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LANDSCAPING CHOICES: A LOOK AT CLASSROOM ECOLOGY

Martha J. Briggs

I'm anxious to see how the summer workshop will influence my methods in here...Now then, I must consider how I'll set up class. I think I'll say TODAY to plan to move the desks into groups of 3 or 4 first thing tomorrow. And to sit where desired and plan to make the first thing done each day moving desks that way.

I wrote that journal entry the first day of class while my Expository Writing students wrote their own—at the very beginning of the hour, before I took roll, before I handed out a single booklet or folder. What better way to plant the notion that students were in a writing class than by having them write first thing? And what better way to introduce the concept of exploratory writing than to make their first writing task one for their eyes only? Their focus was a question: "What goals and expectations do you have as a writer this semester?" I wrote about goals and expectations myself, mapping out a strategy for tampering with my classroom.

So began my modest experiment in classroom ecology—an experiment to see how the physical environment in a high school classroom influences students' confidence as writers and a teacher's confidence as a writing coach. It was part of an action research course at a local university; we conducted our research in the fall and reflected on it in the winter. In this small, supportive community of teacher-researchers, we encouraged each other's efforts, worked through our frustrations, and celebrated our breakthroughs.

My experiment not only helped me see the impact of classroom environment on learning and teaching but also made me realize the many ways a student-centered curriculum nurtures students' accountability for their learning. As writing theorist Marilyn Cooper explains, an "ecological

model" for writing suggests "a web, in which anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole" (370). I learned to view the writing communication I carry on with my students about their work as a delicate but firm ecosystem.

I had chosen to write while my students did for several reasons. In *Teaching With Writing*, Toby Fulwiler says that writing while students do reflects a teacher's conviction that such writing is important (30). I had also found that writing with my students added to the thoughtful atmosphere I wanted for the brief gathering of ideas such writing time provides. Besides, I know I need those five or ten minutes at the beginning of the hour to gather and reflect.

I did plenty of reflecting that semester. Attendance at a summer writing workshop as well as many conversations with elementary teachers about the writing process had helped me understand how important a predictable and nurturing classroom environment is for young writers. It was easy to see how an elementary classroom setting influences work and learning—I have my own vivid memories of colorful bulletin boards, flourishing plants on the window sills, messy cubbies for shoes, lunches and jackets, noisy and productive schooldays—but I'd always assumed such lively surroundings were for young learners.

In my secondary teaching I'd limited my own efforts at shaping a writing environment to modeling the kind of writing behavior my students could emulate. After all, I reasoned, my expository writers are college-bound; they should have outgrown the elementary need for sensory stimulation. They're supposed to be thinking now, I told myself; what difference does it make how the room looks? In fact, I even allowed myself to scoff occasionally at bulletin boards that went beyond the utilitarian posting of schedules and announcements. My approach to classroom decorating was decidedly contemporary and uncluttered.

I also took this approach toward room decor out of necessity. For the past five years I've been a traveling teacher—a nomad, a squatter. I occupy one classroom for one hour, then high-tail it to another for the next. As a result, I've developed certain attitudes about classroom use. Always feeling like an intruder, I hesitate to use the bulletin boards or even the blackboard, especially if I want to leave something up for several days. I rarely remember to keep up the supply of absence slips, hall passes, and even notebook

paper—housekeeping tasks I conscientiously took care of when I had a room of my own in the past. Though most of my host teachers have encouraged me to use the room as I wished, I've always tried to be a good camper, leaving the space I temporarily inhabited as nice as, or nicer than, I found it.

This semester, though, I set about to do what I could in my borrowed space to create a physical environment in which students could form a "community of writers"—a goal Nancie Atwell writes about in *In the Middle*. I wanted to explore some of the concrete ways a high school classroom setting can nurture "ownership," one of three factors Atwell says is critical to a writer's confidence. I already provided the other two: "time," since I used her model of mini-lesson, writing/conference time, wrap-up/sharing as the pattern for the majority of my own 55-minute sessions; and "response," since I used peer commentary and critiques on each piece my students produced, as well as evaluation guides to shape my own comments, critiques, and, ultimately, grades.

The first change I made was to have students cluster their desks. This was a radical move, as I discovered when I conducted a casual survey of the classrooms in my building. Excluding the rooms used as labs for science, computer, art, and vocational classes, desks in 34 of 35 classrooms were arranged in straight rows facing one direction, presumably the focal point for class activity, often the teacher's lecture or presentation that I heard as I passed the room.

