TOM MCKENNA

You Are Where You Sit
Uncovering the lessons of classroom furniture

Imagine the following scenario: Students enter a classroom with the desks and chairs neatly arranged in straight rows. They hesitate at the door, make a quick assessment of the room, and choose a place to sit. They work their way down narrow rows of chairs, careful not to disturb the tight arrangement of furniture.

Shortly before the class is scheduled to start, an adult figure enters the room, writes his or her name on the front board along with the name of the class, and assumes a seat at the big desk or the podium standing by its side. School is in session.

Welcome to day one of your first lessons about power, pedagogy, and their relationship to physical and symbolic capital. I have watched students file into my classroom for 35 years. Never have I seen them try to change the arranged furniture, nor ask to do so. Instead, they arrange themselves according to a pre-arranged design.

I teach humanities at Portland Youth Builders, a high school completion school in one of Portland's poorest neighborhoods. Normally, the chairs in my class are arranged in a large circle. This day, I arrange the chairs in rows. Students walk in the door, stop suddenly, look at me, and ask, "What's this all about?"

I ask them to take a seat and offer no explanation for our newly arranged room. I take attendance and ask if anyone has any thoughts they want to share before we start class.

Delia says: "I don't like this. I have to turn around to see who's talking. Can we change the chairs back to the way they usually are, please?"

I ask how other students feel about sitting in rows. Eric says: "I don't like it either. It feels like school."

A chorus of "Yeah, I don't like it" affirms Delia and Eric's comments.

"OK, let's change the chairs around. But I want you to talk about various classroom seating arrangements when we make the change." I hold up architectural drawings of five different classroom arrangements to illustrate what I want them to discuss. "We are going to divide into small groups, each group is going to get one of these drawings, and I am going to ask you to talk about some of the implications of classroom furniture arrangements."

"Tom, you're going deep on us today," says Michael.

"Yeah, what are you up to?" asks Tiffany.

What I'm up to is this: I'm trying to provide students with an opportunity to think about ordinary things in their lives, like classroom furniture arrangements, and push them to find connections between how they sit in a classroom and how they learn to view themselves in a larger political world. I want them to think about what besides math or English is being taught in a classroom divided into rows. What "hidden lessons" are being imparted about power, learning, and equality? What lessons do students learn about who they are from the material shaping of their space?

I put the students into five small groups and give each group an architectural drawing of a different classroom design. I give group one a drawing of chairs in rows; group two, chairs in a circle; group three, chairs in a forum arrangement; group four, chairs in groups of four; and group five, chairs facing the wall as one might find in a computer lab.

I ask each group to answer the following questions about their respective classroom arrangement:

What does your arrangement suggest about student-student relationships in the classroom?

What does it suggest about teacher-student relations?

What does it suggest about how learning occurs?

What does it suggest about power?

How do you feel when you find yourself seated in your respective arrangement?

At first, students give me quizzical looks. I walk them through the first question about a classroom arranged in rows. "When you were sitting in rows earlier in this class, how did you feel in relation to each other?

Remember Delia's comment that she couldn't see people when they talked? Well, take that comment a step further: How does the arrangement of furniture define how you connect with other students in the room? About how the power is distributed? Chairs aren't arranged by accident or by magic. They are arranged for a purpose. What's the purpose? Who defines that purpose and for what reasons? I want you to think about things you might otherwise take for granted."

Eventually the students begin to take their task seriously and discuss something that they really had never before considered on a conscious level — what is the "hidden curriculum" of classroom furniture?

While the students work, I rotate from group to group, listen to their conversation, take a few notes, and intervene when they get off track.

Group four gets stuck early. Their drawing is one of students seated in small groups.

Megan says: "I'm not getting this. What does how we sit have to do with anything?"

"Let's start with the last question on the handout. How do you feel when you work in small groups with other students as opposed to sitting in rows?" I ask.

"I like it."

I ask Megan why she likes it.

"Because I get to talk with my friends rather than listen to some boring teacher. Don't worry, I'm not talking about you, Tom."

"How do you and your friends learn things when you work in small groups?" I ask.

Megan shrugs her shoulders, and Lina answers instead. "We actually learn from each other, we figure it out."

"Right. So, you guys are the source of each other's learning. How is that different from what often happens when you're seated in rows?"

Lina puts the eraser end of her pencil to her cheek, looks up to the ceiling for a moment, and then says: "You know, I really never paid much attention when I was sitting in rows. I drew a lot instead."

"Do you pay attention in small group settings?"

"Most of the time. You really don't have much choice but to pay attention. Plus, I want to hear what someone else says. It's a lot more interesting."

"You guys get it. Just think out loud with each other about these questions. I'll check back in on you in a little bit." I move on to another group.

