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Classroom Management Techniques

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■ What is classroom management?

Your classroom management is the way that you manage students' learning by organising and controlling what happens in your classroom ...

- Or the way that you consciously decide *not* to organise and control.
- Or the way that you delegate or relinquish such control to the learners.

It is also what happens (or doesn't happen) when you avoid or remain ignorant about these choices.

The classroom management choices you make play a large part in creating the individual working atmosphere of your class – how it feels to be in a room with you as a teacher. Whether it is an enjoyable, engaging place to be learning or whether it is dull, uninvolved and uninspiring. They reflect what you believe about teaching and learning, about learners and their potential and about the relationship of teacher to learner. They reveal how everyone relates to the class as a whole and to the hierarchy of the learning institution you are a part of.

Behind each selection of a technique is an intention – the thing that you want to happen.

A teacher who always keeps the students in whole-class mode and never makes use of pair work or group work of any kind may be a teacher who believes in such 'traditional' educational approaches, or one that has never thought about or questioned them very much. Or perhaps this sort of teacher is afraid of losing control over things or thinks that whole-class teaching is what the school or students expect and demand.

Similarly, at another extreme, a teacher who runs lessons in which the students always take the lead and decide what they want to do and how they want to do it may be working in such a way based on definite beliefs. Or perhaps that is simply what they have always done – and they will continue to do so – in the absence of clear ideas about how things might be done differently.

■ Classroom management is independent of methodology

This book is not about one method of teaching. The techniques in this book underlie all methods. You may be following a task-based approach, the grammar-translation method, a communicative approach, a coursebook-driven course, or any way of teaching. The techniques discussed here should be usable and effective, whichever method you use.

Having said that, there is a definite set of beliefs and values informing the ideas proposed: an assumption that the most effective teaching and learning is going to happen when learners are actively involved, interested and engaged in their work. This is more likely to come about in situations where the learners are asked about, and have at least some direct influence or say in, what they study and how they do it. This presupposes a classroom

where teacher and learners can work together and talk or listen to each other in a respectful and supportive manner – and much of good classroom management is to do with creating the conditions where such an atmosphere is likely to exist.

■ A wide definition

You may have noticed that the definition I am giving to classroom management is considerably wider than the way this term is often used in secondary education, where it typically refers to ways of keeping order in class and specifically to discipline-related problems. Discipline is certainly one area of classroom management, but it is only one, and, interestingly, many of the biggest problems associated with keeping order are often best answered by dealing with other, seemingly separate, issues of classroom management. For example, in many contexts, if you make significant improvements in how well you encourage all students (rather than just the fastest two or three) to participate in classroom interaction, then this is very likely to have significant knock-on effects to how engaged students are in your lessons – which then affects how well they behave.

■ Classroom management is complex

There is no way that a book such as this can solve the organisational problems of specific classes in all the different contexts of the world. Within any individual problem, there are many distinct characteristics that will make each situation unique (to do with location, cultural norms, people involved, time available, preceding events, relationships, moods and many other factors).

This means that I can't ever tell you what to do. There is no fixed book of guidelines that can ever tell you how to respond in a particular situation. All effective teaching requires an active moment-by-moment processing of the current situation and a flexible ever-changing reflection as to what might be the best thing to do next.

Some of the decisions we make will be just right and useful; others will be ineffective or even disastrous. That's normal for any teacher taking risks in the process of learning how to be a better teacher. We have to learn, slowly over time, which sort of responses seem to be suitable for certain types of situations. We also have to ensure that we don't let any of those responses set in concrete – for the answer that works one week may fall completely flat next week. Good classroom management involves learning from experience, but never allowing that experience to put you into automatic pilot.

■ Classroom management is simple

Having said that classroom management is complex, I also want to emphasise that, in lots of ways, it is also deliciously simple.

There are many small, easy-to-learn, concrete, practical techniques that can be read about, tried out, practised, improved and then used as part of any teacher's repertoire of

classroom skills – and in most cases, having more of these at your fingertips will make you a better teacher. It's as clear-cut as that.

I would go so far as to assert that if most teachers in the world could get really good at just five or six of the key techniques, then the quality of education worldwide would hugely improve. Experienced teachers often take higher and higher qualifications, involving more and more in-depth study of aspects of education and become very knowledgeable classroom practitioners. Yet many remain ignorant of, or poor at, some absolutely foundation-level practical techniques that could and would, in a matter of minutes, completely transform their teaching. In such cases, one supportive 45-minute lesson observation of them at work in class, followed by insightful feedback and suggestions, might have a very profound and immediate effect on their classroom practice.

■ Why do we need classroom management?

In our everyday lives – at home, on the phone, on a tram, in a café, on the Internet and in other contexts – we ask questions, talk, explain things, interact, organise, take control, give instructions, listen to each other and so on. When we become teachers, we might suppose that many of these normal natural skills transfer directly from the *world* to the *class*.

The classroom, however, is not the same as the outside world. Our habitual or intuitive responses, formed in the outside world, may let us down and, paradoxically, may lead to outcomes that are actually the opposite of what we had hoped for.

