

Introduction

LESSONS FROM
THE APARTMENT CLASSROOM

By Jay Lord, teacher and NEFC cofounder

In 1983, I taught a sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classroom of twenty-six children in a four-room apartment whose every corner was stuffed full. Like many classroom spaces in use today—portable classrooms, overly crowded classrooms, classrooms that are poorly designed or just don't fit their current uses—it was far from ideal. The apartment was located across the street from our K–8 laboratory school, which had become too small for our quickly growing enrollment. I had worked all summer to convert that apartment into what I hoped would be a suitable classroom space. Mostly, I focused on the details.

The computer went in the front room, the pet mice in the kitchen. The weekly world event map was secured to a wall. A round seminar table was rolled in for literature groups, and small clusters of desks were spread throughout where children could mull, think, and work. After much hammering, building, and moving, the details seemed to work. There was a space for everything that needed to be done.

Then the children arrived. It didn't take long, once I actually began using the space with twenty-six adolescents, to see all the flaws in my design. There were too many places for children to hide, there wasn't an adequate whole-group meeting area, it was impossible to keep clean, it was far too noisy, and it quickly became cluttered, to name just a few problems.

That year, my youngest child Hannah, at the time a first grader in the school, was given the assignment of getting to know the school, then building part of it in her classroom's block corner. As coincidence would have it, her job was to build my classroom. After several visits, many drawings, and interviews with the

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students, Hannah began building the apartment classroom with blocks. Her building not only captured the layout—the front door entering into a hallway, to the left the computer area, straight ahead the cluster of desks, another left into the kitchen—but also the details of each room. There were cardboard computers, desks made from small cubes, and little matchboxes to represent the mice cages that filled the kitchen counters.

After a full week of building, Hannah was quite proud of her work. As the last touch, she sat engrossed beside her structure carefully tearing up sheets of paper into hundreds of little pieces. Then she carefully showered her block structure with these tiny bits of paper until each surface in each room was covered. The clutter that so dominated the room in Hannah's six-year-old vision was now in place.

Details with No Direction

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As I have thought about classroom space over the years, I have often come back to that room and Hannah's white paper clutter to remind myself of all that didn't work in that space. I now realize that I created each space as a detail without a plan that was informed by my knowledge and beliefs about children and learning. At the time, I didn't see the connection between what I wanted to teach these children, how I hoped they would learn, and the place in which we worked and lived together each day.

I had hoped to build a strong sense of community, yet the four separate rooms, none of which was big enough for all of us to sit together, drove us apart. I had hoped that the children would take pride in and care for their space, yet the clutter and the configuration of the space conspired against this. Every corner was jam-packed with "stuff," making cleaning difficult, not to mention the fact that the mice cages which needed to be cleaned every day were so far off the beaten track that they were quickly forgotten.

My intention to create quiet workspaces was challenged by the fact that every room served as a hallway to the next, resulting in a constant flow of traffic through most of the rooms. And my desire to make students feel safe from the adolescent social pressures that can so dominate a middle-school classroom was thwarted by the fact that there were walls everywhere that prevented me from seeing all of the children and offered far too many corners in which students could hide.

That classroom stood in direct contradiction to the intentions and the curriculum of the classroom. It didn't match my beliefs and knowledge of education, and as a result, the children were presented with mixed messages—what I said contradicted what the room said. This mismatch of room and curriculum, in addition to creating many daily problems, had an insidious side captured by Hannah's white paper clutter. The space got cluttered, jumbled, and too full. I blamed it on the children—The children were messy; The children were not taking care of the room; You know how they are, adolescents—when in truth, it was my classroom setup that was flawed, not the children.

A tension defined the room for most of the year—a discord that blanketed the room day-in and day-out. That discord kept the room from reaching its potential, made my work infinitely harder, and at times, made me angry with the children. How wrong I was. How little I understood.

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Lessons to be Learned

During the past seventeen years, I've learned a lot about classroom spaces. I've learned to be more intentional and to look closely at the connections between how a classroom is designed and what happens within it. As I look at classrooms now, I ask teachers if their rooms are consistent with what they believe about teaching and learning. Are there reasons for the details of the room? What are the reasons?

