

Assorted Seating Configurations

Different activities have different seating arrangements. Various seating configurations are in the **Going Beyond** folder for Chapter 14 at EffectiveTeaching.com.

No one will protest the fact that students should not be instructed and drilled in rote memorization without context to the student's personal lives as citizens and human beings. So, more than 60 years ago, out went the neatly ordered columns and rows of desks where students sat and listened to lectures; in came just about any other classroom configuration imaginable.

In elementary schools, this evolved into the island formation that has become most popular. In a visit to these classrooms, you will see a collection of randomly scattered islands. The populations of these islands seem to be desperately competing with each other and with the other island inhabitants for the opportunity to be heard.

Bear in mind that the island formation is not universally in place beyond elementary classrooms. By and large, most middle schools, high schools, and institutions of higher learning have maintained the column-and row-configuration, ostensibly for the sake of efficiency and effectiveness.

The issue is not seating arrangement. **It is accomplishing classroom tasks.** Page 116 in *The First Days of School* shows chairs or desks arranged to maximize the accomplishment of tasks and to minimize behavior problems. These are some of the many factors to consider when organizing the seating arrangement:

- Passage lanes
- Location of pencil sharpener
- Regular place for homework
- Materials available without need of teacher
- Labeled spaces for replacing materials
- Place for regularly used books
- Available storage for student projects
- Place for written class rules
- Place for assignments to be posted
- Place for commonly used supplies
- Calendar
- Space to line up
- Spaces for small groups to work

Consideration if the Seating Is Fixed

It may be fine to philosophize about seating, but what if you have to share a classroom with another teacher or you are a migrant or traveling teacher? What if you are an online instructor or a substitute teacher? What if the desks are bolted to the floor?

Chris Bennett teaches theater arts at Liberty Technology Magnet High School in Jackson, Tennessee. His classroom is the school auditorium. The seats are fixed in rows and are numbered.

On the first day of school Chris meets his students at the auditorium door and has a "theater ticket" ready for each student. See page 104 for a picture of this ticket.

Assorted Seating Configurations (continued)

Each student receives a ticket printed on a note card. Each ticket ADMITS ONE and has a row and seat number printed on it. The students find their respective seats, and then look up on a board where he has posted his version of bellwork, called “preshow” (a term used in theatre for all those things that happen just prior to a show).

The preshow tells them to flip their tickets over and print their names, parents’ names, numbers, grade level, and other important information. He also has them write two interesting facts about themselves on the card.

Chris also has a seating chart and an attendance checking device that holds these cards without having to fill in his grade book, which will certainly go through changes in the first two weeks of school. When a student changes classes, he simply removes the card. If a student is added later, he keeps a few extra tickets on hand.

He recalls a student-teacher who would use the cards while teaching. The students were amazed that she already knew their names. She was effective because of her ability to immediately refer to each student by name.

Chris says that his students know to come in every day, find their seat, and start working on their preshow activities. He adds, **“Never before, in ten years, had I come into my classroom on a regular basis to students sitting quietly working without complaining.”**

Strategic Seating for Problem Students

Problem students are those who have potential or actual behavioral problems: aggressiveness, resistance, distractibility, or dependence. These students need special teacher consideration for seating arrangements.

These are some important factors to consider:

Some degree of separation for seating (if student is aggressive, resistant, or externally distractible).

A substantial degree of teacher proximity (if student is aggressive, distractible, or dependent).

Some degree of non-social seating (if student is resistant, distractible) away from other students, or at least near non-social on-task students.

Three Most Popular Seating Arrangements

The three most common models used in classrooms are 1) the row-and-column model, 2) the island model, and 3) the horseshoe or double horseshoe model.

Row-and-Column Model

The largest complaint with this model is that the teacher tends to talk too much. If there is interaction, the teacher tends to spend more time interacting with the students in the front rows and the rows down the middle. That is understandable when one visualizes an inverted-T. The students sitting in the front- and center-row chairs achieve at a higher level than the remainder of the class. When using the row-and-column model, do not ignore the students who are sitting in the side rows and the corners of the room.

Assorted Seating Configurations (continued)

However, if students are given individual assignments, are watching a video or demonstration, listening to a lecture, taking a test, or anything that requires direct attention, this is the most effective model to use.

Island Model

This arrangement increases communication, reflection, and problem solving among the students and allows the teacher to work more closely with individuals and groups.

The problems reported with this model include 1) increased off-task behavior, 2) increased noise level in the classroom, 3) decreased productivity relative to the amount of work completed by the students, and 4) a large increase in the number of disciplinary and behavior-related incidents.

Horseshoe or Double Horseshoe

Consider using this model if student-student and student-teacher interactions are necessary for increased learning in the class. This model is appropriate when the teacher is required to work with students closely, both as individuals and as members of a group.

This is especially effective if the students turn their chairs to face the teacher during initial instruction, and then the chairs are moved to accommodate interaction in group learning.

This model typically results in higher performance on the part of the students, as well as lowering the incidents of misbehavior in the classroom.

Which Model Is the Best?

The most important thing to remember is that there is no one model of seating that is used at all times. Make the seating fit the activity. In fact, different seating arrangements can be used within a given class period.

For instance, it is quite common for students to sit in a formal setting of rows for direct instruction, and then break into work groups. This often occurs in science classes, where there is instruction followed by laboratory groups, or in elementary classrooms where students sit to receive instructions and then break into groups or to work at centers.

This transition might appear to be a great loss of time during the movements of the desks. However, studies indicate¹ a span of less than 90 seconds is all that is needed to make adjustments. See pages 200–201 for information on how to make transitions quickly.

More information on seating configurations can be found at www.jamescmccroskey.com/publications/82.htm.

[Click here](#) for diagrams of seating configurations.

¹Hurt, Scott, and McCroskey. (1978). *Communication in the Classroom*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.