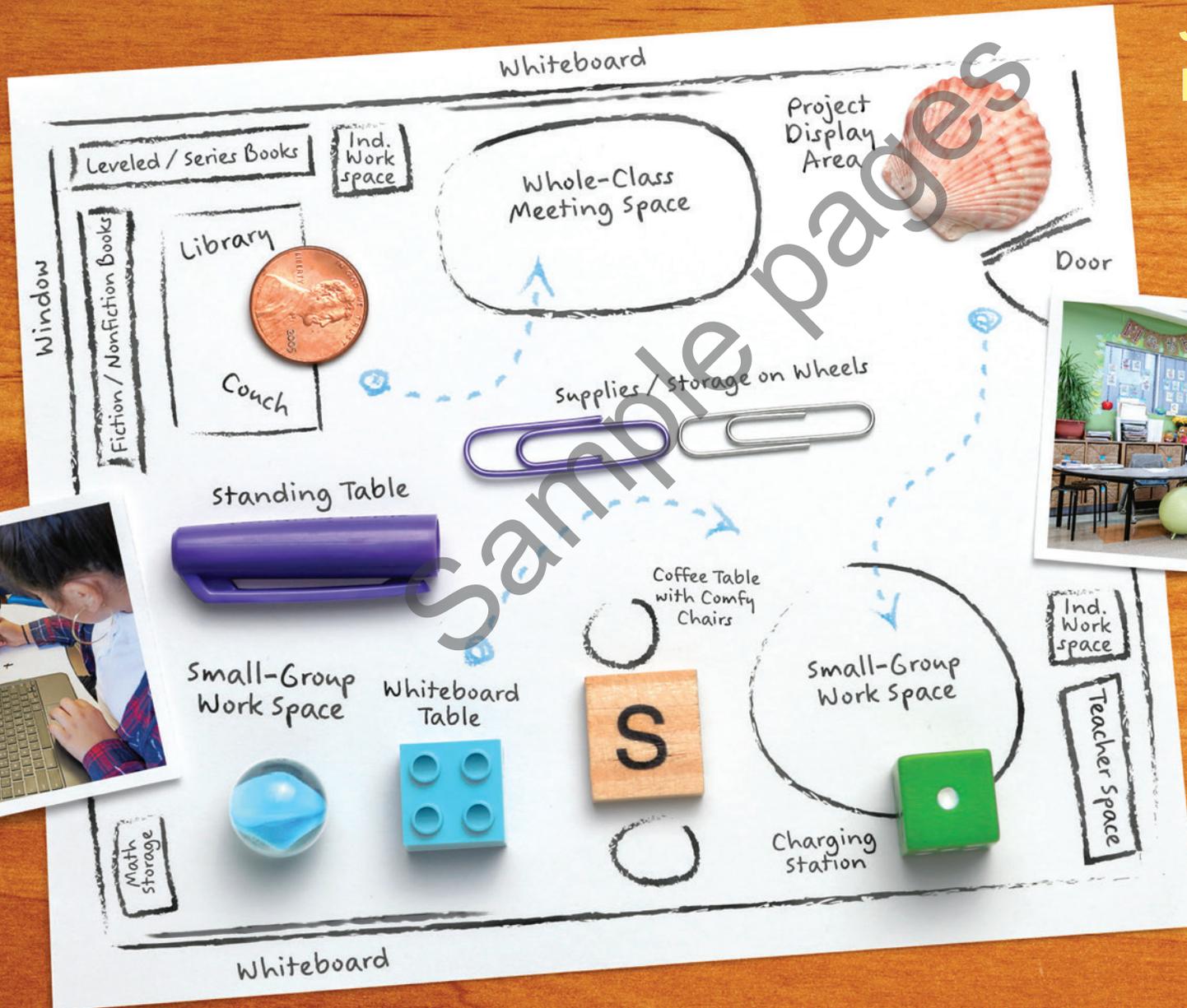


# Strategic Classroom Design

## Creating an Environment for Flexible Learning

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MARTIN



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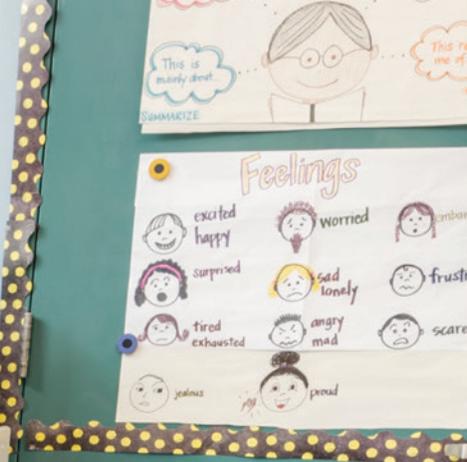
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## Introduction

# Space Matters

**M**

ost days Jayvon's morning drop-off routine runs like clockwork. He skips along a path to his classroom, hangs up his backpack on one of the outdoor hooks, and removes his water bottle before nestling it into an empty cubby that is marked by an image from nature. Today, he chooses an acorn.

Jayvon then bounds out to the play yard to find a friend and await the morning bell with classmates. He is excited on the days he arrives to school a little bit early because he has time to join a friend or classmates climbing, swinging, or jumping atop the play apparatus. On other school mornings, Jayvon lingers near his backpack, waits until his mom kisses him goodbye on the cheek, and walks completely out of sight before taking out a treasure that he has secretly stored in a pocket. A fidget spinner, orange peels, Lego people, rocks, cars, and wood chips are among his favorites. Some treasures make it back home; many find a new home in the teacher's desk.

