

Chapter Four

Arranging the Room

Barriers to Mobility

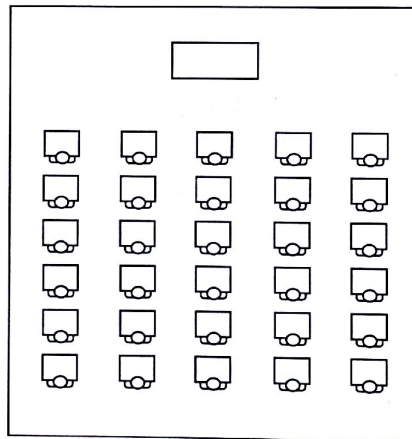
Tripping over the Furniture

Once the importance of mobility and proximity become clear, the next logical step is to make working the crowd as easy as possible. Are there any obstacles that you need to overcome?

Look around a typical class and you will see a whole room full of obstacles. The biggest impediment to working the crowd in a typical classroom is the *furniture*.

The Custodial Room Arrangement

The most common room arrangement in education is pictured in the diagram to the right. Now, ask yourself, "Who arranged the furniture in this classroom?"



Who arranged the furniture in this classroom?

Preview

- The biggest obstacle to working the crowd in a typical classroom is the furniture.
- The custodial room arrangement makes cleaning easy, but it creates barriers to movement.
- The best room arrangement allows the teacher to get from any student to any other student in the fewest possible steps.
- Teachers can increase proximity by removing their desks from the front of the room and moving the students' desks forward.
- Teachers need walkways. These are not little, narrow walkways, but rather, boulevards.
- The most efficient pattern of movement takes the form of an interior loop. This general pattern can be adaptable to a wide variety of teaching situations.

During training, teachers respond without hesitation, "The custodian!"

Now, ask yourself, "What is the custodian's vested interest in the arrangement of furniture?"

During training, teachers respond, "Cleaning."

Unfortunately, the room arrangement that is *best* for cleaning is the *worst possible* room arrangement for classroom management.

Right Back Where You Started

Imagine that you are standing at the "X" in the diagram to the right as you help a student who is stuck. You look up to see two students *goofing off* in the far corner. What are you going to do about it?

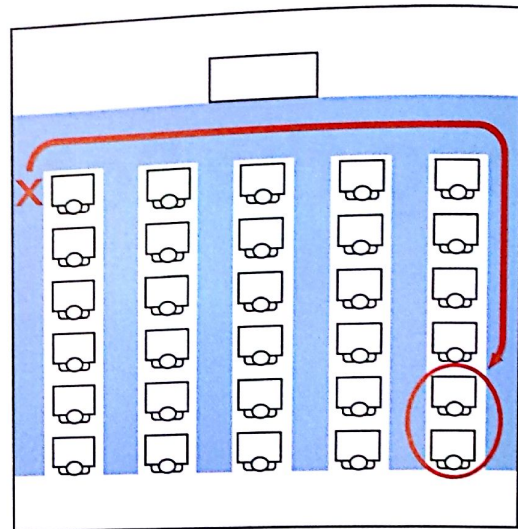
If you ignore the talking, other students will take note and say to themselves, "Oh great! I wanted to talk too." We call this *declaring open season on yourself*. You need to do something. But, what?

Previously we described the usual options. After some nagging and a warning comes the trip across the classroom (see diagram) to "lay down the law." You remember the silly conversation that follows.

"I am *sick and tired* of looking up to see nothing but talking over here... blah, blah, blah."

The students are contrite when you are standing over them, but their repentance is short-lived. How long do you think it will take them to start talking again after you leave?

The day may come when you decide to save yourself the trip across the classroom in favor of a few well chosen words. Think of nagging in this situation as a labor saving device. At least it saves you a trip across the room for nothing.



