to specify such general principles when mandating a particular arrangement.

Educational considerations are paramount

One of the perceptions of the students involved in the field research was that, in a classroom organised in rows, the ‘troublemakers’ sat at the back, the ‘geeks’ sat in the middle and ‘sad people with no friends’ sat at the front.

I can remember being taught Latin when I was 11 in a class organised in alphabetical order. Unfortunately for me, a newcomer to the subject, the Bs were in the back row and I failed to prosper in the subject. As a beginner, I would have preferred to be more accessible to the teacher. If my Latin teacher had been more aware that I was struggling, he might have moved me nearer to the front. I am sure that the present generation of teachers, schooled as many of them are in assessment for learning, would have done so.

A flexible seating policy, just like a behaviour policy or a uniform policy, requires the support of the whole staff. Rogue elements that are not convinced about the efficacy of such arrangements can dismiss them

Friends who are good listeners can justifiably sit next to each other in a classwork session, while it would be reasonable to split them up and distribute their particular strength in a groupwork session

It is easier to keep apart a pair of students who are poor listeners by common agreement of their peers than by what might appear to be an unjustified insistence on the part of the teacher

as time-wasting and unimportant. They can make the job of those who support the policy extremely difficult. This is one of the staging points on the road to a fully blown policy. Stressing the educational importance of where students sit leads neatly to justification for moving students from time to time.

Consult students

Consultation can be done periodically. Who do you like sitting with? Who do you think it would be useful to sit with for this particular purpose? Who do you listen best with? It is often a good idea to draw up some criteria with students on what constitutes good practice because it gives them both a sense of ownership and a reference point for classroom behaviour. A group of students in a Milton Keynes school identified the elements of 'good listening' that are reproduced in the box above right. The school allowed students to identify situations in which they listened best, including whom they sat next to.

In a school in Merthyr, students identified the qualities of those who were good at working in groups. This list, reproduced in the box below, was used as a class aide-memoire, a personal checklist and was also used in peer assessment. In this way students and their teacher became aware of strengths as well as shortcomings and the teacher could group students according to which quality they were seeking to develop in a particular student (for further details, see Beresford, 2003, pp31–37). Students were able to make informed suggestions about where they and their colleagues should sit and not sit.

In the same school, two of the teachers and a classroom assistant modelled an effective groupwork session in front of a class of students. The class was invited to comment at the end on what they felt to be good practice. It would be an appropriate use of learning assistants and mentors to model good practice and act as facilitators to groups of students who may be lacking the groupwork skills identified by the students.

Consulting students on how they learn best is now a standard element of school self-evaluation. Where and with whom they are most comfortable working seems a reasonable extension of such consultation. Hopefully, by this stage, students will be aware of the educational implications of whom they sit next to.

Support friendships where possible

Lists, similar to the ones by the Milton Keynes and Merthyr students, can be drawn up for other learning activities, such as effective classwork, effective deskwork and how to watch well. These repay the investment in class time spent on arriving at them because they provide a reference point achieved through the contribution of pupils that can be used reasonably by the teacher as a justification for particular arrangements. It is easier to keep apart a pair of students who are poor listeners by common agreement of their peers than by what might appear to be an unjustified insistence on the part of the teacher. Friends who are good listeners can justifiably sit next to each other in a classwork session, while it would be reasonable to split them up and distribute their particular strength in a groupwork session.

Qualities of good listeners

The Milton Keynes students identified a good listener as someone who:

- maintains eye contact
- gives appropriate verbal responses
- indicates they are paying attention with their body language
- does not fidget
- does not talk
- is not distracted.

As part of their induction into the school, new staff recruits were informed at the beginning of each school year about the seating guidelines

Override environment

If teachers do not do this, there would never be groupwork in science laboratories or classwork sessions in drama studios. Through the mindsets of past generations of school architects, certain learning environments are associated with specific methods of teaching. But I have seen effective groupwork in lecture theatres and quality classwork sessions in domestic science kitchens. The learning environment should not dictate the way you want to teach.

Flexibility for purpose

One of the outcomes from the research on seating I have described was that teachers in the school were asked to change the seating arrangements in the classrooms in which they taught on at least four occasions in the following half term. Students became used to alternative arrangements and also to facilitating them by moving furniture themselves. By the end of the second half of the term they had become sufficiently proficient in the process not to waste huge swathes of time, and were no longer disorientated by such changes. Teachers were then able to announce that the class was going to do some groupwork and students were able to respond, even midway through lessons. Moving furniture became part of their learning repertoire.

