



Where Should We Sit? Classroom Seating Arrangements and Student Learning



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academic developer

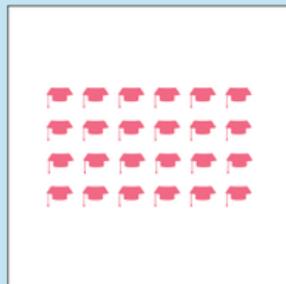
On Campus Teaching

As we prepare for the next academic year, many of us are no doubt anticipating a (partial at least) return to campus-based teaching.

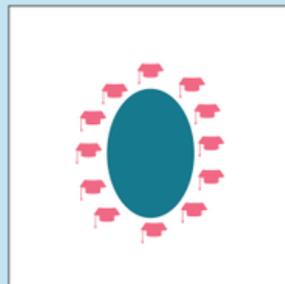
OSDU's Katy Savage and I were in a handful of teaching rooms in the Graham Hills Building recently and began discussing the impact of classroom seating arrangements on teaching and learning. We reached the conclusion that what might seem trivial can have a potentially significant impact on a whole raft of considerations - from the teacher's approach to teaching and learning to the kinds of learning activities that might work (or not work) in certain learning spaces, student and peer learning, and various issues related to accessibility and inclusivity.

While there are always, of course, physical limitations to the ways in which certain on-campus teaching spaces can be configured, today's micro CPD input includes a helpful infographic from the Yale Poorvu Centre alongside a helpful annotation of each example to promote discussion and reflection on this important topic.

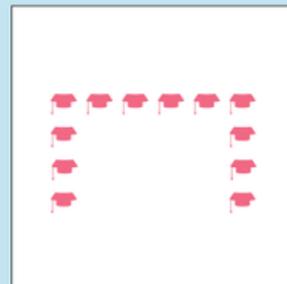
Classroom Seating Arrangements



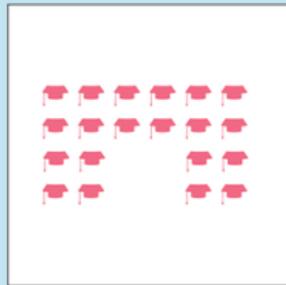
Traditional



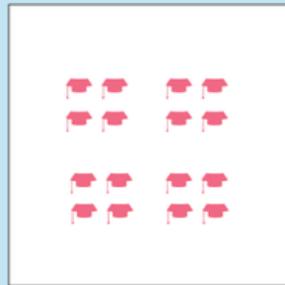
Roundtable



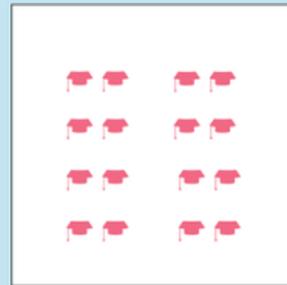
Horseshoe
or Semicircle



Double
Horseshoe



Group Pods



Pair Pods

Yale *Poorvu Center*

*the following is adapted

from: <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/ClassroomSeatingArrangements>

Traditional

The traditional lecture setup typically consists of rows of fixed seating that shares many features of the now centuries-old first ecclesiastical colleges. Students face the instructor with their backs to one another. This classroom seating arrangement is

still very common in colleges and universities, minimizing student-student communication and largely supporting a didactic “sage on the stage” learning environment. The highest communication interactions between teachers and students typically occurs with students in the first row or along the middle of the classroom. Students in back rows are more likely to be less engaged. However, students can still work in groups, even when seats are arranged in fixed rows simply by being encouraged to 'speak to the people around you'.

Roundtable

Many seminar-course room arrangements may consist of an instructor and students sitting around a single large table. This seating arrangement can also be formed using individual desks. Students and instructors all face one another in this setup, which can support whole-class as well as partner dialogue.

Horseshoe or Semicircle

The horseshoe or semi-circle offers a modified roundtable setup, where all participants face each other while the instructor can move about the room. The horseshoe encourages discussion between students and with the instructor, although this setup tends to encourage more engagement between the instructor and students directly opposite, with slightly lesser amounts for students immediately adjacent to the instructor. A horseshoe setup can be particularly effective when the instructor wishes to project and discuss course-related material in the front of the class.

Double Horseshoe

This seating arrangement involves an inner and outer horseshoe, and similar to the conventional horseshoe, invites greater discussion than the traditional format. It is more limited by the backs of students within the inner circle facing students in the outer circle. However, students may also more easily interact with those nearest to them or turn around and face students behind them for group work.

Pods (Groups, Pairs)

The pod or pair arrangement can be designed with rectangular, circular or trapezoidal tables, or individual desks. With regards to stations, instructors can place several tables together to form student groups (e.g. 3 - 4 students), or pairs. This arrangement can be especially advantageous when students will work in groups or pairs with their classmates for a large portion of class time. More generally, this arrangement communicates a learning community where students are expected to work with one another.

Questions for Reflection

Do you move the seats to suit your teaching? Do you ever modify your teaching plan based on the learning space you have been allocated? Are there activities that you feel 'will not work' in a particular class or style of classroom on campus? Have you considered the impact of seating arrangements on hybrid student learning?

Let us know in the comments!

Further Reading

[Harvey E. & Kenyon M. \(2013\) Classroom Seating Considerations for 21st Century Students and Faculty. Journal of Learning Spaces 2 \(1\).](#)