

Reading 7

Required Reading

The open classroom

Herbert Kohl

Herbert Kohl's own teaching experiences, mainly in inner city schools in America, lie at the heart of several of his books on teaching and education. In this set of extracts from *The Open Classroom*, Kohl compares the spatial arrangements of three different classrooms. The classrooms he describes are *hypothetical*, but the descriptions are based on actual classrooms and are all fairly typical for North America. While classrooms in Africa are seldom as well equipped as the classrooms that Kohl describes, this does not mean that his argument is irrelevant to an African context. As you read, consider the ways in which spatial arrangements reflect the differences between an open classroom and an authoritarian one.

Notes

An ordinary classroom and several not so ordinary ones on the first day of school (with a glimpse of them three months later)

[...] It is no accident that spatial memories are strong. The placement of objects in space is not arbitrary and rooms represent in physical form the spirit and souls of places and institutions. A teacher's room tells us something about who he is and a great deal about what he is doing.

Often we are not aware of the degree to which the spaces we control give us away, nor conscious of how much we could learn of ourselves by looking at the spaces we live in. It is important for teachers to look at the spatial dimensions of their classrooms, to step back so they may see how the organization of space represents the life lived within it. To illustrate this and give with identical furniture and dimensions yet arranged by

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*This edited excerpt is from Kohl, H. 1969. **The Open Classroom**. New York: Random House.*

different teachers. I'll start by examining the spatial organization of these rooms on the first day of school, and then look back at them during the middle of the school year. In this way it may be possible to show the many seemingly minor yet crucial ways in which an open classroom differs from an authoritarian and closed one.

The rooms I have in mind can be found in most schools in the United States. They are rectangular in shape, not too large, and contain chalk boards, bulletin boards, cabinets, windows, and perhaps closets, arranged around the periphery of the rectangle. Occasionally there are a sink and drinking fountain and, in exceptional cases, toilets built into the room. The interior has no partitions and is occupied by combinations of chairs, desks, desk chairs, and tables. The desks are rectangular and the tables rectangular or round. Sometimes the chairs and desks are bolted to the floor but there is a tendency to have movable furniture in newer buildings. The teacher's desk is distinguished from the pupils' desks by its size and the presence of abundant drawer-space. There are some classrooms which also have bookcases, magazine racks, work benches, and easels. Also there are usually wastebaskets in the room.

These are the common elements – now let's turn to the way they are fitted into the classroom environments. The first teacher I want to consider has had several years experience; she is talented and popular with her pupils. In her room the authoritarian mode of teaching does not seem particularly oppressive. She is an attractive woman and spends time trying to make her room as pleasant as possible. This fits very well with her teaching style. She is quite friendly with her students in a maternal way and prides herself on being able to get them to perform well. She enjoys teaching gifted children the most, but will take her turn with the less bright classes. She is a bit of a cynic yet gets along with the staff. Her main fault (though it is not seen as such by her co-workers) is a deep intolerance of, and dislike for, defiant and 'lazy' pupils.

This teacher works very hard getting her classroom in order before the first day of class. She has read the class record cards, knows how many girls and boys there are, who the troublemakers are likely to be. She arranges the desks, tables, and chairs accordingly. The wall with the chalkboard is designated the front of the room (many teachers don't realize that this needn't be the case), making the opposite wall the back of the room, and the two remaining walls the sides. This may seem a simpleminded thing to mention but it isn't. Why does a classroom have to have a front, a back, and two sides? The notion that there is a 'front of the class' and the authoritarian mode of delivering knowledge received from above to students who are below – both go together.

Having designated the front of the room, the teacher moves all the tables and desks into a position where they face the chalk board. They are also arranged in evenly spaced rows. Chairs are placed accordingly, one to a desk, or to a designated place around a table. Extra chairs and tables are set aside until the teacher's desk is in place. The teacher I'm describing is sympathetic to the progressive movement in education.

She doesn't believe that the teacher should put her desk in the front of the room, even though she accepts the notion of a 'front' of the room. Consequently she moves her desk to the side, a bit apart from the students' desks but in a convenient position to survey them.

An extra table, round if possible, is placed in the back of the room. The wastebasket is placed next to the teacher's desk.

So much for the movable furniture. Next the teacher turns to the chalkboard. On the far right (or left) of the chalk board in the front of the room the teacher prints neatly her name (prefaced by Miss), the class designation, room number, and several other things that may look like this: After the chalkboard come the bulletin boards. The teacher has pre-

MISS A. LEVINTON
CLASS: 6-543 (HS)
DATE:
ATTENDANCE: B____G____
ASSIGNMENT:
HOMEWORK:

pared ingenious and elegant displays to put up around the room. There are photographs, charts, signs, maps – things designed to illustrate and illuminate the curriculum for the year and make the classroom handsome though somewhat antiseptic. A small part of one bulletin board is set aside and neatly labelled 'Students' Work.'