The morning bell rings. Jayvon and his classmates line up near other classes on the yard and begin a short walk to the entrance of their classroom while chatting about adventures or singing a favorite song. Before entering the classroom, he and his classmates greet their teacher at the door with a firm handshake and by making eye contact. After the teacher greeting, most mornings begin with independent reading followed by a welcome circle in the large open rug space. Jayvon's teacher gathers the children close to talk with them about the plan for the day and share any news, reminders, and announcements

they might need to consider about the day or upcoming week. She also takes the opportunity to highlight kind and positive classroom behaviors she has been noticing and how those contribute to the feeling of safety and belonging for everyone. Next, it's time to sing a few favorite songs together. Everyone stands up and stretches before singing songs and chanting verses. The call-and-response and rhyming melodies that have gestures and movement are Jayvon's favorites. He tries hard to stay in his bubble of space while singing, which is hard at times because he loves to bounce, sway, wiggle, and move as he follows along with the rhythm.

As the music ends, storytelling begins. Jayvon walks over to a nearby shelf to pick up a piece of modeling clay from inside a small covered container. He quickly rejoins the group on the rug but sits on the perimeter now. He falls to his knees while gently kneading the clay with both thumbs and forefingers. His teacher turns on an electric candle near her chair, asks a student to dim the overhead lighting, and continues the read-aloud text that she began to read earlier in the week. Many of Jayvon's peers sit and listen to the story in partnerships or trios, some sit on pillows, others sit in chairs, and three students stand toward the back of the meeting area. Occasionally, Jayvon's teacher will guide the students to process what is happening in the text with a nearby thinking partner.

When the read-aloud ends, Jayvon jumps up and returns his piece of thinking clay, now an animal of some sort, to a nearby container on the shelf. He is eager to listen to the plan for the day and to begin the day's work at various project stations around the classroom. The projects on this day include a problem-solving investigation, exploring images and artifacts, caterpillar and butterfly habitat observations, learning a new vocabulary game, and art experiences with mixed media. As each group works independently, some students may receive additional support while in their group or be pulled out of the group for part of the time by the teacher to work in a targeted skill group. Students are invited to turn to a partner and share out a smooth exit and start-up routine for how they plan to move from the whole-group meeting area, quickly gather supplies, and get started at their project station. Once everyone briefly shares a game plan, Jayvon's teacher gives a nonverbal signal to leave the meeting area and begin their task.

Jayvon initiates his plan by carefully standing up and turning his body toward a work area adjacent to the whole-group space. He maneuvers his way around a few chatty peers, grabs a pen from a nearby supply caddy, and is first to find a seat at the lowered (table legs were removed) round table that displays a caterpillar habitat. As another group member passes out butterfly books, student sketchbooks, and magnifying glasses, Jayvon is excited to chat with a peer about how the caterpillars are suspending themselves on leaves and chewing away on host plants. Next a group member flips over a sand timer and they begin to discuss observations before recording their thinking in science sketchbooks. Before the work time ends, each budding

entomologist takes a turn at sharing out with the group any unique observations that were made and documented into sketchbooks. The group responds to one another with a few connections, some predictions, and even more questions they have about caterpillars and butterflies.

A chime soon rings out and signals to everyone that it is time to clean up and rotate to another group. Jayvon and his classmates quickly finish sharing and collect books, sort observation tools, stack sketchbooks, and return all items to labeled baskets onto the science shelf nearby. When a second chime rings, Jayvon and his team head off to the next learning station, where they have opportunities to represent science topics and ideas through art.

## How You Design Your Classroom Matters

As you follow Jayvon through a typical morning at school, you might be surprised by his level of independence or the limited amount of management from his teacher. What is not visible but very present in every moment of Jayvon's classroom learning experiences are the decisions Jayvon's teacher has made about classroom design. His environment is designed with a keen eye toward the type of learning tasks that can happen in flexible learning spaces. This includes lots of space to move, plenty of light, furniture options, and a variety of possible seating configurations, easy access to tools and supplies, and technology that is used to encourage thinking, innovation, and collaboration.

Only a small part of designing a learning space is about beautification and aesthetics. Reimagining a strategic learning space is mostly about being mindful of the evolving needs of learners. An emphasis is placed on safety and belonging so that learners are free to share, create, reflect, and collaborate in a whole group, in small groups, or on their own without fear of rejection or judgment. Additionally, designing a classroom environment means educators invite students to co-design structures and processes so that all stakeholders not just survive, but thrive across the school year.

## Your Classroom Design Ignites Engagement

Notice how Jayvon's classroom teacher has set students up for success from the moment they arrive to school. Her drop-off system allows students to independently sort and store their own belongings. Once backpacks and jackets are put away and students are signed in, they can make decisions about how to spend time before the school day officially begins. In addition, her classroom activities are designed to happen in spaces that help ease the transition from home to school. Some students head out to the play yard; others read books, visit the discovery table, or play a card game in the classroom with a lingering parent or caregiver; and the remaining few

spend time at a nearby outdoor table talking with classmates or playing with friends from other rooms. The predictable nature of the home-to-school transition time has a calming effect; it helps students feel less anxious about starting the day and more connected to their peers and the classroom spaces. Their bodies and minds have been primed for the start of academic routines and structures of the day.

