

Students Who Face the Board Learn More

Seating arrangement impacts student learning and, amazingly, student health! Read more about this in the **Going Beyond** folder for Chapter 12 at EffectiveTeaching.com.

The phrase “Get the job done” is often used in every aspect of life. Simple changes in seating arrangements between students sitting in rows or around tables can bring significant changes in every student’s on-task behavior and ability to “get the job done.”

Although students *can* learn from each other through discussion and cooperation, the assignment must be a group activity requiring collaboration. This is not to imply that sitting in rows is better than sitting at round tables—it depends on what you are trying to do. Group seating can be appropriate for team projects. Whatever the nature of the activity, a procedure can be put in place and implemented in a minute to change the classroom layout to reflect the sort of work students are doing.

In reality, much of the assigned work is still individually based, and students are expected to work by themselves. Consequently, much of the talk in groups tends to be chatter, and unrelated to individual work. When there is no relationship between the nature of the assignment and the seating arrangement, it leads to less time spent on-task and less work being completed.

Increase the Space

There is no such thing as one right way to seat students, just as there is no single way to teach all students. If lessons are to be differentiated, then seating should be differentiated to match the activity of the lesson. Bear in mind that students will not necessarily be sitting in classes where subjects like art, physical education, music, or welding are taught.

When it comes time to do individual work, we all have those moments when we want to “get the job done”—when we want some “peace and quiet.”

Perhaps you’ve heard of the “island of time” concept? It postulates that one can accomplish as much in one hour of uninterrupted time as in eight hours of interrupted time. It’s true, and it works.

In a classroom, when we want students to be on task on an individual assignment, we should give each student their own “island of time.” **The easiest way to do this is to increase the space between students.** Results clearly show that an increase in physical space between students leads to increased on-task time and decreased disruptive behavior.

Increased space also allows the teacher to move freely around the room to monitor, help, and give positive feedback.

Align the Seating

Along with increasing the space, aligning the students to face in one direction will improve on-task time. **Students who face the board learn more.**

A 20-year study at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom confirmed that pupils who sit in groups are at a massive disadvantage compared to those who face the board. Students find it harder to concentrate when they are sitting around tables. Many have their backs to teachers and waste more time chatting—misusing as much as a quarter of the lesson time. The distractions do not always involve talking. They can be passive, as when students just sit and watch what somebody else is doing.

Students Who Face the Board Learn More (continued)

According to Nigel Hastings, professor of education at Nottingham Trent, anything *but* group seating is considerably better for individual work.

Hastings says, “We know from research already done that when the task is an individual one, if you switch the arrangement to something other than group seating the effect is to increase the amount of time the average child spends actively engaged in the task. For students who are most easily distracted, you could double the work rate. Exactly what alternative formation you use is less important than that it isn’t groups.

“The implication of this isn’t a return to rows,” he stresses. “You can have a horseshoe or an L-shape or another formation. The crucial thing is that for individual tasks, students aren’t sitting opposite one another.

“The students who made the biggest improvements when they were moved out of groups were the ones who were the most easily distracted. For the most able students, there isn’t much difference. But, the ones least engaged in their work were affected dramatically, in some cases doubling their concentration.”

A Time for Sitting in Rows

In a related study, two groups of students, aged 10–11, were observed for two weeks in their normal seating arrangements around tables. On-task behavior was recorded; that is, doing what the teacher directed the students to do—to get the job done.

Without comment from the teacher, the desks/tables were moved into rows and the students were observed for an additional two weeks using the same procedure.

Finally, again without comment, the desks were moved back from rows to their original positions of students working in groups around desks/tables. Another two weeks of observation ensued. **This time there were complaints from the students; some of them said they preferred sitting in rows.**

In both groups, on-task behavior rose by about 15 percent overall when the students were placed in rows; it fell by nearly as much when they returned to sitting around tables.

Individual students with the most improvement (over 30 percent) were those who typically had low on-task behavior. The improvement was less among those students who had higher on-task behavior.

Subsequent studies have replicated these findings many times and have also shown that on-task behavior remains high even after several weeks of sitting in rows. In addition, the quantity and the quality of work produced are greater when students are seated in rows and their task is individual work.

This is not an avocation of moving back to rows for all students for all work. Rather, consider the task, and then vary the seating arrangements to suit the task at hand.

For instance, see how Diana Greenhouse sets up a double circle of chairs for discussion on pages 117 and 274 in *The First Days of School*.

Seating by Gender

Here is a fascinating observation of seating students by gender. In one classroom, the students were seated around six groups of tables. Three of the groups of tables were occupied solely by girls; the other three by boys. During the study, the boys and girls were mixed, so that boys and girls were now sitting next to each other.

In another class, the students were seated at double desks, two students to a desk. The desks were arranged in three rows and all of the students usually sat next to a member of the opposite sex. During the study, girls and boys changed places so that they were sitting by a member of the same sex.

The two classes were first observed for two weeks in their usual seating conditions, followed by a two-week observation period after the seating conditions were changed.

This was followed by two more weeks of observation, with students back in their usual seats.

The results showed that on-task behavior increased by 15 percent when students were seated in a mixed-sex seating arrangement. **Disruptive behavior in both classes was at its lowest when boys and girls sat together.**

Much of this information was synthesized from articles appearing on <http://www.illinoisloop.org/desks.html>.

Sit Anywhere You'd Like

Seating details must be part of your classroom management plan. Although inviting students to sit in a place that makes them comfortable may sound inviting, it's not the best move on your part. There is a science to arranging desks and assigning seating. What you subject you teach will determine your desk arrangement. Who you are teaching will determine your seating assignments. Once you've determined your classroom seating needs, your students' on-task behavior will improve—and everyone will be able to “get their jobs done!”