I had often used clusters of desks at one time or another during a class hour, as most teachers have; for my experiment this semester, though, the clustered arrangement would be the regular one, not the occasional one. In fact, seats were in straight rows only four days out of ninety in the semester—all test days, including exam day. Even the seating chart reflected the clustered setup. Substitutes read an explanation of this layout in my lesson plans, and none commented on it one way or the other. I interpreted their acceptance as a gauge of the ordinariness of that seating routine, as well as a gauge of my power, even as a temporary resident in the classroom, to shape the atmosphere in a significant way.

I worried briefly that such a setup would be a nightmare of logistics—how many times do kids turn room-arranging into an event? Once convinced that it was to be part of the daily pattern, though, students ceased to make it a special occasion. Instead, they had the desks clustered before the bell

rang at the beginning of the hour and had them back in straight rows by the end of the hour, ready for the resident classroom teacher to take over. Thus my students began to create their classroom environment; together we "owned" that space for an hour. In a very tangible way we made the landscape of our classroom reflect our growing identity as a "community of writers."

Several weeks later I wrote the following journal entry, at the end of a frustrating session:

I talked entirely too much this hour. Often I'm good about waiting the requisite 20 seconds for kids to answer a question. But today I performed. I'm having them write about the room arrangement right now so I guess I'll comment on it too. I think I'm unwilling to allow the "twenty-seconds silence" after I've asked a question because, whenever I do, they fall into little pockets of conversation within their clusters. And rather than attend to the discussion, they create their own oases of talk about—whatever.

I was angry that a class discussion had been interrupted by chattering among small groups of kids, so I asked them to spend the last few minutes of the hour writing about how the room arrangement affected what went on in class.

Their journals revealed unexpected insights. I figured they'd say the clustered arrangement made discussing easier and they did. What surprised me, though, were the remarks about the confidence the clustering gave students:

I'm more comfortable speaking up because I'm surrounded by people, rather than alone in a row.

And I didn't expect the clusters to affect students' attitudes toward writing in class:

It's easier for me to write when I'm not staring at the back of someone's head.

I like writing more because I'm not facing the blackboard.

One student admitted that the arrangement created difficulties:

I know we end up talking among ourselves, but it's not always unrelated. Sometimes, not often enough, it's about the topic.

As I thought about these remarks I realized that one reason that day's discussion was so grim was because I had sat in one desk the entire time. Discussions on other days were more successful because I traveled around the room, stopping near a chatty group long enough to squelch the irrelevant conversation before moving to another location. The asymmetry of the room's desk arrangement allowed me to roam freely, keeping students from growing bored with the scenery.

As the semester continued, I held fewer "whole class discussions," relying instead on Atwell's model of the mini-lesson. Large class discussions became unwieldy, as the clustered arrangement strengthened students' identity with their small group. It also streamlined the conference group setup for our research project.

I began that unit as I have for the last ten semesters, with a confidential journal to use as I made up conference groups. In this journal students identify two kids they'd like to work with and explain why; I guarantee a match with one. Then I make up conference groups on the basis of those choices, balancing when I can and working in any students no one asks for—a difficult task. Since I'm after a commitment to the group, I even have a grade that reflects other group members' performance on the paper.

However, as I read these students' journals, I felt as though I was adding a layer of accountability that they didn't need. They'd been working very well together all semester without a formal commitment, and imposing one at this point seemed superfluous, even a bit heavy-handed.

I extended my students' responsibility for their learning during the research paper project when I had them check a documentation exercise against one of five copies of a key I posted around the classroom. Each student corrected any punctuation or order errors, gave himself a 10/10, and turned in the exercise. I then recorded his perfect score in my gradebook.

The exercise isn't difficult to grade, only tedious. But this way, the correcting work was done by those who needed to do it—the students. After all, what I do when I grade an exercise like that one is prove many times over that I know the form. The students' hands-on correcting reinforced their knowledge of the correct forms as they actively noticed any mistakes they made, rather than passively observed MY recognition of their errors. And since the purpose of the exercise was to give them a chance to write the forms

correctly, recognizing the end product with a perfect score let them learn that form at least as well as punishing them for errors they made in the process of trying to get it right.

The clustered desk arrangement had led naturally to this shift in responsibility. And I continued to make landscaping changes in my classroom. The teacher whose classroom I used had generously granted me the permanent campsite I had requested, a 3' square of table space. There students found extra copies of the booklets for the class, a stack of current magazines, a schedule and class list taped to the table, and the Red Basket.