The activities planned for Jayvon and his classmates also intend to promote curiosity. Drawing on a study by Gruber, Gelman, and Ranganath (2014), Marianne Stenger (2014) wrote, “curiosity puts the brain in a state that allows it to learn and retain any kind of information, like a vortex that sucks in what you are motivated to learn, and also everything around it. So, if a teacher is able to arouse students’ curiosity about something they’re naturally motivated to learn, they’ll be better prepared to learn things that they would normally consider boring or difficult.” Jayvon and his classmates are challenged with lots of decision work that builds curiosity and leads to engagement and ownership of their learning. Where should they sit? Where will they get the materials they need? How should they start? Students in Jayvon’s classroom are encouraged to work as a team and utilize the classroom space to prep for learning opportunities and seek answers and solutions. For example, a small group of students might begin a task in a designated part of the room using an inquiry approach. They might make observations, ask questions about the realia on the table or on their devices, and then collect and pass out materials needed for learning, determine seating arrangement, work together, share findings with one another, and of course, clean up. By design and with support from their teacher, students are encouraged to learn because they’re given responsibilities and a space to think, make a plan, and work together. Engagement is ignited when students feel ownership of their classroom environment and play a role in making decisions about how the teaching and learning will occur.

The opportunity to engage and collaborate alongside peers in well-imagined classroom spaces is also a chance to learn important skills about boundaries and behaviors. For many, learning alongside peers, rather than going it alone, is in and of itself engaging. In each of the different classroom spaces, whole-group rug area, library area, and small-group and individualized learning stations, students learn from one another about acceptable and expected behaviors and how to negotiate disagreements. Fostering respect with how each classmate makes their own contributions to the group without fear of judgment or rejection allows each member to participate more fully in a learning task, decreases misbehaviors, and increases engagement.



## Your Classroom Design Helps Students Stay on Task

Once Jayvon's teacher greets all students by name, makes eye contact, and shakes hands with each of them, they reunite as a classroom community in a large open space at the center of their classroom for songs, stories, and brief announcements. Students know to start the day by first meeting in the larger communal space, forming a welcome circle for greetings and songs, and performing a movement activity. A little while later they reconfigure the seating arrangement for a story, class news, and school updates before going off to work in individualized or smaller, more intimate group configurations around the classroom. In the whole-group space, the expectation is to participate in ways that honor contributions made by the classroom community. Class norms in whole-group settings might include raising hands to signal a desire to share an idea or add on to someone else's thinking (until students are ready to participate without raising hands); using a talking stick to direct focus and attention to the speaker; using timing devices like schedules, sand timers, and chimes to remind group members to practice attentive listening while waiting to respond; and creating a seating chart with assigned spaces until these tools are no longer needed. In small-group spaces, the expectation is to collaborate with one another to accomplish a learning task or goal. Class norms in a small-group setting include taking turns, making plans, collecting materials, speaking calmly with one another, using an appropriate indoor volume, respecting ideas that might be different than their own, and cleaning up by sorting, returning, and organizing materials to nearby storage areas and shelves.

Establishing norms and co-authoring routines and protocols that correspond to specific spaces or areas in the classroom are examples of how a teacher might strategically use the classroom environment to help students stay on task. With practice, students better understand how their environment works and are able to anticipate and navigate respectful and welcoming behaviors in the various learning areas around the classroom more successfully (Rohrer and Samson 2014). For example, as students become more familiar with the classroom library routines of book selection, book care, and the kinds of learning opportunities that can happen there, engagement levels will likely increase along with the ability to stay on task.

In addition to keeping in mind the emotional and behavioral relationships between the learner and the physical learning environment, it is important to think about the cognitive work that the learner is engaged in and how this work also promotes on-task behaviors in the learning space. Lessons that are intentionally planned with students in mind will optimize student learning goals. Educators like Jayvon's teacher and her grade-level colleagues often meet together to plan curriculum using standards, assessment data, and a variety of resources. They plan with an eye toward novelty and sustaining curiosity, as well as using provocations to spark new ideas and questions.

Learning experiences that are planned with intention and enhanced by the layout of the physical classroom space assist students with staying on task. In their book *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, authors Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock noted that “no instructional strategy works equally well in all situations” (2001, 8). Simply using and teaching the strategies as prescribed in a teacher’s guide, for example, does not raise student achievement; teachers must also understand how, when, where, and why to use them.

Classroom spaces support students in a variety of ways so they can remain focused on their learning with minimal distractions. With intentional planning these strategically designed areas can help foster social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive growth and well-being for all learners.

## Your Classroom Design Cultivates Collaboration

Jayvon’s teacher, like so many of us, works hard to nurture home and school relationships because she knows they matter most. Providing space for students to collaborate with peers, teachers, teaching assistants, and parent volunteers requires thinking about how best to utilize our small classroom spaces in big ways. At the ground level, teachers understand that for students to successfully collaborate with one another and adults, the classroom environment must feel open enough for students to easily communicate feelings, thoughts, and actions. To collaborate well, students typically need spaces they can think and work in both individually and collectively. They need a physical environment that promotes safe and positive social learning opportunities through innovation, tinkering, problem-solving, and reflecting with one another.

However, classroom spaces are not created equal. The average classroom is approximately 750 square feet (25 × 30). Go ahead and set aside 150 square feet for teacher space, typically at the front or back of the classroom. Then set aside the 25 square feet (5 × 5) of often unusable space near the doors and/or window emergency exit. Finally, divide the remaining space by the average number of students (25) in a room. The result is about 23 square feet per student, which is arguably not a lot of space in which to work (Abramson 2015).

To think about what it would take to design a space that promotes collaboration, teachers must know their students, consider age-appropriate tasks, and envision the space for its opportunities rather than its challenges. Spaces large enough to fit the entire class might lend themselves to beautiful communal experiences where students are engaged in deep discussions, song, literature, fascinating content-area topics, laughing, taking on challenges, and brainstorming solutions together collaboratively. The experiences that happen in these larger spaces propel students forward as a collective.