After the students complete their work, they report their thoughts back to the larger group. Before each group begins their sharing, we arrange the chairs in configurations that mirror the particular drawing they considered as a group. Before group one reports on the hidden curriculum of chairs arranged in rows, we arrange the chairs in rows. Then the group shares that most of their classroom lives have been spent seated in straight rows. Tiffany recalls a time when she was surprised to find a friend who was seated on the far side of the room from her. "I didn't even know she was there for the first couple of weeks of class."

Jake says that he always felt left out. "There wasn't enough room up front for everyone. Only so many students got to sit in the front rows. The rest of us had to fill in the back."

Eric agrees with Jake. "It was like a hierarchy — the same kids got the best seats while the rest of us spaced out in the back."

Delia adds, "I could never talk with anyone and you know I love to talk."

"Yeah, that was school," adds Eric. "The teacher talked and then we were just supposed to listen."

"Everyone knew who the teacher's favorites were. The kids in the top reading group, the ones who got to monitor recess, they all sat in front. And like Jake said, there was only so much room at the top and that's the way it was."

We move our chairs to form a circle and group two shares their thoughts. Chano awakes from his slumber. "Is this when we all sing 'Kumbaya'?"

I thank him for his cynicism and ask Juan to begin. "We like circles because you can see who's talking without having to turn around."

"Yeah," says Huong, "I feel a lot less confined. I can breathe."

Sean says, "It's like there's room for all of us. We can talk if we want or just listen if we want to, like I always do."

Michael looks directly at me. "And you're not controlling everything. We get to talk with each other."

Gerardo shares that he's not always comfortable in a circle. "I feel exposed."

"I sometimes do, too," says Rayann, "but I also feel much more together with everyone else in the class. We can all think out loud together. I feel included."

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Perhaps the most profound reflection that students discuss is the fact that they never before considered classroom arrangements of furniture as anything more than an arbitrary and benign circumstance of learning. The chairs are where they happen to be. Students adjust themselves and their consciousness to a given reality without giving much thought to, as Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "considering reality."

The simple act of moving classroom furniture can allow us to think critically about the first material reality we experience in a school setting: the room in which we sit. We discover that we have always assumed we don't have the power to arrange the material nature of the room to fit our needs. Someone else owns it. Someone else arranges it.

I finish the activity by asking my students the "so what?" question: "Given what we did today, what are the larger lessons to be learned? We spent a whole class period looking at classroom furniture designs. Why? Desks and chairs can be arranged in a variety of ways, so what?"

Delia says: "I never thought about any of this before. It makes me think, what else did I miss along the way that has somehow shaped me?"

"You know a lot of us never thought we were very smart and we also thought it was our fault that we weren't doing all that

good in school. But maybe it wasn't all our fault, maybe being put in the back row had something to do with it. I don't know." Jake shakes his head as he ponders his words.

Michael springs to life and says: "It's kind of like the work site. [Students spend time building low-income housing while at Youth Builders.] We're put in crews and have to figure out things by ourselves. I mean, sometimes the boss isn't around, and something happens that you have to deal with. We work in small groups to figure it out ourselves. I was thinking of that when we were sitting in small groups. We could never build a house if we all just sat and listened to someone tell us how to do it."

"Like I said before," says Eric, "it's about control."

"Tell me more, Eric. How are chairs in rows about control?"

"You learn early on who's in control and who's not when you are just put in rows and told to remember things. You get the feeling that the kids in the front rows deserve to be there and that the kids in back deserve to be in the back."

I direct a question to Jake: "You said earlier that there just wasn't enough room in the front for everyone. How is that similar to what we find in society?"

Jake thinks about my question for a minute before he says: "It's like musical chairs out there. Heck, there isn't enough room for all of us in the back row. Forget about the front."

Chano decides to get serious. "What I want to know is, who sets up the chairs? I don't mean here, but out there?"

"What do you mean, Chano?"

"For all my time in school, I just tried to find a seat in a room arranged by someone else. Now I feel like I'm trying to do the same thing with my life. But I want to know: Who sets up the chairs out there?" Chano points out the window. "How do we get to do something else other than try to find a place in the back?"

"Let's start by trying to understand as much as we can about the structure, the arrangement of things, and then let's see who is making progress turning some of those rows into circles." I know the answer won't satisfy Chano's curiosity, but it's a start.

Simply changing the furniture will not in and of itself change pedagogy or raise consciousness, but it can provide a way to start thinking about how, as students and teachers, we hope to transform ourselves. We can start to uncover a complex system of relationships both in school and "out there" by simply taking stock of

where we find ourselves in the world — how we are placed in relation to each other. Once aware, we can suggest to students like Jake, Eric, Chano, and Delia that maybe their previous academic and personal failures weren't all their fault. Then we can help our students develop strategies to deal with a system that casts them to the rear — a system that teaches them to adjust to a given reality rather than create one.

Rather than ending up at the bottom blaming themselves for their "failure," maybe my students can begin to envision a system, an arrangement, that better suits their collective needs. Like rearranging classroom furniture, maybe we can think about and change that system one chair at a time.

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