Creating a Classroom to Engage Student Senses

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Teacher education programs train candidates in pedagogy, methodology, and classroom management, but seldom address practical applications such as classroom environment. The topic of classroom environment, i.e. decoration and arrangement, is generally considered secondary to curriculum. The requisite skills to create warm, welcoming, student-centered classrooms entail more than the study of theories. Yet, decorating, as it relates to the learning environment, is an important component of classroom management.

Classroom spaces mirror both teacher and learners. Creating a comfortable learning environment for students can enhance student motivation (Jones and Jones 2007). A classroom communicates to its visitors the teacher’s values and reflects students’ achievements (Marzano et al. 2003). The arrangement and setup of a classroom even can promote cohesion.

Using state and district standards as a starting point, teachers can create a curriculum-inspired space to promote learning, collaboration, and cross-curricular applications.

Starting from Scratch

New teachers, full of anticipation, may be overwhelmed at first. Upon being given the keys to their first classroom, they face the reality of familiarizing themselves with curriculum guides, textbooks, and the daunting task of taming the...
blank walls. As a result, some new teachers fall prey to “teacher supply” stores, ready-made posters, decorative borders, and other mass-produced and often unnecessary products.

Teachers easily can spend small fortunes covering blank surfaces with a multitude of random pieces, rather than creating a unifying theme that mirrors the curriculum and student work. Successfully setting up a classroom, however, requires little more than a game plan. What follows are suggestions, drawn from my own experiences, for tackling classroom design.

The Standards

Begin with grade-level state and district standards. What topics are covered? How can the decor reflect these topics? Social studies content, for example, is an easy entry point for students to connect visually with subject matter. Students’ reaction to a subject area most often depends on its treatment. As Maxim (2006, 6) wrote, “When learning is fun, students become more interested and open to acquiring more knowledge . . . they see social studies as an important and fulfilling part of their lives and will strive for serious learning.” A social studies backdrop for décor sets the stage and builds anticipation for the year.

Creating Spaces

Once familiar with topics in the standards, new teachers can establish distinct areas in the classroom, such as a library, small-group area, computer center, performance arena, or supply center. Visual and spatial divisions can be created using shelves, rugs, and pillows. Separate areas for different functions lend themselves to cooperative group work.

My First Classroom

My first assignment was teaching sixth grade. Not knowing where to begin, I looked to the social studies standards and found the focus was ancient Western and non-Western civilizations. Contextualizing the learning environment with the social studies curriculum in an interdisciplinary way became the game plan.

My classroom was a blank canvas: two empty walls, closets, and no bulletin boards. I covered the walls with butcher paper and painted three murals related to social studies. They displayed crude renditions of a mural from the Palace at Knossos, as well as Egyptian and Greek-style temple façades. The closets, wrapped in black butcher paper, exhibited student-published books and artwork.

Lacking bulletin boards and inspired by the banners outside New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, I hung banners that announced social studies units and distinguishing areas (e.g., The Garden of Reading), promoted upcoming events, and welcomed visitors. They were made inexpensively from fabric remnants and decorated with foam.

Further adorning my classroom were papier-mâché objets d’arts that the students and I created: a life-size sarcophagus, temple pediment, masks, griffins, Medusa, and puppets. Papier-mâché, though messy, was then a mainstay of the decorating repertoire.

Students took pride in and ownership of the room as evidenced through their behaviors and frequent requests to invite visitors to the room—their parents, relatives, friends, and the administrators. By creating an inviting and stimulating classroom, an ordinary room was transformed into an intellectual playground.

Teachers are a creative lot, and producing a mural is as simple as projecting and tracing an image on a wall. Those lacking creativity or time always can recruit parent volunteers, community members, and students who would love to help.

Considering the amount of time teachers and students spend within its walls, the classroom begs for attention. Before teachers can engage students in learning, they must attract their senses and create a space conducive to active and receptive learning.

Does it really matter what the classroom looks like? The answer is a resounding “yes!” Teaching is an art, and creating a space for learners to excel is part of the craft.

Resources