If teachers and students are able to arrive at some agreed seating arrangement based on educational as well as friendship considerations, it would seem reasonable for teachers to cite educational considerations to regroup students for different educational purposes.

Seating for schemes of work

If teachers are serious about developing and expanding the ways students learn, they have an obligation to provide a variety of learning experiences. This variety requires a variety of seating arrangements and these can be noted in schemes of work. Particular aspects of a curriculum might lend themselves to class discussion, to individual problem-solving or to group discussion and resolution. Departments might want to identify these before the start of the school year to ensure a

Qualities of good groupworkers

The Merthyr students identified a good groupworker as someone who:

- gets down to work quickly
- does not waste time
- takes their turn fairly
- does their fair share of work
- does not say they know everything
- helps others in the group with what they know about the work
- asks questions to help them understand what needs to be done
- knows where to find information to help to do the work
- is open about how they feel and what they think
- is easy to understand
- gives others in the group a chance to talk
- listens well to others
- does not always agree with the rest of the group
- is very thoughtful about what they say
- uses other people's ideas as well as their own
- often comes up with unusual but good ideas
- does not mind when others disagree with them
- does not blame others when mistakes are made
- carries on working hard when work is difficult
- always believes that work can be done.

varied spectrum of learning opportunities is on offer to their students.

As part of their induction into Sharnbrook School in Bedfordshire, new staff recruits were informed at the beginning of each school year about the seating guidelines. The information session also then acted as an aide-memoire for more established members of staff. This flexible seating policy became integrated into school policy, and became part of how things were done in the school.

Tactical partners

To develop particular strengths or to address particular shortcomings in students, it is important to alternate seating arrangements according to the purposes of the lesson. If students are confident in the process of self-evaluation, see it as a means of self-improvement, rather than a veiled threat, and if it has an important place in the classroom, then students will readily partake in peer coaching or remedial activity.

Looking to future

The secondary pupil of the near future is one who will:

- have access to a range of learning pathways that will require a wide learning repertoire and versatility
- need information and skills training that no single school, let alone a single teacher, can provide
- need access to multimedia to inform this learning
- need teachers to act as guides through, rather than fonts of, knowledge

- need flexible learning environments to facilitate this learning.

Curriculum managers will need to:

- ensure students are receiving a range of learning opportunities and that they have the requisite skills to take advantage of them, including the ability to work in groups (see Beresford, 2005, for an auditing suggestion)
- enable student access to a variety of media and ensure they have the skills to use them effectively
- reassure teachers that they will continue to have a key role in the classroom
- move towards a system of flexible seating arrangements in the classroom.

The way learning environments are organised will be critical to learning in the future. Flexible learning requires flexible classrooms. Teachers preparing for the schools of the future can prepare their students by changing their own and their pupils' mindsets about the immutability of classroom seating arrangements.

John Beresford, Freelance Researcher

John has recently been appointed as an Associate Lecturer at the Open University. His latest book, *Matching teaching to learning*, is published by Optimus. You can email him at: jf.beresford@ntlworld.com

Moving furniture became part of their learning repertoire

A flexible seating policy, just like a behaviour policy or a uniform policy, requires the support of the whole staff

Curriculum Briefing

RISK-FREE Order Form

If you liked this sample from *Curriculum Briefing*, to order your risk free trial copy simply complete the form below and send it to:

Optimus Education, FREEPOST RLYT- KTSR-XJKC, 33-41 Dallington Street, London EC1V 0BB or fax it to 0845 450 6410

You will then receive your first issue with an invoice. If you wish to continue receiving issues of *Curriculum Briefing* – all you have to do is pay the invoice. If you do not wish to receive future issues, simply return the invoice marked with 'cancel'. The first issue is yours to keep with our compliments. *Curriculum Briefing* is published three times a year and an annual subscription is £117.00, or £89.00 for the first year if you are a *Curriculum Management Update* subscriber.

Delivery details:

Name:

Email:

Job title:

Address:

Postcode:

Tel:

Fax:

Payment details:

Please invoice my school/organisation, order number (if applicable)

Cheque enclosed, payable to Optimus Education

Sourcecode: 08Ewebresource