Classroom spaces designed for smaller groups or individuals allow students to have more personalized learning experiences. Chairs or pillows surrounding a small table or a standing table pushed up against a back wall might feel more comfortable and intimate for some learners. Some students might take more ownership over their learning when collaboration occurs in small groups or when they have the chance to first work on something on their own before sharing out ideas with a partner.

All of the areas in your classroom, no matter how big or small, can be utilized in strategic ways. Spending time thinking about how to optimize a whole-group space for the classroom community and how to use all of the smaller, surrounding spaces can cultivate endless and exciting opportunities for inclusive collaboration.



## Your Classroom Design Supports Student Achievement

Jayvon's classmates regularly come together to greet each other and negotiate tasks in the whole-group meeting area. As the year progresses, each classmate can begin to anticipate activities held here and acceptable ways to participate in them. This community meeting space not only becomes a place to practice welcome rituals and have powerful discussions, it becomes a whole-class teaching and learning hub where students can press on other each other's ideas. It is often a teacher's favorite time of day to gather together, offer feedback, provide clarity, and alleviate confusion around classroom behaviors that impact student performance. Time spent together, reflecting on behaviors and classroom expectations, discussing self-management and self-regulation strategies, or having fun role-playing participation scenarios with one another is important for the growth of all students. For those students who sometimes have trouble taking risks or struggle with some of the behavioral norms of a traditional school setting, this time is both grounding and practical as it supports how they interact (perform) in daily activities.

British researchers, led by Professor Peter Barrett, collected data and concluded, "Classroom design could be attributed to a 25% impact, positive or negative, on a student's progress over the course of an academic year. The difference between the best and worst designed classrooms covered in the study? A full year's worth of academic progress" (Barrett et al. 2015). The study also measured design elements that included lighting, noise levels, air quality, furniture layout, flexibility, and storage availability.

We can build opportunities for all students to experience academic success without shame or blame through the way we design lessons and projects, the variety of spaces we offer, and the kind of access we provide to materials. Many educators agree that what drives the learning space configuration is the type of task, number of students involved in the project, and each student's role. Ideally, students have multiple opportunities across the day to support their own achievement by making choices about where to work in the room, how to go about tasks, and whether to work individually or collaborate with one another.

Students who struggle with social norms often affect teacher expectations, which impact student performance. Psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson "found that expectations affect teachers' moment-to-moment interactions with the children they teach in a thousand almost invisible ways. Teachers give the students that they expect to succeed more time to answer questions, more specific feedback, and more approval: They consistently touch, nod and smile at those kids more" (Rosenthal and Jacobson 2003). In his classroom, Jayvon knows that if he gets a wiggly or bouncy feeling during storytelling time, it's not a bad feeling. He has been taught to use the strategy of taking a standing position near the side or back of the meeting area to help him listen better, learn better, and participate in classroom conversations

with confidence and competence. His access to curriculum has not been decreased or taken away by being sent to the time-out chair or to “visit” another classroom for a short break. Jayvon has learned that if his hands start to have that busy “buzzy” feeling, rather than swing his arms around and accidentally touch others, he can squeeze or shake them out. He can also collect a piece of modeling clay provided by his teacher and use that fidgety hand energy to knead or sculpt. Each of these options allows Jayvon to remain in the lesson, stay connected to the group, and continue learning.

## From My Experience

Along with ten years of moving cabinets, desks, chairs, and tables back and forth across my own classroom floors, this book comes from my own personal experiences with helping hundreds of kindergarten–middle school classroom teachers across the country rethink their learning environments—either during summer professional development workshops or impromptu classroom makeover sessions.

I taught at Corinne A. Seeds University Elementary School (currently known as the UCLA Lab School). It was while working here as a demonstration teacher that I learned the most about classroom design and its impact on teaching and learning. A few aha moments included (no surprise here) the importance of light and natural elements to create a sense of calm, relieve stress, and improve cognitive function (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Tanner 2009; Wells 2000) in the classroom. I became a bargain shopper for indoor plants at local nurseries and swap meets, and a bit of a green thumb, usually picking up something for my own apartment space as well.

I also learned about color and its influence on emotion, student behavior, and performance. I began to think about and experiment with color palettes on my walls, display boards, and even with furniture. I stopped decorating my bulletin boards with brightly colored butcher paper and matching borders. Instead I learned to use muted colors to prevent overstimulation.

The idea of flexible seating configurations was not a new revelation, but at the lab school I learned to take flexible to the next level. Colleagues inspired me to make clipboards readily available and to raise, lower, and remove the adjustable legs of a table to create different kinds of seating or standing options for students. Who knew this would be one of the easiest (and cheapest) ways to impact student learning? My students seemed more engaged in their tasks when they were given options. Would they work alone, with a partner, or in small groups? Would they work standing up, sitting, kneeling, leaning, or lying on the floor?

I continued to explore classroom design when I became a staff developer. In addition to supporting teachers with literacy and math, I had ongoing conversations about the impact classroom

design had on teaching and learning. With the help of colleagues and educators, I learned to consider the implications of one design over another—what it means to move in the space, how to think about furniture as a tool for student learning, how to teach students about classroom layout, and how to create an environment that is conducive to learning for both teachers and students. Ultimately, I learned to help teachers think more strategically about classroom design.

## What You'll Find in This Book

This book is designed for educators interested in learning more about the factors that contribute to well-designed classroom spaces that connect with students and help teachers more effectively navigate the world of teaching and learning. Each chapter is full of photographs of classrooms ranging from grades K to 8. I share predictable challenges, one or two transcribed sample lessons, a chart with specific lesson suggestions, and answers to some common questions in an “If-Then” section.