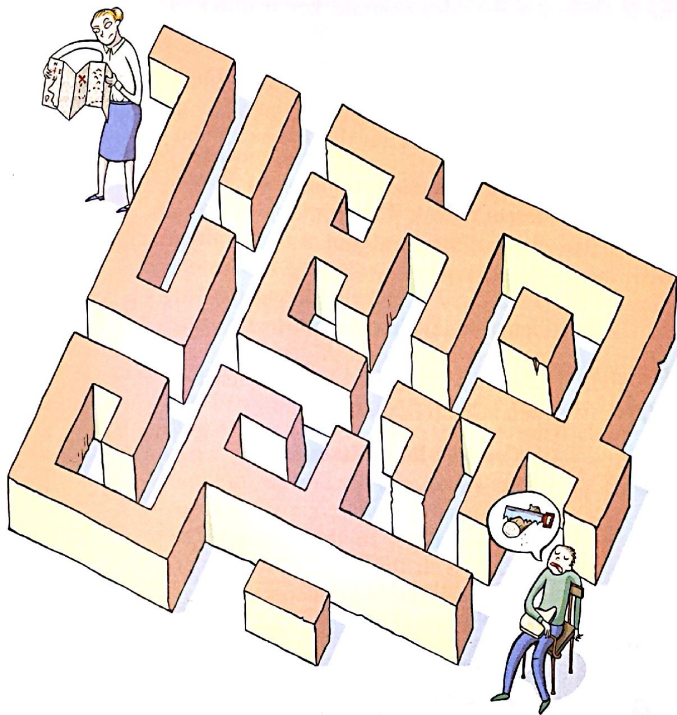
Walking across the room is usually an expensive response to a small problem.

Arranging the Room for Teaching

Imagine teenage bodies at the desks in the diagram above. With normal crowding, students' feet reach to the chair in front.

Consequently, the custodian's room arrangement creates *five impermeable barriers* between the left side of the room and the right side. How will you work the crowd? How will you move toward students who are goofing off without hiking around the periphery? During training, teachers learn the following maxim:

Anything that you do not arrange to your advantage, somebody else will arrange to their advantage, and it won't be to your advantage.



Attempting to work the crowd with the custodian's room arrangement will be so frustrating that you may give up the whole idea.

The first element of Classroom Structure for which you must take full responsibility is room arrangement. You will need to rearrange the furniture in your classroom to facilitate mobility and proximity. Your objective is to work the crowd. To save steps you must carefully analyze space, distance, and movement.

The Teacher's Desk

Move It

The first step in room arrangement is to get your desk away from its traditional location in the *front* of the classroom. Where should the desk go?

Most teachers just shove it into the corner so they can conveniently lay things on it. Other teachers place it at the side of the room or in the back – it doesn't much matter.

Why move your desk? Because, it costs you *eight feet of proximity* with every student in the classroom!

I used to carry a tape measure with me when I visited classrooms. With the teacher's desk in the front, the distance from the chalkboard to the students in the front row is roughly thirteen feet.

Now, stand in front of a colleague who is seated, and imagine that you are conversing with him or her. Make it a comfortable conversational distance. Look down to see how far your knee is from your colleague's knee. It is usually about three feet.

Next, imagine that you are addressing the class. Add another two feet to the conversational distance described above. This extra space gives students to the side a decent viewing angle for the overhead projector or writing on the board.

You are now approximately five feet from the desks of the students in the front row. Compared to when your desk was in the front, you are now *eight feet* closer to every student in the class.

The Cost of Eight Feet

Is eight feet important? In terms of the zones of proximity described in the previous chapter, it is the difference between the *red* zone and the *green* zone.

To feel the difference, stand about thirteen feet from a group of your colleagues who assume the role of typical students who would love to chit-chat in class. Ask them, "Would you start if I were standing here?"

Next, walk toward them until you are standing five feet away. Have them imagine that they are the same students. Now, ask them, "Would you? Could you?"

You will find that when you are thirteen feet away, the students feel free to goof off. But when you are five feet away, they "cool it." This is a tremendous increase in power for simply moving a piece of furniture.

This experiment will give you a feeling for the close relationship between proximity and goofing off. In your classroom, *eight feet* is the difference between *prevention* and *remediation* whenever you are standing in the front of the classroom.

Leaving Your Comfort Zone

I must warn you that, when you first bring the students forward, you may feel a bit claustrophobic. It takes a few hours in the classroom for your comfort zone to readjust. But you will soon come to appreciate the intimacy and control that proximity provides.

The Students' Desks

Analyzing the Use of Space

I will show you some sample room arrangements. Do not jump to the conclusion that they are "correct." They

are generic examples that demonstrate key features of room arrangement as they relate to working the crowd.

These room arrangements make mobility easy. Once you become familiar with them, you will be able to rearrange your own classroom in a way that is best for you.

As we look at space, think of teachers in one of two different places. The *first* is standing in

front of the classroom as they address the group or facilitate a discussion. The *second* is walking among the students supervising written work during Guided Practice. A good room arrangement must serve the teacher well in both of these situations.

