2 Organising the classroom for learning

2.1 The classroom as a learning environment

Organising the classroom environment is important, because research suggests that disorganised classrooms predict poor attainment and poor behaviour (Pointon and Kershner, 2000). Such research reinforces the view that the environment in a classroom should: be tidy; be aesthetically pleasing; stimulate pupils interest; set high standards in the display and presentation of pupils' work; and be created in such a way that it is practical to maintain. In addition, however, reflective teachers should aim to structure the environment so that opportunities are taken to reinforce their overall purposes, both in general terms, and for particular lessons/lesson activities. This applies equally in a primary classroom, as well as in a subject-teaching room at secondary school. Research suggests that the physical aspects of the classroom environment interact with the teacher's intentions for learning, and that careful consideration of the interaction of these elements is necessary in creating an 'inclusive classroom' (Lucas and Thomas, 2000).

In considering the physical environment of the classroom you may find the questions in Checklist 8.1 helpful. These focus on the use of displays to support learning.

Checklist 8.1

Aim: To examine the classroom environment.

1. *Design*. What are the main design features of the room, and how do they affect its aesthetic feel?
2. *Affordances*. What are the possibilities and constraints for active learning in the classroom? Can you move the tables to enable discussion? What are the possibilities and issues for display on walls, on windows, on flat surfaces, off the ceiling?
3. *Purposes*. Do displays stimulate and inform? Do they provide opportunities for pupils to interact with them, for example, by posing questions? Do displays only show finished products or do they also reveal processes and value hard work, for example, displaying drafts and then finished products. Do they provide a stimulus for discussion (such as thinking walls, or a periodic table in a chemistry lesson), sharing problems, or giving mutual support and advice? Do they provide a stimulus for structuring enquiry, from devising questions to testing ideas?

4. *Quality*. Do classroom displays show that the pupils' work is valued? Does it provide a model which pupils may apply to their own work? Is there a 'working wall' which enables ongoing contributions by pupils?
5. *Practicality*. Is the classroom environment as practical as it can be to maintain?

Other research suggests that environmental factors, such as classroom temperature, acoustics, and lighting may affect pupils' ability to engage in learning (Woolner et al., 2007; Winterbottom and Wilkins, 2007). There is a limit to what individual teachers can do to control such factors, but maintaining good ventilation, preventing 'over-lighting' of pupils' workstations, and ensuring pupils sit where they cannot see a 'glare spot' on the interactive whiteboard are all important.

2.2 Use of resources

A good supply of appropriate resources is essential, given the importance of direct experience and practical activities to pupils' learning. Such resources may differ between primary and secondary. For example, at primary level, you will be more likely to find resources which provide direct and active learning experiences. However, at all levels, resources can:

- motivate, inspire and focus pupils' attention;
- provide a basis for discussion, or be designed to enable pupils to learn independently;
- explain, instruct, or demonstrate procedures and ideas;
- enable pupils to access information;
- enable pupils to learn in manageable steps;
- help pupils to recall, consolidate and extend their learning;
- support assessment of pupils' understanding, perhaps by providing a structure for recording responses.

In some ways, organising resources is a straightforward matter, but it also requires careful thought and attention to detail. For instance, it is all too easy to discover that the paint has dried out in a Year 1 classroom, or that insufficient chemicals have been ordered for the Year 9 chemistry syllabus. Likewise, even with centrally managed resources, laptops may have run out of charge, the printer may have run out of ink, or the laptops may update themselves for five minutes before they can be used. It may take several days for new software to be installed on the computers by the ICT technicians. It is also common in schools that shared resources are not put back where they are usually stored; a sense of collective responsibility for the care and use of such centralised resources is therefore essential.

When considering employing resources for pupils' learning, four possible criteria might be considered:

- *Appropriateness*. What resources are needed to support the learning processes which are expected to take place?
- *Availability*. What resources are available? What is in the classroom, the school, the community, businesses, libraries, museums? Are there cost, time or transport factors to be considered?
- *Storage*. How are classroom resources stored? Which should be under teacher control? Which should be openly available to the pupils? Which are stored by the technician? Are they clearly labelled and safely stored?
- *Maintenance*. What maintenance is required? Is there a system for seeing that this is done? In the case of ICT and specialist equipment, where is the expertise and technical support located and how can this be accessed?