The Red Basket became the focal point for the daily workings of the class. It housed several important components of our writing workshop, including the Class Log and Extra Files. The first day of class students had received written instructions that outlined the responsibilities of the person who completed a log sheet for the day he was named Class Recorder. Each day students checked the class list to see if their turns in the alphabetical order had come. Recorders attached extra copies of any handouts to their class log sheet and filed it in the Class Log Notebook. Kids who'd been absent checked the log when they returned and took any handouts they needed from the Extra Files. The Class Log and Extra Files reflect my belief that student-centered instruction shifts not only the joy but also the responsibility of learning to the students— precisely where both belong.

Here was an ecosystem at work, one I set up but one students maintained with reasonable success and some needed support from me. The Class Log was critical to the success of our workshop, yet it was very inconsistent. For example, when students forgot to check the class list to see if it was their turn to record a particular day, the recording didn't occur and absent students had no tangible information about what they'd missed.

To deal with this problem, I took to beginning each hour with "Who's recorder today?" to establish responsibility for that task right away. And I instructed returning students to quiz a should-have-been recorder and in a quick conversation find out what they needed to do to catch up.

Along with this supportive role, I discovered that I had to keep the Extra Files well supplied so copies of handouts were available. In taking care of this task, I moved many of my files away from my desk in the English Office and into the classroom, a more appropriate place. I had always run a few

extra copies of handouts in case a student lost an original, carrying them back to my office because I didn't have an easy place to keep them in another teacher's room. The Red Basket gave me that easy, accessible place.

The Red Basket also housed the students' Cumulative Writing Folders. All finished work went in these folders, which stayed in the Red Basket in the classroom. Stapled to the front inside cover was a running record of writing strengths developed and weaknesses to work on. After I returned a set of papers, students recorded my written comments in the appropriate column; they referred to this record as they worked on subsequent writing tasks, and I used it as a quick glance of their progress over a given length of time, such as a marking period. Before the Red Basket, students had kept their finished work themselves, occasionally losing it altogether, usually forgetting to bring it to class, often rummaging through a stack of folders and notebooks to find a particular piece. With the Red Basket, everyone knew exactly where to look for papers we could count on to be there.

These tangible changes in classroom setting— the desk arrangement and the Red Basket— continued to influence my teaching habits as I altered my grading methods. Rather than grade each assignment as it came in, I evaluated students' work over a two-to-four-week period. This practice is neither revolutionary nor life-threatening: Atwell advocates it in In the Middle, and a few secondary teachers in my school system have used it successfully in their writing classes.

To give students some security and to give me a gauge to measure their work, I created a climate-controlled atmosphere for this facet of my experiment in classroom ecology. I assigned two sets of tasks, one involving letters of inquiry, complaint, or praise, the other involving a college or scholarship essay, and announced two firm due dates for final copies, along with suggested target dates for sharing of preliminary work and drafts. Files with copies of guide sheets for each step in the process were available in the Red Basket.

Students came to class each day prepared to tell me briefly at the beginning of the hour how they planned to use class time. I then conducted brief conferences with individual students and made notes on a sheet I patterned after Atwell's "Status of the Class Sheet" (90). It lists the students' names down the left side and runs a week's worth of columns across the top,

revealing at a glance all the students' work during an entire week. They planned, shared, drafted, critiqued, revised, edited, and finished their pieces.

Of course I wrote comments on each piece—at least two on the piece itself, along with wrap-up comments on a cover sheet. That was no less and in some cases more than I would have written if I'd allowed a letter grade to represent my response to the piece. Students recorded these comments on their Running Writing Record. In short, I implemented, with some modifications, the process method Atwell describes so thoroughly in Section II of *In the Middle*, "Writing Workshop."

At the end of the first week, I asked students to write a journal answering this question: "How'd the workshop go?" Many students felt good about their work.

I really enjoy these workshops because there is more time to ask questions and organize your writings.

I thought the workshop went really well. I like working during the hour.

I really enjoy the workshop days to work on an assignment...the workshop days are very useful especially if you have to budget time.

I feel that the workshop went well. I finished three critiques, two rough drafts, two final drafts and two research portfolios.

I felt that the workshop was a good way to compare, critique, finalize, and talk over the letters. The time, I felt, was spent good. I like this concept.

Others were ambivalent, expressing both the satisfaction of flexible time plus what they saw as the drawbacks of responsibility.