In order to help create the most engaging and useful learning environment, we need to learn new techniques, or perhaps relearn familiar ones, so that they are effective in a classroom environment; for example, how to talk to a group of people, how to give an instruction, how to organise seating, how to hand things out, how to listen to someone who has a problem, how to respond to a person who is talking too quietly and so on. These are all techniques that need to be thought about, tried out, reflected on and refined (maybe quite a number of times) before they become appropriate, effective, normal and instinctive.

■ Who is this book for?

This book is intended for you if you are a teacher of English as a foreign, second or other language. The ideas proposed are suitable for a wide range of different face-to-face classrooms and educational contexts. You might:

- Be a native or a non-native speaker.
- Be newly qualified or experienced.
- Teach within the state or private sector.
- Teach children or adults.
- Teach multilingual or monolingual classes.
- Work in a country where English is a first, second or foreign language.

- Teach students studying general English, CLIL or specialising for example in business English, academic English or any other specific purpose.
- Use any methodology or approach.
- Use any kind of coursebook, resources and materials – or none.

In looking at classroom management, we are looking for the fundamental organisational issues that underlie what you can do successfully in class, wherever and however you do your teaching, whatever your starting point.

This book can't solve your immediate local classroom-management problem for you. But it can show you some techniques that have been effective for a number of different people, in a variety of contexts and situations. You can read these, decide which might be useful for you, try the ideas out and add them to your suitcase of possible classroom actions, for use as, and when, appropriate. They won't all work for you in your classrooms, but many of them will, and the ones that don't work can suggest a starting point for reflection and working out your own solutions.

■ What's in this book?

Classroom Management Techniques is organised in seven chapters:

- 1 The classroom** This chapter looks at the teaching/learning space and how best to organise it and exploit what it offers.
- 2 The teacher** We look at who the teacher is in the classroom, how he or she can encourage the most learning and what changes the teacher might be able to make to his or her own actions, reactions and behaviour.
- 3 The learners** We ask who the students are and how the teacher can work with both the group and the individuals.
- 4 Key interventions** This chapter provides a detailed look at fourteen different ways that teachers can behave, speak and do things in the classroom.
- 5 Facilitating interaction** Getting students to communicate in English, with the teacher and with each other, forms a significant part of any language teacher's job. This chapter offers lots of practical advice to get more, and better quality, interaction.
- 6 Establishing and maintaining appropriate behaviour** Discipline involves not just applying sanctions after bad behaviour, but a whole way of working that might encourage the desired good behaviour. This chapter looks at the issue from both angles.
- 7 The lesson** The last chapter considers a range of issues directly associated with in-lesson teaching, including ways of running tasks and approaches to materials and resources.

For most people, this is probably not a book to read from cover to cover (though that could be helpful, especially for newer teachers or teachers in training). For this reason, I have included many cross-references so that you can go to parts of the book that you may not have read, but which contain related teaching suggestions. These references are all given in the form 'Chapter x Unit x', where 'chapter' refers to the seven major chapters of the book, and 'unit' refers to the numbered subsections within those chapters.

I think that there are two main ways that you might approach the material:

- When you face a classroom management problem in your current teaching, you could look in here for possible techniques, strategies and approaches to try out. Even if you don't feel that any of the ideas are directly relevant or suitable for your particular situation, you may still find that reading about similar problems and solutions helps you to clarify your own thoughts and generate your own solutions.
- When you feel that you want to develop professionally and are looking for ways to move your teaching forward, you could research some of the practical ideas and suggestions, select one or two and then try them out in your classes.

At the end of each section I include some 'Questions for reflection' to help you relate the material to your own practice and to think a little more widely about some of the issues.

1 The classroom

1 Different classroom layouts

I always work in the same room with the same layout. It feels a little boring. I wonder if a shake-up would wake my class up a little.

Aim

To experiment with different arrangements of seats and tables/desks.

Introduction

The way your classroom is arranged has a direct impact on what you can do and how you do it. The traditional classroom layout with rows of fixed desks all facing the front may be appropriate for teacher-fronted explanations, board work and quiet individual work, but is arguably less suitable for communicative or task-based work.