You can read this book from cover to cover or jump into a section that resonates with you; perhaps it connects to a challenge or opportunity in your classroom, everything from How can I create a learning space where everyone feels welcome and a sense of belonging? to What do I do about the daily traffic jam that occurs at the supply station? to How long should it take for my students to transition into the classroom from recess? We get used to constantly juggling what is in and out of our control. Sometimes we start off the school year without certain supplies, the arrival of new students with only a moment's notice, and broken classroom furniture, but we make it work. I am confident that you'll find the information, makeover stories, and photographs from educators—just like you—helpful and inspiring. You, too, have permission to be creative and resourceful in your practice, going beyond the surface-level work of simply creating aesthetically-pleasing learning spaces. Attention to classroom layout and co-authoring with students about each space's rituals and routines will inspire a greater sense of belonging as well as provide students with opportunities to be part of an engaged, focused, and collaborative community of learners.

### Chapter 1

What do we mean by classroom design? In this chapter we'll explore the basic layout of your space from the ground up. We'll consider how to make room for a whole-group space, small-group spaces, individual work spaces, and your teacher space. When you are reimagining your classroom, it can feel overwhelming, so I'll show you how to start with a simple layout plan.

## Chapter 2

How can we set up our classrooms in strategic ways to cultivate curiosity, belonging, and academic growth? In this chapter, we'll explore the other classroom work spaces—the library, multimedia learning space, makerspace, play area, content area, and art space—and think about how they can be designed to help breathe life and inspiration into your learning journey with students.

## Chapter 3

How can we help students move, transition, and interact with one another and the classroom environment in ways that feel conscious and connected? We'll highlight the most commonly congested traffic areas and challenges. In addition, we'll consider ways to help students transition with more intention and purpose and how to co-author plans with your students to efficiently gather supplies and complete assigned tasks and projects.

## Chapter 4

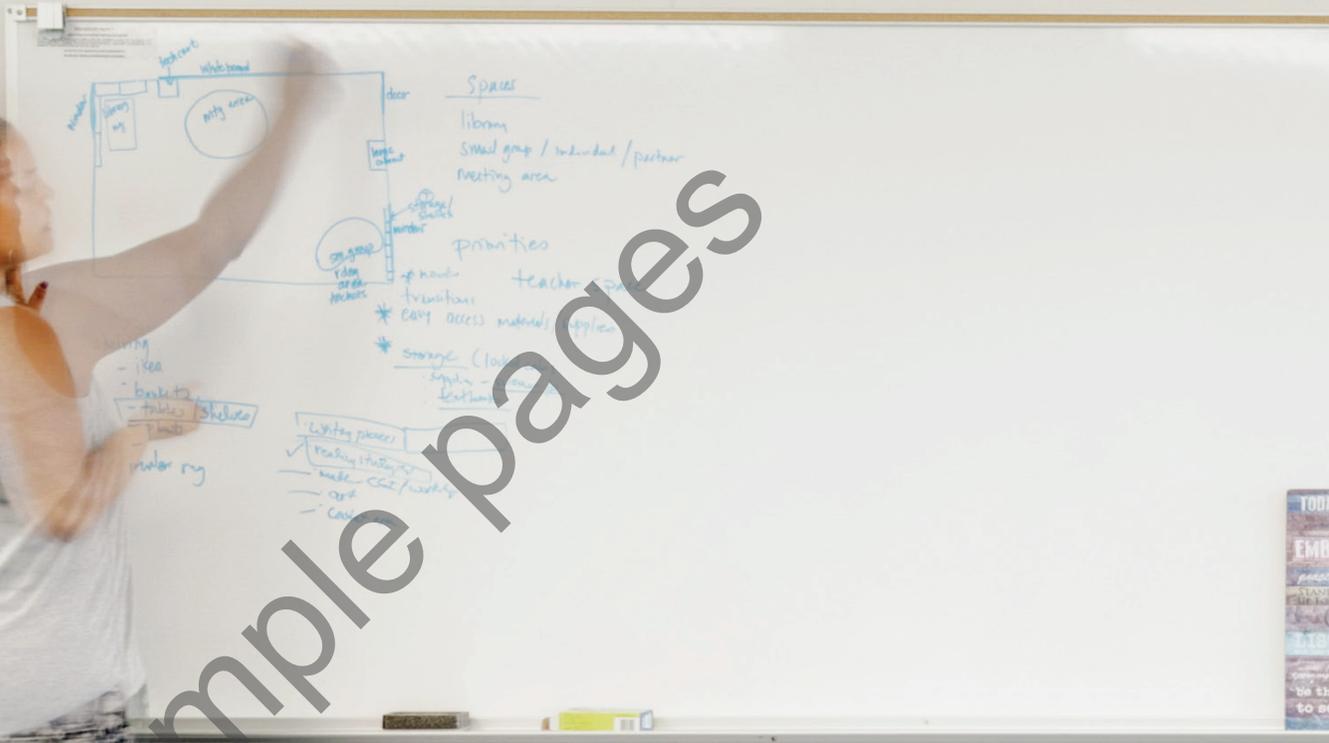
Which elements of design make the most impact on teaching and learning according to research, and which are the most budget friendly? We'll take a closer look at what the research says about the effects of light, color, sound, and natural elements on the classroom environment. Then we'll explore practical ways to incorporate these design elements into your own classroom.

## Chapter 5

Follow one teacher's journey as she strategically designs her classroom space. See before-and-after images and learn about the ups and downs she encounters along the way.