The bookcase in the back of the room holds the books the teacher has accumulated, and the table in the back of the room is labelled 'Library Corner.' The cabinets and closets are full of neatly stacked books and papers and the teacher checks to see that their doors are has been stocked with a smock, some comfortable shoes, a coffee cup and saucer, and a bottle of instant coffee, etc. It also contains a metal box with the students' record cards.

The classroom is ready to receive its students. The teacher has made the room a familiar place for her to function in and, armed with rules and routines, is ready to face her new class and tell them exactly what will be expected of them in the coming year. The students are free to fit in or be thrown out.

A visitor to the class three months later would be struck by the similarities of the room on the first day and ninety days later. A few changes would be evident, however. There would be neat papers on the bulletin board under the label 'Students' Work,' as well as a new but equally elegant bulletin board display. There would also be books and papers in the students' desks. But the wastebasket would still be next to the teacher's desk and the library would still be bare except for its label. All would be in order.

It is hard to distinguish between apparent chaos and creative disorder.

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The next classroom I will describe could present problems for an observer; he would have to attend as much to what is not done as to what is done. Interesting and natural patterns of classroom life can emerge through a collaboration of all the people involved; but this may take time and patience, and one has to have seen the process of development in order to understand the result.

When the second teacher I have in mind arrives before the start of school, the classroom is a mess. The chairs have been piled upon the tables and pushed into a corner. The teacher, a young man who has taught for several years, can't make up his mind what to do with the furniture. As he enters his room he feels disoriented. He can't tell the front of the room from the rear. It strikes him that there may be advantages in seeing the room as a neutral space without points of orientation. Perhaps his students would also be struck by the neutrality of the space and see for the first time that many things could be done with it.

Why not leave the room just as it is and see what happens when the students enter? He had other plans ones carefully nurtured over the summer. He would set up the tables in small groups and let the children sit where they chose. He would also turn the teacher's desk into a resource table which he would occupy at certain times and which could, he hoped, become the communications centre of the classroom rather than the seat of power and authority. But the idea of leaving things as they are may be a better way to begin the year. Perhaps it might be possible to make organisation of the class a collaborative venture between him and his students, and among the students themselves. Besides he has come to realise that the things that work best in class for him are the unplanned ones, the ones that arise spontaneously because of a student's suggestion or a sudden perception. He trusts his intuitions and isn't too upset to abandon plans that had consumed time and energy.

The previous year he had run a reasonably open classroom. Still he had organised the room from front to back; and though the tables and chairs were movable, they faced in only one direction during the year. He had used the class record cards to tell him who his pupils were though he very frequently found them misleading and inaccurate. For half the year he'd used textbooks and finally got up the courage to drop them after one of his pupils turned in a devastating parody of one of the stories in the book. He had worried that the principal of the school might object to this but he did not announce what he was doing and no one complained. During the remainder of the year he built a library of students' writing and books to replace the textbooks. He found one interesting set of readers and kept them because he liked group reading himself and wanted to have one book he could read together with his students and discuss with them. That was one of his pleasures in teaching.

He also managed to piece together a set of dictionaries and obtain a record player and a collection of records, a slide machine, a \$15 tape recorder, tapes and film strips, and a miscellaneous collection of junk that filled the closets of the room leaving him no place to hang his coat.

He took to hanging it in the wardrobe along with his students' coats.

The stuff he had collected the previous year was still in the closets and cabinets. He threw open all the doors in the room as he had planned. The blackboard and bulletin boards in the room had been untouched since June as he had requested. Except for the tables and chairs everything was as it was the last day of school the previous year.

The plan was quite simple. The first day of school would consist of a dismantling of the previous year's work, an examination of things in the classroom by the new students, and an exploration of what was available. He didn't want to impose a structure upon the class; at the same time he knew that it was crucial to have enough stuff in his room to suggest to his pupils the range of things they might do.

It is impossible to predict what his classroom would look like after three months. That would depend upon the students and the teacher, and also upon what happened to be engaging their attention at the moment. Things would most certainly be in a state of flux. Certain groupings of chairs and tables would be just forming; others would be in the process of disintegration. The bulletin boards would be full of the students' works, or of pictures they liked or the teacher liked. Some might look worn but sacred and bound to last out the year; others would be in the process of being assembled or dismantled. The stuff – the record-player, tape recorder, books, etc. – would be distributed throughout the room and there is no telling where the wastebasket would be. Those who need it would use it – and would not have to come up to the teacher's desk in order to throw things out.