2.3 Use of space

The way a teaching space is organised has considerable impact on the teaching strategies that can be deployed, the attitude of the learners and thus the quality of learning. Space in a classroom is always limited; yet what space there is must be utilised in such a way that it allows a teacher to change organisational strategies, for instance between whole-class teaching, group work, or pair work, with associated implications for seating. The use of interactive whiteboards and personal laptop computers in classrooms also creates particular demands on classroom space. Such technologies enable exciting new forms of whole-class and individualised learning but should be deployed in relation to educational purposes rather than just because of their availability.

Because primary teachers tend to occupy the same classroom for all of their teaching, it is often possible to use space flexibly, and to move tables and desks as appropriate for the learning activity. However, notwithstanding the constraints of e.g. fixed science-benches, secondary teachers can also benefit by examining the requirements of the learning activity, and adapting the classroom space in response.

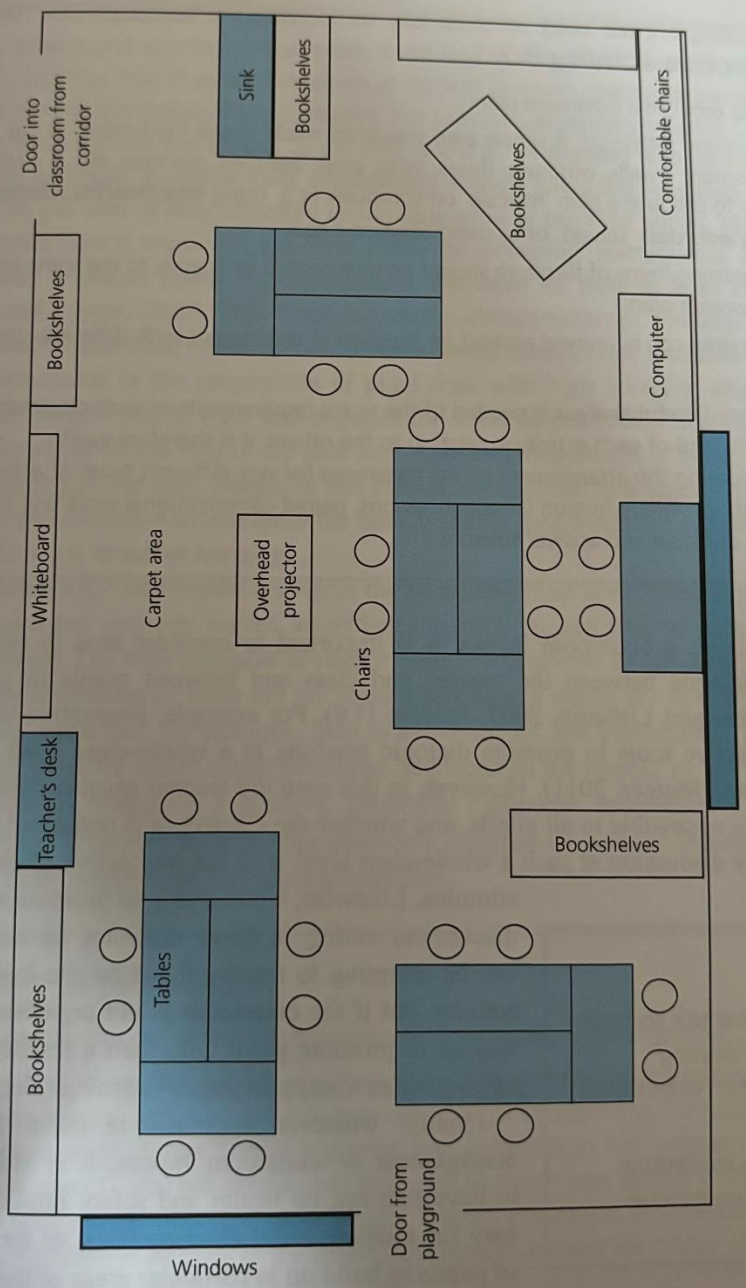

Figure 8.2 Plan of a Key Stage 2 classroom

When thinking about the most effective use of classroom space, consider developing a classroom plan, either on card, by using classroom design software (e.g. http://teacher.scholastic.com/tools/class_setup/) or using the drawing toolbar on a word processor (see Figure 8.2 for a primary example and consider Reflective activity 8.2). Using such a plan, it is possible to explore the affordances and constraints of each teaching space when organising for teaching and learning.