Compact Room Arrangement

Let's start with the fairly traditional room arrangement pictured on the following page. In this diagram the teacher is in the front of the room, and the students are separated and facing forward.

For starters, you only need *two aisles* running from the front of the classroom to the back rather than the four or five aisles that the custodian typically provides. As a result, you can make the room arrangement more compact by placing desks where several

of the custodian's aisles used to be.

Think of the rows of desks as running *from side to side* rather than from front to back, as in the custodian's room arrangement. There are now eight students in the front row rather than the five or six that the custodian would place there.



The objective of
room arrangement
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walkways.

In addition, these students are much closer to you than they were before you moved your desk to the corner. We are following two strategies to make the room arrangement more compact. We are *moving the students forward* and *packing them sideways*.

Spacing Desks

Now, imagine yourself positioning the second row of desks. *First*, sit in a chair in the second row and relax your legs (bent, not straight out in front of you). *Second*, with a tape measure, measure eighteen inches from your toe to the back leg of the chair in front of you. That distance will provide you with an adequate walkway.

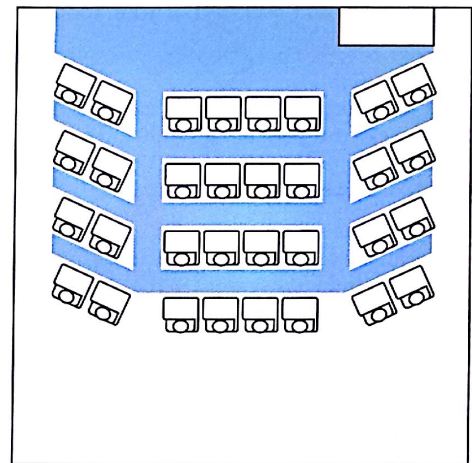
When you first look at the distance separating the first row from the second row, it seems huge. How can you afford that kind of space in a crowded classroom? The extra space that we need for wide walkways will come from the space we *saved* by moving the students forward and by packing them sideways.

Making Walkways

The most important feature of room arrangement is *not* where the furniture goes, but, rather, where the furniture *does not go*. The objective of room arrangement is to create *walkways* in order to make mobility easy. I do not mean little, narrow walkways. I mean *boulevards*.

I want you to be able to stroll down the boulevards without kicking students' feet, tripping over backpacks, or being blocked because a student is tall. In addition, I do not want you to pull students off task because they are worried about being stepped on.

The diagram pictured above has four rows running from side to side with eight students per row for a class of thirty-two students. We can now work the crowd with easy access to every student.



The space for walkways is created by bringing the students forward and packing them sideways.

Generic Room Arrangements

Proximity and Supervision

Imagine yourself working the crowd during Guided Practice as you supervise written work. To supervise written work, you must be able to *read* it. How far can you be from students and still read their work.

With normal eyesight, you can read the work of the student sitting on the aisle as well as the next student over. But you cannot read the work of the third student over because the writing appears too small.

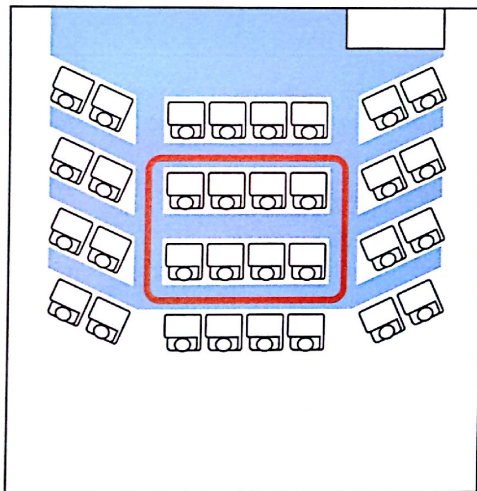
Normal eyesight limits you to supervising *two students to your right and two students to your left* as you work the crowd.

This fact will play a major role in determining the placement of furniture and walkways in your room arrangement.

An Interior Loop

What is the shortest distance you can walk that would allow you to read the work of every student in the class? It is pictured in the diagram below to the left. We will call this pattern of movement an *interior loop*.

As you work the crowd along this interior loop, every student is within two seats of an aisle. In addition, you are only a few steps from any student in the class. As you work the crowd, no student will be in the green zone for very long.



