

# **SO MUCH STUFF, SO LITTLE SPACE**

**Creating and Managing the  
Learner-Centered Classroom**

Susan Nations and Suzi Boyett



Maupin House

***So Much Stuff, So Little Space***  
*Creating and Managing the Learner-Centered Classroom*

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# Starting Out Right

Some wise person once said, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” We have found this statement to be especially true as a school year gets underway.

Suppose it’s the beginning of the school year. You wake up from your relatively relaxed summer and return to school with great anticipation for the year ahead. But even before your students set foot in the classroom, your optimism can quickly disappear under a blanket of unorganized materials. Does the following scenario sound familiar?

**Day One:** You return to school, eager to get into your classroom to start putting everything in order, but the principal holds an all day meeting. During the meeting, you doodle ideas for your schedule and your classroom design on the day’s agenda. After the meeting, you stay at school late digging out things you’ll need for Day Two.

**Day Two:** You head off to school, hopes high; today you expect to get most of your classroom set up. You spend the entire morning getting tables and desks arranged. Soon, you feel hunger pangs and seize the opportunity to go to a long lunch and visit with your colleagues. After lunch, you walk in, see your room, and are overwhelmed by all that remains undone. Once again, you stay late, making a list for Day Three.

**Day Three:** In your classroom, you rush around shoving piles of materials and paper into cabinets to prepare for today’s Parent Open House. You throw together a few bulletin boards

to make the room presentable. You quickly make name tags and a sign for the door welcoming new students. You put on a smile and greet parents and students for an hour. When open house ends, you panic about the next day's lesson plan.

Perhaps you have felt like this at the beginning of a year. It is hard not to. The good news is that your first few days don't have to be this way. The rest of this chapter is filled with ideas to get your school year off to a successful start.

In August or September of each year, your classroom is like an artist's empty canvas. It has endless possibilities, and you can design it to fit your needs. However, you must also take into consideration the things your students will need to be successful. In his book, *The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher*, classroom management expert Harry K. Wong notes that kids want to know seven things when they come to school on the first day. Table 1 lists those seven things and suggests ways you can help answer their questions.

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**If the student wants to know...**

**Then the teacher should...**

Am I in the right room?

Post all names on the classroom door at the students' eye level. Stand at the door to greet students as they arrive.

Where am I supposed to sit?

Label desks or tables with student names. Stick name tags to the desk with clear contact paper.

What are the rules in this classroom?

Post a few simple rules in a prominent place. Plan to introduce and review these several times during the first week.

What will I be doing this year?

Clearly post a daily schedule in your classroom. Introduce students to some of the thematic units you will be teaching this year. Let older students have a textbook-browsing time during the first week of school.

If the student wants to know...	Then the teacher should...
How will I be graded? _____	All students should know and understand what constitutes quality work in your class. For older students, post the grading scale along with sample work.
Who is this teacher as a person? _____	Display family photos or special mementos on your desk. Create a book or poster to introduce yourself to your students.
Will the teacher treat me as a human being? _____	Stand at the door to greet students as they arrive. Use their names throughout the day. Kneel to their eye level when talking to them.

**TABLE 1**

While these seven questions are on students’ minds the first day of school, they must be in our minds long before students ever arrive. The classroom must become a place where both you and your students can accomplish work in a positive and productive manner. You can achieve this by setting up clearly defined spaces, organizing teaching and learning resources, and creating a user-friendly environment prior to the first day of school. Use the form on page 13 titled “The Seven Things Every Student Wants to Know on the First Day of School” to help you plan for success at the beginning of the school year.

## Setting Up Clearly Defined Spaces

Visit any school during the weeks prior to student arrival and you are likely to see people dragging furniture from one side of a room to another (and sometimes back again!). The placement of classroom furniture defines learning spaces for students and is one of the most critical decisions we make prior to the students’ arrival. Save your energy. Before you are ready to move furniture, consider the floor plan of your classroom.

Some classroom layouts present a greater challenge than others.

Some lack ample shelves and storage. Others have large physical obstacles to overcome, such as a furnace, a column, or some other permanent fixture. Still others have an odd shape or size. Think about your own classroom. What design challenges will you need to conquer as you set up your classroom for successful learning?

If you are in a classroom that has large obstacles or is an odd shape or size, there is probably another room in the building that is quite similar to yours. Walk the halls of your school site. Many times the answers to your challenges are right next door or down the hall. Find out what your colleagues are doing to handle their space issues and select a few of their ideas to try as you set up your own room.

If you find that a lack of shelves and/or storage space is an issue, Chapter Four provides suggestions for ways to organize. A tip: You may want to check with your local grocery store and/or food mart. The wire racks and shelves that display featured products are often discarded when the product is gone. Retailers are usually willing to donate these items to schools or teachers.

After making plans for the shape and size of your classroom, it is time to consider the furniture arrangement. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What large group space(s) will I need?
- What small group space(s) will I need?
- How will I arrange for easy movement through the room?
- Is there a place for students to line up when exiting the classroom?
- Does each student have storage space?
- How will I use my walls and bulletin boards?
- Do all students have visual access to the board or overhead?
- Are there spaces for group as well as independent learning?

Have you ever moved all of the furniture in your classroom only to find you didn't like it? We have. Save your back! Before moving a single piece of furniture, arrange a plan on paper using the following activity:



3. Arrange your furniture on the map. Think about proximity issues during this step. For example, an art center will need to be near the sink, and the classroom library may need to be large enough for class meetings.
  4. After you are satisfied with the design of your classroom, try moving the furniture to make sure it fits.
- 

## Organizing Teaching and Learning Resources

Once you are satisfied with your furniture placement, it's time to think about how you will organize teacher and student materials. In order to do this, you must have a comprehensive plan in mind. On page 15 you will find a chart titled, "The First 20 Days of School — Setting Up for Success." Use this chart as a springboard for determining what materials you will need available for the beginning of school.

Keep resources you will need for the first six weeks easily accessible. Everything else needs to be out of sight (but never out of mind). There's no need to have access to winter themes or decorations in August and there is nothing more frustrating than searching and never finding that one piece of paper that will make your lesson a smashing success!

What materials will you need for the first six weeks? Pull those items out of your summer storage and lay them out. Organize the materials by theme, subject, or sequence of use. Use the files, closets, and shelves in your classroom to store these things for easy access. (For more about filing and storage, see Chapter Five.)

Keep instructional materials separated by subject to be used when needed. For example, designate a few shelves for math manipulatives, textbooks, and other math-related items. This will facilitate a positive and effective learning environment that makes materials available when and where they are needed.