When planning a classroom layout, it is important to consider how to promote and manage dialogue between the teacher and class and between pupils in groups and pairs (Mercer and Littleton, 2007, Reading 11.6). For example, interactive whiteboards can be effective tools to promote dialogic teaching at a whole-class level (Warwick, Hennessy and Mercer, 2011). However, in this case the teacher must consider whether the screen is accessible to all pupils, and whether the classroom is organised to promote high-quality discussion at such a whole-class level with the interactive whiteboard as a stimulus. Likewise, when trying to promote small group discussion, sitting in rows may not be conducive. It can be tempting to merely focus on the logistics of an activity, but if the classroom is not organised in such a way as to promote pupil talk, then a teacher may miss opportunities to support pupils' learning (Higgins, 2003).

Finally, whatever approach is taken to resource management or classroom layout, it is still important to have one eye on health and safety implications; it is easy for aisles to be blocked by bags, or for bottlenecks of pupils to build up in particular areas of the classroom.

Expert question

Dialogue: does teacher–learner talk scaffold understanding to build on existing knowledge and to strengthen dispositions to learn?

This question contributes to a conceptual framework underpinning professional expertise (see Chapter 16).

2.4 Use of time

Notwithstanding all the other dimensions of teaching, research has shown that the amount of time during which pupils are fully engaged in targeted instructional tasks is closely related to outcomes (Berliner, 1991, Reading 8.4; Heuston and Miller, 2011). This is affected by the length of the school year, day and timetabling, as well as by the effectiveness of classroom routines and organisation.

However well-organised a classroom is, and however good one's organisation of resources, when pupils start to use that space, it can lead to a significant amount of 'evaporated time', and may require some re-analysis of the way in which space and resources, and pupils' use thereof, are designed and managed. For example, in primary schools, Campbell and Neill (1992) showed that almost 10 per cent is lost as 'evaporated time' in classroom-management activities. A similar study in secondary schools found that secondary teachers only spent 46 per cent of their allocated lesson time actually teaching pupils. Minimising this evaporated time is important, but even within the remaining 'instructional' time, it is still important to ensure pupils are engaged and motivated for them to learn effectively (Goswami and Bryant, 2010). This is not necessarily always achieved. Findings from the primary-based Oracle study (Galton et al., 1999) showed considerable variations between different classrooms in the proportions of pupil time with high levels of engagement. Overall, Key Stage 1 pupils were task-engaged for about 60 per cent of classroom time, distracted for about 20 per cent of the time and organising themselves or being organised for the remaining 20 per cent. Hence, in this section, we consider two aspects: pupils' use of the space and resources to maximise the time available for curriculum activity, and the time actually spent in active learning.

Time available for curriculum activity is the remaining time in each teaching/learning session, once it has properly started, excluding interruptions and time to pack up at the end of the lesson. The time available is clearly related to a number of organisational strategies. The most obvious of these are the routine procedures which are developed within the classroom space that, for example, help to avoid queues and bottlenecks. These help to manage the pressure which might otherwise be placed on the teacher by the pupils and they contribute to producing a positive, structured classroom environment. Reflective activity 8.3 may be helpful in reviewing classroom organisation and procedures, and thus increase the time available for curriculum activities.

distributing resources before pupils enter the room). Can you improve your own routines (for example, preventing bottlenecks by asking pupils to unpack before putting their bags away, or by distributing resources around the room). Are you planning far enough ahead or practising crisis management (for example, do you often find yourself hunting for resources in the cupboards, or running to the prep room or office for resources you've forgotten?). Can you actively involve pupils, giving them routine responsibility for specific aspects of resource organisation (for example, giving automatic responsibility to particular pupils to give out books or materials at the start of the lesson)?

Purpose of procedure	Procedure	Evaluation of procedure	Possible improvement
Entering the classroom			
Leaving the classroom			
Completing the register			
Collecting in homework			
Issuing homework			
Distributing learning resources			
Collecting learning resources			
Going to the toilet			
Tidying up			

Extension: Teachers and Teaching Assistants build up a useful repertoire of strategies for these organisational matters. A good extension would be to share and exchange ideas with a 'critical friend'.

Encouraging pupils to take on more responsibility for organising themselves, their classroom and their resources is important, as it can enhance their learning time, reduce their reliance on the teacher, and give the teacher more time to focus on pupils' learning. Indeed, the aim is for the classroom to run itself. For this to happen effectively, it is important to ensure that the locations of all resources are labelled, or that resources are visible and obvious, so that pupils can fetch them with ease where it is safe to so. This is easier to do in primary school, as pupils tend to spend all their time in one room. However, over time, and with established departmental practices, it is relatively straightforward to encourage in secondary classrooms as well. Alternatively, a teacher may adopt different strategies to try to maximise time available for learning. These could include asking pupils to hand out resources to the rest of the class, or individuals or groups moving between workstations, with resources remaining fixed to such locations.

Time spent in active learning is th