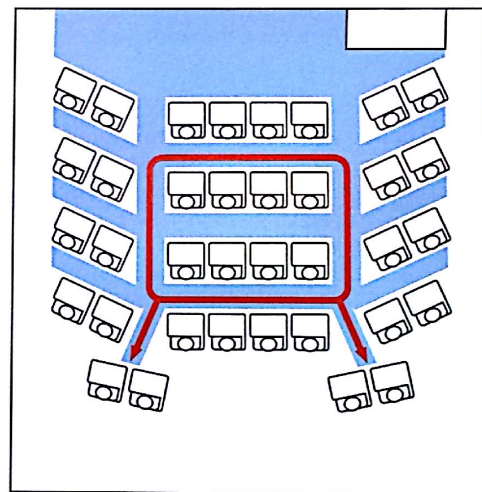
An interior loop allows you to work the crowd with the fewest steps.

Imagine standing at the edge of this room arrangement. You would pay a high price for being in this location very long. An interior loop allows you to *avoid the periphery of the room* where you are cut off from the students on the far side.

Mobility with Overcrowding

What if you have more than thirty-two students? Where will you place the overflow?

Don't make a fifth row! The middle section of that row would usually be in the green zone. Instead, place the extra students at the *ends* of the two walkways that run from front to back. These locations are the most accessible to you as you work the interior loop.



With overcrowding, you may need to use an interior loop with ears.

Of course, you will need to take a step or two out of the loop to see how these students are doing. This produces the elaborated pattern of movement shown on the previous page. We'll call it *an interior loop with ears*.

The placement of "ears" will depend on the idiosyncrasies of your classroom. You will find that one of these ears is no trouble, and two is doable. But, if you have three of them the whole idea begins to collapse because you are in the ears as much as you are in the interior loop.

Cooperative Learning

With the room arrangements on the preceding page each section of every row is laid out in even numbers. This facilitates interactive learning with partner pairs. This arrangement is also very flexible. You can create groups of four by saying,

"Would rows *one* and *three* please turn your desks around so that we may get into our cooperative learning groups."

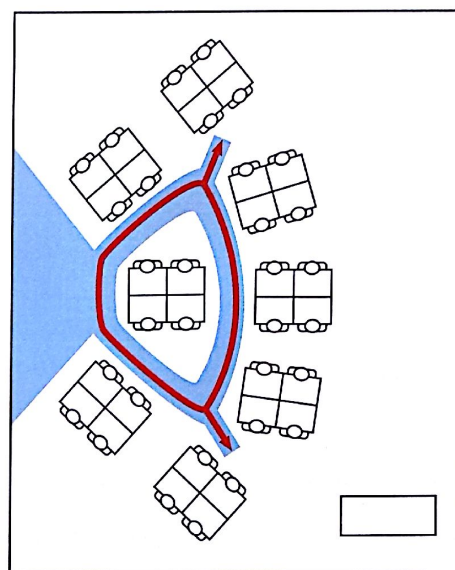
Each partner pair combines with the one behind to create a foursome or "study square."

The diagram to the right shows a completely different room arrangement for groups of four. We refer to it as the "wagon wheel." You will see that it is not all that different, however, when you begin to work the crowd. You will find your *interior loop with ears* soon enough.

Basic Patterns

You may have to rearrange your room several times before you get it the way you want it. The goal is efficiency. The optimal room arrangement *allows you to get from any student to any other student with the fewest steps*.

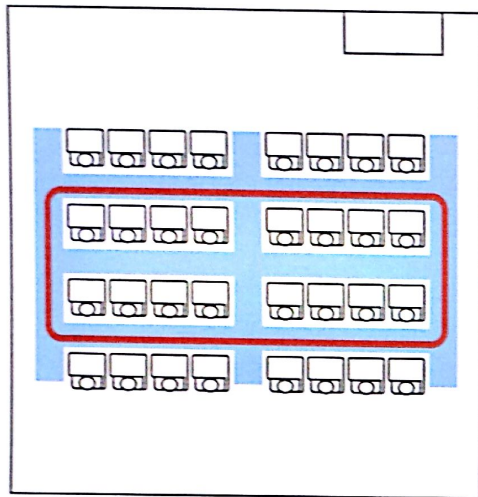
I have rearranged many classrooms over the years, and the most efficient room arrangements tend to fall into two basic patterns. The *first* is rectilinear or "grid" (previous page). The *second* is curvilinear or "wagon wheel" (above).



An interior loop with ears fits a wide variety of furniture configurations.