Certainly, there will always be classroom spaces, like my apartment classroom, that are far from ideal. There will be spaces born of necessity, budget constraints, and bulges in school populations that will never be optimal. But even these less-than-ideal spaces, even my apartment classroom, could be made to work much better in the hands of a skillful teacher—one who understands clearly how room design impacts teaching and who has a repertoire of practical strategies for creating effective designs. The aim of this book is to help teachers develop this understanding and to provide them with these strategies.

This book will help teachers make the most of what they have to work with to create warm, orderly, and engaging environments that serve the needs of all their students. More concretely, it will help teachers to make informed decisions about where to place the desks, the books, the meeting area, the recycling bin, the collection of posters, the art work, the maps, the scissors, the paper, the storage shelves, the bookbags, etc.

These details matter. In fact, it is in the details that the classroom is defined. But the details, if they are to make sense, must get their direction from our strongest beliefs about education and children. A classroom that is not centered on educational beliefs is a room of disconnected details, a room of convenience rather than purpose. It is our focus on our educational beliefs that aligns all the details of the room, blending them together seamlessly to create the whole.

In San Francisco last year, I visited an exhibition of winter landscapes by the French Impressionists. As I approached “Snow at Louveciennes,” a canvas by Alfred Sisley, I saw that it was a picture of an aproned woman with an umbrella walking slowly down a snow covered lane bounded by a stone wall and a wooden garden fence. Cottages dotted the hillside behind. Fascinated, I walked closer and closer to the picture until all I could see were thousands of small, quick strokes of color. The woman disappeared and the snow dissolved into these strokes.

It was these details, these small quick brushstrokes, that created this grand three-foot canvas, yet I knew that Sisley must have held a vision of the big picture in his mind as he created each one of them. It was this vision that gave each of the strokes its color, its direction, its placement. And it was precisely this vision that was so sorely missing in my apartment classroom. I’ve learned since then to always begin with the big picture when designing a classroom space. Before moving a table or lifting a hammer, I now ask myself, What are my most closely held educational beliefs? Why do I teach? How do children learn? It is the articulation of these educational beliefs that allows us to make coherent decisions regarding the thousands of details that create a well-designed classroom space.

**Lessons to
be Learned**

**Starting with
Your Big
Picture**

Starting with Your Big Picture

We all have closely held personal beliefs about teaching which are likely connected to our reasons for becoming teachers in the first place. Ideally, these beliefs serve as a guiding force for all the decisions we make in the classroom. Ruth Charney, in her book *Teaching Children to Care*, talks about the importance of articulating a positive vision for one’s teaching which is founded on personal convictions. Charney writes:

As teachers, we need to know why we teach, and why we do what we do in the classroom. These ideals (or values) need to be conscious and clear. The process...begins by establishing the ideals, which become the foundations for our social arrangements and our expectations for content groups and individuals.

It is easy to lose sight of our ideals among the complex demands of every teaching day. If necessary, we need to go back and identify them again and again, recovering them from the piles of roll books, lesson plans and report cards—“the stuff” that may shroud our earliest spirit and most compelling desire to teach. When we truly know these ideals, we can use them to guide the specifics of our classroom. I know that we are all strongest as teachers when our ideals inform our teaching. (Charney 1991, 196)

Charney identifies her ideals as the following: schools need to teach alternatives to violence and to stress nonviolence as an essential characteristic of the community; children need to learn to think for themselves; educators need to stretch, not track, potentials. My ideals are different: we must value the voice of each and every child; we must, in a world of difference, be able to teach and practice empathy; we must equip every child with the necessary tools, both academic and social, to work and live with dignity. Your ideals will be different still. I suggest that you stop here and take a few minutes to think about and write down your ideals. What do you hope to achieve as a teacher? What is your guiding force?

While the details of our ideals need not agree, we must all begin with a positive vision as the foundation for our practice, a vision which is imbued with hope and possibility. This vision is highly personal and is the starting place for creating the classroom we want. We must be able to see and name what we hope for before we can realize it.

At their best, these ideals will translate into classroom practices that help children reach their potential both to learn well and to act in this world with compassion and kindness. My hope is that the ideas and strategies presented in this book—which you’ll select, refine, and revise to best meet your purposes—will help you create a classroom that reflects your ideals and helps you achieve these ideals in your teaching. Best wishes for your journey.

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