Sample pages





# Creating a Physical Environment That Empowers Learners

**J**amaica, an eighteen-year veteran teacher from Long Beach, California, was ready to start the school year at a new school. After teaching fifth grade the year before, she was looking forward to teaching third grade again. In last year's fifth-grade classroom, she started to think about classroom design with her students. Together, they made changes based on everyone's ideas and feedback. Jamaica wanted to continue her journey with strategic classroom design in her new school setting with her new third-grade students. (You'll see photos from Jamaica's third- and fifth-grade classrooms in this book!)

One August morning, just seven days before the first day of school, we agreed to meet in her new classroom to talk about the physical environment. She was intrigued by the opportunity to strategically design a classroom space from the ground up. Her new school was in the process of being renovated so she and her colleagues were asked to set up shop in temporary portable classrooms for the upcoming school year. We began by walking around the classroom space. Her classroom had no tables, desks, chairs, shelving, or cabinets; they were to be delivered later that week. We stood near her whiteboard and talked about goals she had for her learners this year and ideas she had about teaching in her new classroom space. She wanted to create a place where students felt safe and seen. She envisioned a space large enough for everyone to meet as a community throughout the day, and some small-group work spaces where she could work with

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.*

—MARCEL PROUST,  
*IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME*

just a few learners at a time. One of her personal goals this year was to also make sure students maximized their learning time. All of her ideas seemed like wonderful starting points.

Teachers spend a lot of time inside their classrooms. We often arrive early in the morning to prepare for our students and to catch up on administrative duties; we stay late into the afternoon to help kids with homework, meet with parents and grade-level team members, and to clean and organize our classrooms. According to Jim Hull and Mandy Newport's 2011 article "Time in School: How Does the U.S. Compare?" for the Center for Public Education, conservative estimates say US students spend on average 11,700 hours of their lives in our classrooms during their K–12 school experience (quoted in Cheryan et al. 2014). With that many hours spent with students inside of classroom walls, it makes sense for us to be mindful, even strategic, when we plan out a space.

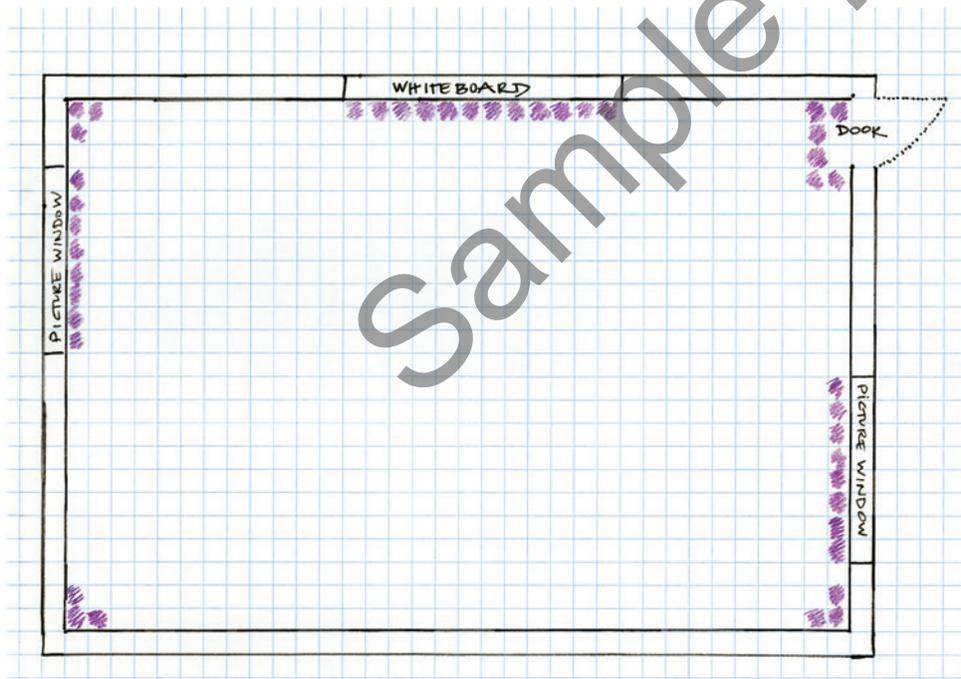
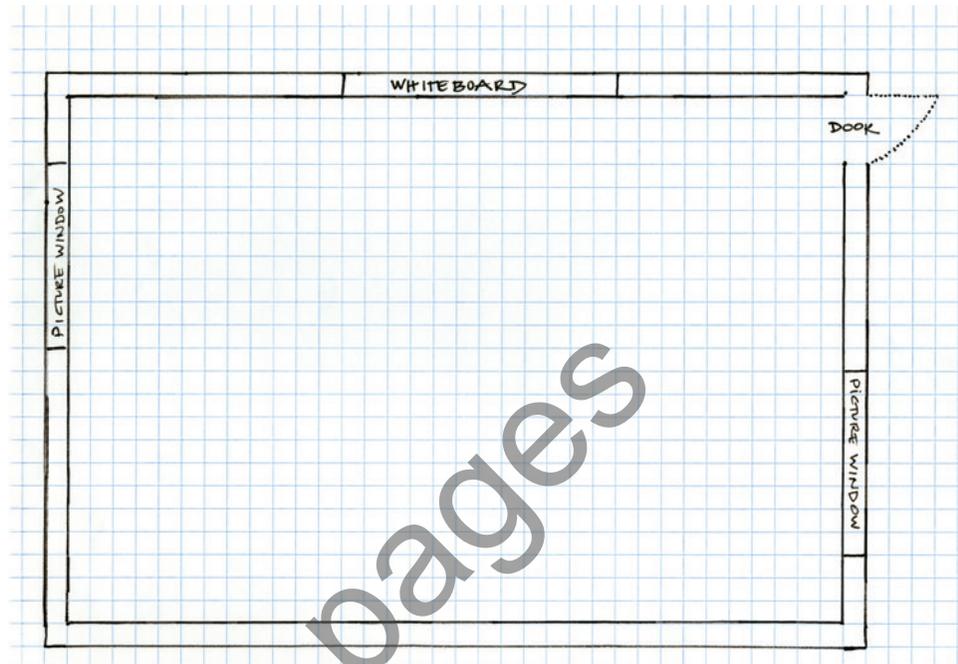
Space matters. It matters because the places we inhabit play a key role in how we think, feel, and react to things. It matters because when we are uncomfortable in a space, it affects our ability to learn. Space can have both a positive and a negative impact on our decision-making process. Each time we design a new layout plan for our classroom, we influence the way our students learn, participate, collaborate, and grow. Keeping our students and their needs at the forefront of strategic classroom design is what makes it strategic. Will our classroom design promote and encourage more positive learning outcomes, or will it deprive and discourage learners from using their voice, taking risks, and owning their learning?

