

Placement of the Teacher's Desk

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Abstract: The question of where to put the teacher's desk in the classroom often goes unanswered or is lost in the commotion of setting up the rest of the classroom. This article examines and compares the effects of placing the teacher's desk in the front of the room, back of the room, and having no desk at all.

There are often debates about how to organize student desks, whether into rows, clusters or to completely rid the classroom of desks and start using tables. Less often talked about is the placement of the *teacher's* desk. There are several leading ideas as to where to put it. Some say front and center, a few argue no desk is the way to go, and others swear by putting it in the back of the room. After analyzing numerous sources, it is clear that the best teaching practice is to place the teacher's desk in the back of the room.

In the traditional classroom, the teacher's desk is front and center. Many teachers argue that having the desk in plain sight of all students is a good thing because students who are out of the teacher's view may not see any reason for participating in reading and writing (Fawcett, 1992). Sometimes it is impossible to see every student clearly so Dr. Tom McIntyre suggests, "If some students must be outside of [the teacher's] line of site, be sure that they are the compliant and focused pupils" (McIntyre, n.d.). McIntyre is proposing that the "focused and compliant pupils" will be on task whether the teacher can see them or not. Additionally, putting the teacher's desk in the front and center of the room can help the teacher keep the class attentive as it conveys a sense of power and authority (Cuban, 1986). But this power and authority can sometimes come off too strong for students. When the teacher's desk is raised and isolated from students desks, it can "signify the teacher's status in relation to the student and the direction of the flow of knowledge", meaning the teacher's desk is higher therefore they know more (Proshansky & Wolfe, 1974). This is definitely something to avoid as teachers never want students to feel like their opinion doesn't matter.

Often students perceive a negative message when the teacher's desk is front and center. This message conveys an authoritarian feeling and

students see the teacher's desk as "immobile and inviolate" (Proshansky and Wolfe, 1974). The location of the teacher's desk in a traditional classroom can also communicate that the teacher is isolated from students and effectively set the teacher's desk off limits to students (Proshansky & Wolfe, 1974). A teacher never wants students to feel like approaching the teacher's desk is off limits. In addition to feeling scared and cautious, students might feel embarrassed. When the desk is at the front of the room, some students may feel ashamed to walk up to the teacher's desk because all of the other students see them do so (T. Savage & M. Savage, 2010). They just stay put and fail to understand the material.

Another disadvantage of putting the teacher's desk in the front of the room is the fact that it may encourage teachers to sit down and teach as opposed to standing and moving around while they teach. Sitting down while teaching can lead students to believe that the teacher isn't excited about the material and in turn the students have fewer positive attitudes (T. Savage & M. Savage, 2010). As student attitudes can determine effort levels, teachers don't want their students to feel scared to come ask for help. For many reasons, it is safe to say that putting the teacher's desk front and center is not the best teaching practice.

There is an alternative theory and fast growing trend that getting rid of the teacher's desk all together is the best option. Some teachers claim that it takes up too much space that could be better utilized for student focused furniture. McIntyre even argues that the teacher's desk is a waste of space and the teacher should never be sitting down anyway. He states that if the teacher really can't do without their desk, they should put it in a corner or near a wall so it takes up less space (McIntyre, n.d.). Another justification for ridding classrooms of the teacher's desk could be that it disallows teachers from desk-teaching and it puts more emphasis on students. It can also help to reduce the previously described "flow of knowledge" and "authoritarian" feeling a front and center desk can give off. However, there is still a better teaching practice than completely ditching the desk.

One of the best teaching practices while setting up the classroom is to put the teacher's desk in the

back of the room. There are numerous advantages to keeping the teacher's desk behind students. First, by putting the teacher's desk there, a student centered environment is created (Getzels, n.d.). The teacher's desk is no longer the first thing students see when they walk into the classroom, they see *their* desks first. So now that the teacher has centered the environment on students, they can focus on student behavior better too. As many students base their behavior and rule following off of the teacher's behavior, and more specifically whether they are watching or not, the teacher needs to get creative (Adkins & Damer, 2000). When the teacher's desk is in the front of the room, students can see whether the teacher is looking at them or not. However, when the teacher is seated behind the students, they have to look back to see if they are being monitored. The students frequently looking back can be easily identified as students who may be off-task.

Teachers are also less distracting during work time when their desk isn't front and center (Kelly, n.d.). Often even the slightest ruffling of papers or clicking of the mouse can distract students both of which can be reduced when the teacher is in the rear of the room. Also students feel compelled to watch a teacher sitting in the front of the room rather than staying busy (T. Savage & M. Savage, 2010). The teacher additionally gets more privacy in the back of the room so increasing is not only student productivity, but teacher productivity as well (Kelly, n.d.).

Who sits in the back of the classroom? Often the most disruptive students and the ones who need the most attention and help sit in the back of the classroom, each for different reasons (Kelly, n.d.). When the teacher's desk is near the back both of these groups' problems can be solved. The disruptive students will never know when the teacher is watching and the students who require the most help will feel comfortable walking back to the teacher's desk knowing that the whole class can't see them doing so (Kelly n.d.; T. Savage & M. Savage, 2010). Granted, assigned seating can dictate where students sit, however this arrangement is useful in advanced courses where the teacher usually does not assign seats.

It is very important that the teacher's desk is a safe zone and conveys a degree of openness so that

students feel comfortable asking for help ("Building Great Classrooms", n.d.). In addition to students feeling comfortable at the teacher's desk, they need to have access to it. The teacher's desk area must not be congested with traffic, so it is easily reachable by students and the teacher (Evertson & Poole, 2002). Teachers also need to consider the pathways and routes students are using to get to the teacher's desk. Teachers should observe whether on their way up to the desk, students are bumping or disrupting other, possibly more on-task, students (Evertson & Poole, 2002; McIntyre, n.d.). All of these goals can be achieved using the best teaching practice of simply moving the teacher's desk to the back of the room.

When examining the different options concerning the placement of the teacher's desk, it is clear that the best teaching practice is to move it to the back of the room, behind student desks. This best teaching practice has many benefits including increased student and teacher productivity, improved student behavior, and increased teacher privacy. The simple act of placing the teacher's desk in the right spot can go a long way in determining student and teacher success.

References

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