The workshop works fine, the only problem is personal motivation.

I kept telling myself I had plenty of time and put things off, not doing much in class.

I had time to organize my layout and get others' opinions and input on my topics [but] I had a hard time concentrating on my own work at times when I felt obligated to help others with theirs. Their inorganization affected me, though I can't blame them for that.

Whether their response was positive or negative, students focused on what they did or didn't do with the time—ask, organize, work, budget, spend, concentrate, put off, motivate. Clearly, they owned what had gone on in class for them that week.

If students were generally satisfied with the workshop time, some were uneasy after I returned their first commented-on-but-not-graded assignment:

It's just hard for me to get a handle on what I'm going to get for my papers when I don't get an actual grade.

I am decidedly opposed to the method of grading over a long time period. This method is somewhat vague to me, while on the other hand the grade for each task is much easier to follow.

I was skeptical about the merits of the grading experiment myself when the two weeks were up. I faced twenty-two writing folders, each with a Running Writing Record, three completed pieces, a one-page self-evaluation, and my own records of workshop status and critiquing. I planned to use all of this data as the basis for the single grade I'd give for this third of the marking period. My grade reports were due in five hours and I had no idea what 30% of each student's grade would be — nor did I have any idea of the task I had ahead of me.

Three hours later I put my pen down, having spent a thoroughly enjoyable time looking over my collected data and assigning grades that reflected both my students' ability to communicate clearly and their growth as writers in a highly charged environment. They'd taken risks in their writing, committed to a timetable, responded carefully to others' work, turned a critical eye to their own writing habits, and ultimately stretched themselves. They told me so in their self-evaluations, confirming my own observations and records.

It took me as long to give twenty-two cumulative grades as it would have taken me to grade twenty-two papers. But when I was finished I had a sense of how my students did over a span of days rather than simply how they did on a single task. And I had a chance to let my method of grading truly reflect the speech I gave at the beginning of the semester about risk-taking, self-knowledge, and progress.

As I thought about how different this semester "felt" in Expository Writing, I realized that the changes I'd made had been informed by more than just my decision to alter the seating arrangement. They'd also been informed by the professional environment in which I've found myself teaching and learning, and by the important reading and talking I've done in the last several months. I've always been lucky to teach in a department where collaborative work is the rule rather than the exception, where teachers plan lessons together, share assignments, and experiment freely with new ideas.

This year the atmosphere has continued to be charged with commitment and imagination. I'm surrounded by people and literature that nurture my experiments with the environment in my classroom. Furthermore, professional development has contributed to the greenhouse effect I feel. That summer writing workshop helped me to appreciate the positive effect of time, ownership, and response, and made me anxious to give my students the same experience.

At the end of the marking period, I asked my students to write about which grading method they preferred. Eleven of twenty-two favored grading over time, and three favored grades on each assignment. The remaining eight expressed various degrees of ambivalence, from "you're the teacher" to a mild preference for one method over the other.

In their course evaluations at the end of the semester, I asked students to select four factors that influenced the effectiveness of the class—two positively, two negatively. They could select whatever they wanted; I provided no lists or other prompts. Some facet of the workshop system was mentioned as a positive influence in twenty-nine of a possible forty-four responses, and as a negative influence in nineteen of a possible forty-four responses. Grading over time was mentioned as both a positive and a negative factor, while the desk arrangement and the Red Basket were mentioned only as positive factors.

Conducting an action-research project forced me to reflect on the implications of my findings. Two factors were critical to this reflection: first, the readings and discussions helped me place my own experiment in a larger context of action-research. Second, the interest and support of my teaching peers encouraged me to go beyond what I've always believed was good teaching. Just as my students did, I had to take risks, commit to a timetable, respond carefully to others' work, turn a critical eye to my own writing habits,

and, ultimately, stretch myself. Practicing what I preach buttressed my already strong conviction that what I preach does work.

As I experimented last semester with various ways to create my own space in a borrowed room, I began to understand the subtle impact of simple adjustments in what I know is a learner-centered program: a shift of desks, a relocation of extra handouts, a student-generated record of class events, a self-graded exercise, a system of communicating about writing progress without using grades. That first change—the desk arrangement—was instrumental in encouraging my students and me to stake a claim on the territory we inhabit together for an hour each day. Because we took charge in so clear and tangible a way as moving desks from here to there, I'm convinced that my days of allowing my students and myself to occupy space without owning it are over.

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