Whether you are a new teacher designing your classroom for the first time or a veteran teacher ready to consider a small change or complete makeover, start by reimagining your physical layout or floor plan. Be sure to include different-sized spaces for students to join together and collaborate.

## Develop a Floor Plan

What do you notice that is unique about your current space? Is there space for all of your learners to gather as a whole group? In small groups away from their seats? Individually and away from others? One way to begin this exciting journey into strategic classroom design is to imagine or reimagine all space configurations by drawing it out on paper or a whiteboard, or creating a digital sketch of the space, imagining it first as a blank slate or canvas where anything is possible. See Figure 1.1 for an example of how Jamaica used graph paper to capture proportion and the dimensions of the layout in her new classroom space.

Begin by sketching out the perimeters, making sure to consider the space around doors, whiteboards, display boards, and windows in your classroom. You'll want to make sure there is ample room for students to enter and exit the classroom. You will also think carefully about corners. You'll want to keep corners clear on your floor plan sketch as they are prime real estate "nooks" for learning. Corners tend to be quieter and feel less busy. Figure 1.2 shows how Jamaica reserved corner space as well as space around the door, boards, and windows.



**Figure 1.1** Consider using graph paper to sketch out the space dimensions of your classroom.

**Figure 1.2** Jamaica shaded in areas on her layout grid to preserve space near the door, whiteboard, corners, and windows.

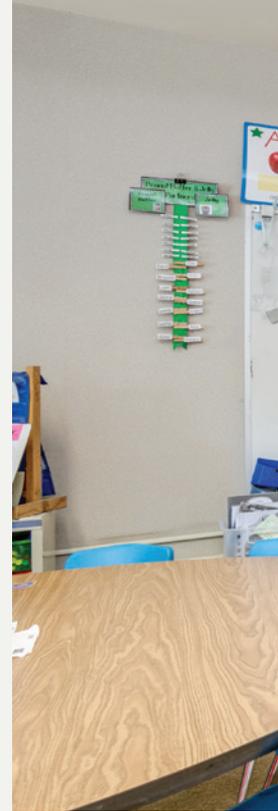
**Figure 1.3** Middle school classroom. Rather than a large area rug, Julia preferred smaller rugs that give students more space when gathering together as a whole class. Small rugs are also easier to wash and care for.



**Figure 1.4** Middle school classroom. Learners gathered into a central space using an amphitheater-style configuration. Tiered seating provided Aimee's students with a few different seating options. Seating options support positive participation goals (students feel more comfortable and able to focus) during whole-group lessons and partnership discussions.



**Figure 1.5** Fifth-grade classroom. Instead of placing the large-group meeting area in a corner of the room, Jamaica experimented with centralizing it and framing the space with an area rug that offered students options to sit on the floor or use chairs, crates, stools, and cushions.





**Figure 1.6** First-grade classroom. Shayla created a larger open space by design so that her primary students could move, collaborate, and meet in different learning configurations using the same space across the day.



**Figure 1.7** Kindergarten classroom. Creating a large-group space in a smaller than normal classroom presents a challenge. Rosanne's decision to use multifunctional furnishings kept the area feeling light, airy, and open.

## Whole-Group Meeting Area

Since it's the largest space consideration, tackle your whole-group space first. Ideally, the meeting area holds everyone comfortably. It allows the whole class to join together for lessons, discussions, and activities before students head off to work independently or in small groups (see Figures 1.3–1.7). There are many benefits to carving out as large of a whole-group space as you can, no matter which grade level you teach. Where else will your community meet to have conversations, share news, tell tales, explore ideas, and push one another's thinking?

Having students come together in close proximity for short periods of time provides invaluable whole-group learning experiences. The whole-group space also gives the teacher additional opportunities to informally assess and differentiate instruction for students. For example, it allows the teacher to coach into participation behaviors in the moment and to redirect, prompt, or positively reinforce as needed. A meeting area also provides students with multiple opportunities to turn and process their thinking with a partner. Proximity helps students become more accountable to each other and gives the teacher additional opportunities to listen to partnership thinking, support individual learning goals, and support language development through coaching, prompting, or demonstrating in the moment. Of course, whole-class teaching and differentiated instruction can



## Furniture Considerations: To Rug or Not to Rug

Some teachers have strong feelings about area rugs in the classroom. For some educators it's a nonissue; rugs are a part of the school culture. In the primary grades, almost every teacher is expected to have one in their classroom. Primary students traditionally gather on or around the area rug for minilessons, class meetings, interactive read-aloud lessons, discussions, and debates. Some upper-elementary and middle school teachers also embrace the idea of a meeting space that includes a rug or some form of carpeting. For other educators, rugs are an eyesore or can present a health concern without proper cleaning and maintenance across the school year. The rug itself is not as important as carving out a space or a way for students to gather together as a community of learners.