Long rectangular rooms such as portables usually work best with a "wagon wheel" with the front of the room on the long wall (above). If the front of the room is on the short wall where the architects usually place it, the whole back half of the classroom will be in the green zone. If your portable is set up in this way, change it even if it means relocating the chalkboard. If you can't get permission, you can always apologize later.

After you have rearranged your classroom, walk around to see if you can get to every student easily, and count your steps. It is not uncommon for a teacher to show me a diagram like the one at the top of the following page and say,



Beware! A central aisle creates a peripheral loop and increases the distance you walk by 60 percent.

"I think my room arrangement is close to what you are describing. I have a central aisle that allows me to get around the room fairly easily."

Beware of a central aisle! The weakness of this room arrangement becomes apparent when you picture yourself supervising written work during Guided Practice. The distance you must walk in order to read the students' work (loop above) is *60 percent longer* than an interior loop. In addition, half of this loop is on the periphery.

Variations on Room Arrangement

There are patterns of room arrangement other than the "grid" and the "wagon wheel" that work beautifully.

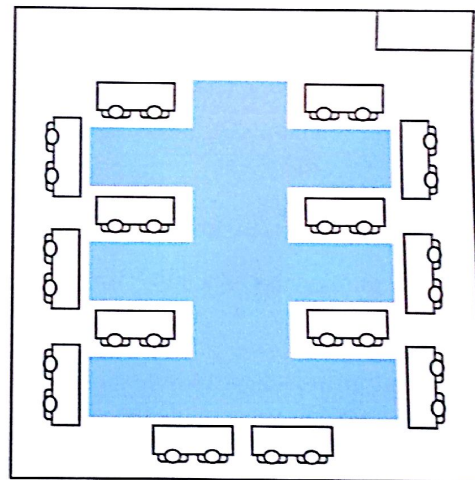
The common element is that they make mobility and proximity easy for the teacher. Here are some examples.

"Double E"

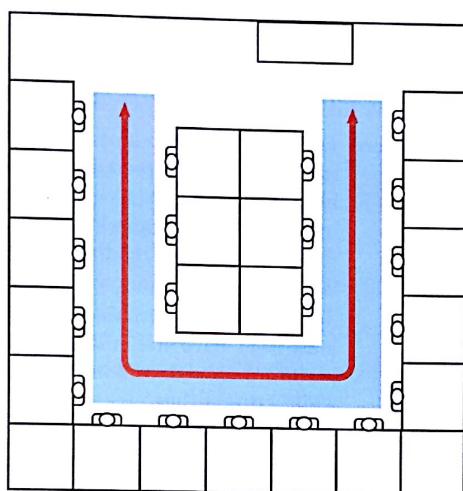
The arrangement pictured below works well with large tables. It is called a "double E" because it resembles two capital E's back to back. The teacher can easily stroll the central area between the two E's while facilitating a group discussion or supervising work stations such as lab tables.

Computer Labs

Another variation that many teachers use is the "horseshoe" or "U." It is practical in most special education classrooms and with the small groups typical of resource rooms.



The "Double E" works well with two-person desks.

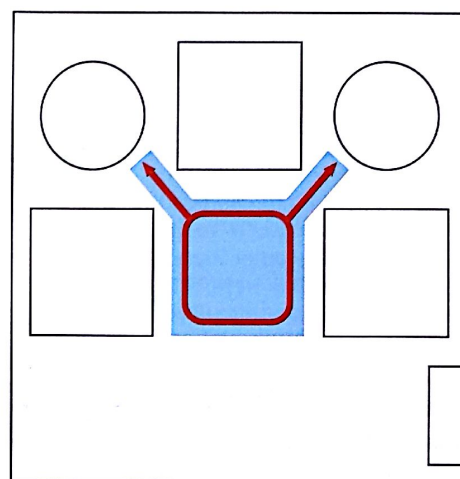


A "U" shaped arrangement works for computer labs.

With normal size classes, however, the "U" is so large that, when teachers are supervising students on one side of the room, they are cut off from students on the other side. However, this design can work when students are at workstations. The diagram above shows a computer lab with additional workstations placed in the interior part of the "U." Using this arrangement, the teacher can look over students' shoulders with a minimum of walking.

Instrumental and Choral Music

Instrumental and choral music teachers often ask for ideas that might help them during rehearsals. They feel cut off from the students in the back where most of the fooling around occurs.



A variation on the "U" facilitates supervision during rehearsal for instrumental and choral music.