The teacher's desk might be anywhere. It might not even be the teacher's any more, the teacher settling for a desk like the pupils' and abandoning his privileged piece of furniture to some other use.

In order to find out what this all meant, an observer would have to discover what the pupils were doing and what the teacher was doing at that particular moment in the year. The observer might not discover chaos, however, but a more complex and freer order than is usually found in classrooms in the United States, or in the society at large for that matter.

It may be useful to look at a third classroom. The room and its furniture are the same but it is in a high school where not one but four or five classes use it daily. It is the teacher's room in a more real sense than is possible in the elementary school since the teacher is the only person there throughout the school day.

There is another problem – the teacher is a specialist. She has been hired to teach a specific subject and, by virtue of that fact, is restricted in her own freedom. Still within limits this teacher has managed to have an open class - or rather, four open classes, since she is required to teach four different English classes a day. The students in her classes are grouped according to what the school considers to be ability, and whatever her personal opinion of tracking, she has to teach tracked classes. She has a 'bright' class, a 'slow' class, and two 'middle' classes. There are

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several tables and many movable chairs with armrests in the room. There are also many makeshift bookcases filled with dozens of books, magazines, newspapers, collections of students' writing. The walls still have the previous year's accumulation of writing, drawings, and cartoons on them. A section of wall is covered with newsprint and set aside for the students' graffiti (a possible form of writing).

The teacher's main problem is to make her room available to all four classes in the same way. There are temptations to simplify things, have a pet class and structure the room for them. The 'bright' class is an easy one to choose since the students in it are usually co-operative. The room can be arranged for them the other three classes that use the room would have to squeeze themselves into a space designed for the bright students.

Another way of dealing with the situation would be to neutralise the room—place the chairs and desks in columns and rows and force each class to sit segregated according to sex, and arranged in alphabetical order.

Yet chairs and tables can be moved about every period. It is possible, though a bit noisy, to let the students in each class decide their own placement. The hypothetical teacher I'm describing here has gotten used to noise and accommodated herself to a constantly changing space. She even finds advantages in having her students move the chairs each period. It brings the students together, calms them down, and enables them to experience a return to stability during a day in which they are forced to move from space to space every 45 or 50 minutes.

The first day of school in this classroom is hard to describe. Each class that visits the teacher starts in its own way. The students are forced to move the chairs about and find their own places. Four different arrangements of space exist within that room. The same is true three months later.

I know teachers who can manage four classes and four different arrangements of space a day. Yet few people can live with this institutionalised schizophrenia and no one should be made to function within it. The idea that a teacher can offer something to four or five groups of twenty-five to thirty-five young people each day at intervals of 50 minutes is absurd. Exceptional people can do creative things within the departmental structures as they exist today in high schools and junior high schools – but at what cost to themselves?

Teachers must fight for a sane existence for themselves as well as for their pupils. At the same time they must not turn their frustrations and sense of powerlessness upon their pupils and compound the miseries of school existence. In the sanest circumstances students are allies and not enemies.

During the first year of teaching there are as many problems with the surroundings in which one works as with oneself and with the students. Beginning to teach in a school is like moving into a furnished apartment.

One has no familiarity with the furniture, the lighting, the resources, or the drawbacks of the room. For example, it is impossible to estimate beforehand the effect the position of doors and windows in the room will have upon the movement of students and consequently upon the life of the class. I remember my first classroom. It was in an old school and the windows were six feet from the floor. The students couldn't look out into the world and there was a sense of the room being sealed off from the outside. The next year I was in a newer school. My room had a wall of large windows facing on a busy street. The world was practically in the room. I couldn't keep from looking out myself since so much was happening on the street, and so window watching became one of the activities that were possible in the class.

Doors are often more troublesome than windows. For example, during a school day there is a constant stream of messengers and monitors that enter the room. The farther away the door is from the centre of activity the more time monitors and messengers spend in the room, and the more chance they have to distract one's students. On the other hand there is an advantage to the door being away from activity. Nosy teachers and administrators will see less when they sneak a look into the room.

Beginner teachers always worry about mastering school routines-taking attendance, collecting lunch money, appointing monitors, distributing and collecting books and papers, etc. Spatial malaise is as great a problem as all of these and underlies most of them. One doesn't know how to move throughout the room, how to use the light. All of this develops with familiarity and most of it without any conscious awareness of change. The second year is often easier than the first because the setting of one's encounter with young people is familiar and comfortable. One of the-most-important and helpful things a teacher can do is explore the space of his classroom with and without his pupils and make it as comfortable and familiar a place as possible.

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