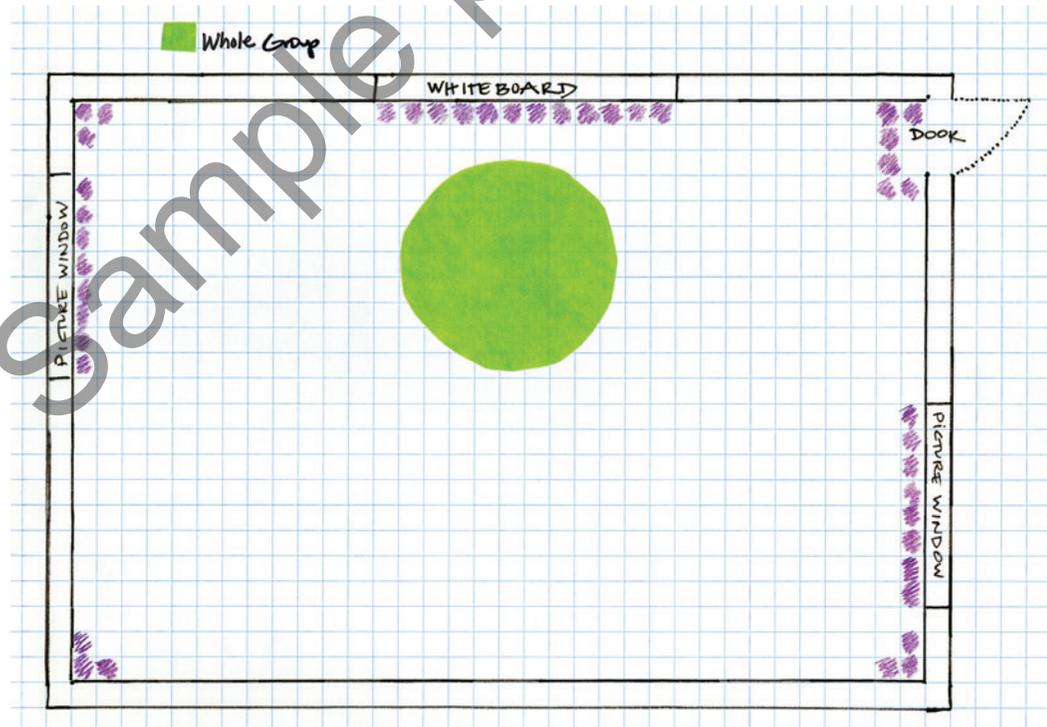
be accomplished without a central meeting area, but it may feel more challenging to get around to everyone quickly since students are spread out or seated behind desks. Gathering briefly as a class in a designated meeting space is similar to a team coming together. Imagine it's the fourth quarter of a big game and your coach calls a time-out. The clock stops. Your team gathers near the bench area for a huddle. The closeness of the huddle contains the energy and urgency of the moment. It allows the coach to make eye contact with players and share words of inspiration. It's at this moment, much like when we gather for a minilesson, that the team becomes one.

Whole-group meeting space design will typically match the grade level you teach. Meeting spaces in primary classrooms will look different from those in upper-elementary, middle, and high school. With older students, you'll want to create a space that has some flexibility and can grow with the students. Give preteen and young adolescent learners options to stand, kneel, or lean during the lesson. You might also create a tiered or amphitheater-style seating arrangement where students are given the choice to choose from a variety of seating options—on the floor, in chairs, atop of stools, and even standing at the back or on the sidelines.

As you start to think about where to place your meeting area, consider the accessibility of the space from anywhere in the room and imagine the traffic patterns that can be built around it. The more open, accessible, and flexible the space, the greater the opportunity for thinking and learning to occur.

Figure 1.8 shows how Jamaica began to envision her classroom space. We cut colored sticky notes to represent the planned spaces in her classroom and tried to size them to scale. Move sticky notes around until you find a configuration that feels like it might work for your students (the true test is when your learners arrive). When considering your whole-group space, ask yourself these questions:

**Figure 1.8** Jamaica cut up a green sticky note to imagine where her meeting/rug areas might go. Green = meeting/rug areas



- Is there enough space for everyone to sit comfortably?
- Where are the multiple access points to enter and exit the space?
- Are there any blind spots or obstructed views of the whiteboard in the central teaching area?
- Is there access within the central teaching area for learners to present or demonstrate learning?

Once you've allocated space on your floor plan for the whole-class meeting area, consider taping it out on your actual floor, or visiting a classroom design website like <https://floorplanner.com> or <https://www.smartdraw.com> to input the dimensions and/or create a virtual classroom layout design. Remember to always take into account the age, size, and number of students as well as any learning or ambulatory needs.



## Furniture Considerations: Seating

Many educators choose to furnish the classroom meeting area with flexible seating options for students and for themselves. Many teachers now use technology as they teach and prefer to sit on stools, in rocking chairs, or in ergonomic chairs that offer back support. Seating options can be noisy. Consider muffling furniture noises so that the dragging and pushing of chairs doesn't disrupt teaching and learning. Some teachers collect used tennis balls or use rounded pieces of felt or self-stick furniture pads on the legs of chairs.