These teachers typically use the same room arrangement during rehearsal that they use for a concert. This arrangement, however, is poorly suited for rehearsal where you want to hear subunits clearly while working the crowd.

One practical solution is to arrange the subunits of the ensemble around three sides of an open square as shown above. Vocal music teachers often report that they can hear the altos and sopranos clearly for the first time, and band teachers like the separation between brass and woodwinds. Walkways to the percussion and rhythm instruments (circles) facilitate instruction while making it easier for the teacher to set limits on noise making.

Play With Your Room Arrangement

The examples of room arrangement provided in this chapter should be viewed as food for thought rather than as prescriptions. Rooms are different, lesson formats are different, and teacher preferences are different.

Rather than thinking of a room arrangement as being right or wrong, think of it as an attempt to cut your overhead. Remember, your objective is to get from any student to any other student with the fewest possible steps. Play with your room arrangement until you find what works best for you.

Mobility with Small Groups

Elementary Classrooms

During training, teachers ask, "What do you do about room arrangement when you are seated at a table working with a small group?" The answer is usually, "Nothing."

The purpose of room arrangement is to facilitate *mobility* and *proximity*. If you already have proximity without moving, you needn't go any further.

The same logic applies to primary teachers who are seated while reading to students at their feet. Management of minor disruptions can usually be accomplished by simply stopping, turning toward the disruptors, and waiting until they become quiet.

Reading Groups

Teachers of reading groups typically sit with the students in a circle while having each student read aloud in turn. This time honored format has two disadvantages:

- **Low time-on-task:** If there are eight students in the reading group, only one of them is reading while seven out of eight are passive. How can we increase the ratio of students who are actively engaged in reading without sacrificing teacher supervision?
- **Performance anxiety:** Some students get nervous when they have to read out loud. They block due to anxiety which causes other students to giggle. This causes the student who is reading to block all the more.

One way of alleviating these problems is to have the students work in partner pairs with one student reading while the other listens. Another approach is to have all of the students "whisper read" by themselves.

With both of these formats, the teacher can supervise by moving around the periphery of the group while leaning down to listen to the reading of individual students. The teacher will hear one student at a time just as well as before.

Once up and about, the teacher can then cruise among those students not in the reading circle from time to time. When the teacher is mobile during small group instruction in this fashion, goofing off and time-on-task are within normal limits.

Small Group Instruction with the Teacher Seated

Mobility during small group instruction is not always an option. Sometimes the teacher must remain seated in order to work intensely with students. The management of small group instruction hits the wall as soon as the teacher sits down.

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Within seconds “talking to neighbors” triples and time-on-task drops by over half. Traditionally, educators have accepted this high level of goofing off as the unavoidable price of working intensely with a small group. It could be argued, however, that the cost of this format exceeds the benefit.

How can the teacher relinquish working the crowd in order to work intensely with small groups without paying such a high price in goofing off? This will require an entirely new technology that goes above and beyond working the crowd. This technology will be described in detail in a later section entitled Responsibility Training.

People Issues

Teacher Inertia

Over the years I have repeatedly seen resistance on the part of experienced teachers to changing their room arrangements. I suppose this inertia is not surprising. We all resist changing what is familiar, especially when it alters our “comfort zone.”

This resistance is so great that, if you train your colleagues, you will probably want to break into “furniture moving squads,” go to each participating teacher’s classroom in turn and say, “Where do you want the furniture?”

Your colleague will often give you a funny look as though surprised that he or she must actually change things. But, after a pause, he or she will usually say, “Let’s start with my desk.”

Without your “furniture moving squads,” over a third of trainees never rearrange their furniture. This is a fatal omission. Without a proper room arrangement, working the crowd becomes extremely difficult. In addition, without working the crowd, many of the skills of effective classroom management described in subsequent chapters cannot be implemented.

The Custodian’s Cooperation

Teachers who rearrange their furniture without having a talk with the custodian are asking for resistance. I have known teachers who rearranged their furniture on Monday only to find it back in rows on Tuesday.

For one thing, the room arrangements pictured in this chapter are more difficult to clean than rooms arranged in traditional rows. But, perhaps more importantly, nobody likes to have their world changed without being consulted.

If you want the custodians to put out extra effort to give you an optimal room arrangement, treat them like colleagues. Have a joint planning meeting with teachers and custodians to share the rationale for the changes and discuss the details of implementation. Treat the custodians like professionals, and they will probably respond as professionals.

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