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ORGANIZING THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

"Sharing responsibilities in the classroom community helps teachers and students work cooperatively and collaboratively to ensure success."

Vicki Gibson and Jan Hasbrouck, 2008

There are many ways to organize classroom environments and create an environmental structure that supports high-quality teaching and learning.

Begin by following these steps:

- **Determine available resources** including amount of floor space and furniture in the room, access to health facilities, and needs for technology and storage areas.
- **Consider how many students** will participate in activities in your classroom.
- **Ensure safe access** around and between furniture placements.
- **Plan adjustments** for students with special needs.

IN THIS CHAPTER

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Plan ways to arrange furniture and designate work areas to permit:

- **Clear visibility** for monitoring students at all times,
- **Safe access** to all entry areas and walkways,
- **Easy access** to facilities for personal hygiene and handwashing,
- **Sufficient space** for any physical activity, either whole-group or small-group, and
- **Storage space** for instructional materials either in active use or for later use.

Throughout the year, you will need space for the following work areas in your classroom:

Meeting Place or Student Desks

Identify a large area that will be used for whole-group activities. Students will report to this area during opening or closing activities and during transitions.

Teaching Table

A teaching table is an area where you will work with small groups of students and provide explicit instruction differentiated to their capabilities and needs. Usually this space includes a table, four to six chairs, and shelving to store materials.

Worktable

A worktable is an area designated for small-group collaborative practice using previously taught content and skills. If available, a teaching assistant, special education provider, or English Learner specialist can work with a small group of students to provide extended guided practice. If another adult is not available, students participate in activities that require less direct adult supervision.

Learning Stations

Learning stations are areas in the classroom used to extend learning through collaborative activities where students apply previously learned skills aligned to specific learning targets or standards. Students choose stations and practice responsible decision-making. The number of learning stations included in a classroom depends on how many students will participate and the availability of space and materials.

Providing Instruction and Practice at the Teaching Table

Teachers provide explicit instruction and feedback for students in small groups at a teaching table. Based on their capabilities and the intended outcomes, students are assigned to small groups. They are grouped homogeneously so that teachers can provide learning experiences and feedback specific to needs. Group memberships are reassigned as needed to ensure that instruction is meaningful and productive.

The area designated as a teaching table may or may not include a table and chairs. New content and skills are introduced and modeled in whole group, but taught explicitly at a teaching table, where teachers closely monitor students' responses to instruction, respond to questions and comments, and provide constructive feedback.

At the teaching table, teachers monitor students' responses closely and provide feedback to address students' needs.

Worktable activities may include:

- Instructional support provided by a specialist or paraprofessional,
- Guided practice activities tailored to students' needs,
- Reinforcement activities for recently taught content and/or skills, and
- Creative enrichment activities related to recently taught content and/or skills.

Worktable groups include all members of the same teacher-led instructional group. Therefore:

- Members' skills and needs are similar.
- Members share an instructional history (for greater support).
- Membership is typically larger than attendance at a learning station.
- Membership is chosen by the teacher, not the students.
- Members may work together as one group or be sub-assigned to work in pairs.

Selecting Activities for the Worktable

The worktable is an area used for small-group extended practice. It may or may not include a table and chairs. Activities at the worktable may or may not be directly supervised by an adult, depending on availability.

In full-day programs that include two adults in the room, the teacher provides explicit English Language Arts/ELA instruction and feedback at the teaching table while the adult assistant provides extended practice using previously taught ELA content and skills at the worktable. In the afternoon, the teaching and worktables are used in the same way, but the content and skills are focused on mathematics and science.

In half-day programs, the worktable may be used differently. An adult assistant might be teaching mathematics or science at the worktable while the teacher provides ELA instruction at the teaching table.

If there is only one adult in the room, the worktable may be used differently. Students work on activities practicing skills taught previously at the teaching table. Note: At the worktable, students remain in the same group as their teacher-led instruction group and work on reinforcement activities specified to their group's needs, receiving support from one another.

Students collaborate at the worktable for extended guided practice using previously taught skills.
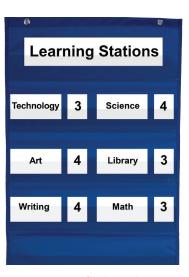
Using Learning Stations for Collaborative Practice

Learning stations are used for extending students' skill development—socially, emotionally, and academically. The collaborative activities provide opportunities to increase proficiency in oral language and deepen vocabulary word knowledge.

Learning stations may reflect topics or specific skills related to classroom instruction. The purpose for using academic learning stations is to extend students' learning, using previously taught content and skills. Collaborative learning and project-based activities engage students in experiences that develop social and emotional skills.

Learning Stations			
Technology	3	Science	4
Art	4	Library	3
Writing	4	Math	3

Teachers of older students may elect to keep the names of learning stations simple when designing collaborative practice activities.

Use these steps to create learning stations:

1. **Determine the instructional purpose** for each learning station. For example, a Detective Station may be included to encourage social and emotional development through role-play, as well as problem-solving. Language and literacy stations encourage students to apply previously taught reading and writing skills. Mathematics stations, such as a Counting or Bank Station, can use manipulatives to reinforce concepts and demonstrate real-world application.

2. **Gather items to be included in each learning station.** Choose fewer items for each station in the beginning to support efficient cleanup and to maintain order. Add more options as students demonstrate the maturity to manage more materials and choices.

3. **Determine ways to teach, model, and practice** routines for using each station so that expectations are clearly communicated and students know how to participate and clean up.

4. **Designate an area in the classroom for each learning station.** Post a sign that names the station and includes a numeral that indicates how many students may participate at one time.

Materials for individual learning stations are stored in labeled, clear plastic bins. Ideally, teachers work together and share resources.

Organizing Materials and Varying Activity Choices

Once you collect materials for learning stations, store them in plastic tubs with lids. Include a card that lists the items in the container. When learning stations are shared with other teachers, the list helps keep things organized and stored for later use. Sharing your station materials will decrease the workload for creating learning stations and allow teachers to change stations efficiently with less effort.

Some learning stations will not change substantially throughout the year. For example, Media Stations or Reading Stations may require that teachers change content or materials, but the basic setup will remain the same. Stations that might remain in the classroom all year include a Reading Station, Art or Creative Stations, Science Discovery Stations, and Mathematics Application Stations.

Students exercise choice when selecting learning stations for collaborative practice.

Learning stations do not have to be complicated. Balance choice options for stations based on the purpose for using each learning station. Ensure that younger students engage in learning activities that are not always focused on academics. Include some stations that encourage imaginary participation such as fine arts and dramatic play. Include simple board games where students choose a game or an activity and share materials, cooperating with others and taking turns.

Changing learning stations may occur every two weeks, but there is no set schedule. Academic focus and skills can be coordinated with the current curriculum content and skills taught in the classroom. Learning station materials and activities should include familiar content and require skills that have been previously taught in small groups with adults, so that students will participate successfully without immediate adult guidance.

FURTHER READING

Gibson, V., & Fisher, D. (2008). *Managing small groups.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Publishers.

Gibson, V., and Hasbrouck, J. (2008). *Differentiating instruction: Grouping for success.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.

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AUTHOR'S CORNER

SCIENCE

WRITING

MATH MANIPULATIVES

READER'S THEATER

SOCIAL STUDIES

VOCABULARY

CREATIVE EXPRESSION