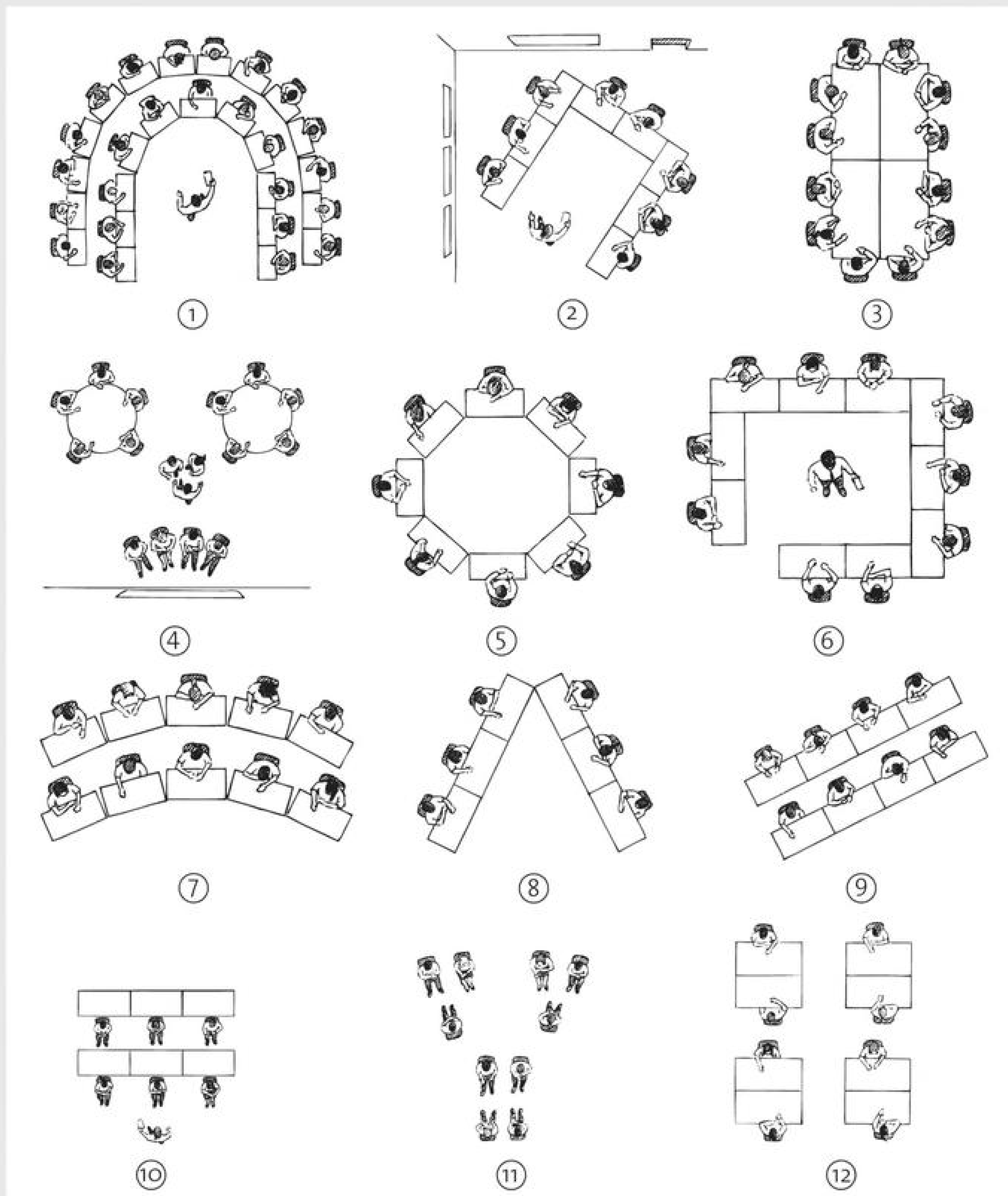
A teacher needs to keep in mind the possibility of occasionally changing the seating arrangements. Sometimes this will happen because you need to do so for a specific activity. At other times, change for its own sake may be justification enough. From the learners' perspective, having a new view, new eye contact, and new people next to them may, in a small way, help to keep their interest alive and motivation higher.

Some classrooms have furniture that is fixed to the floor, and, in such cases, one can only play around with how that is used. However, many rooms have seats and desks that can be moved – though it might seem noisy or troublesome to do so.

→ See Chapter 1 Unit 3 *Avoiding chaos when rearranging the room* for ideas on how to avoid such disruption.

Techniques: Classroom layouts

Here are a number of suggestions for rearrangements. Try one or more of these.



Smaller classes (up to about 20 learners)

1 Semi-circle or U

This allows learners to make eye contact and communicate with each other. There can be a number of rows if needed.

2 Tipped U

In reducing the rigid right angles of most classrooms, this can feel more informal, yet still provide desk space. A variation is to widen out the angle of the arms.

3 One large table

Pull the tables together to form a large table, and sit learners round it. This may increase the feeling of cooperating together on a single task.

4 Zones

If you have the luxury of a large enough classroom and there are spare chairs, you can arrange different areas within the room – a line of seats up front, facing the board; others around tables at the back of the room; a shared open-discussion / mingling area in the middle. During certain stages of a lesson, students may be able to move from zone to zone, depending on what they need to do.

5 Full circle

This is a very democratic arrangement allowing everyone to see everyone else. Notice the learners' expectation that you will sit in the frontmost seat. Try sitting somewhere off-centre, and notice what difference it makes to attitudes and interaction.

All sizes of class**6 Rectangular**

Arrange rows of desks and seats around all four edges of the room, or closer in, allowing space to walk behind the seats.

7 Curved rows

Rather than the typical straight-line rows, try curving the lines a little, perhaps facing a long wall of the room (rather than the narrower front wall).

8 Arrowhead

A shape made up of diagonal rows with the arrow pointing towards the back of the class. This permits more eye contact. It also allows more open space at the front of the room (perhaps for mingling activities, or for getting students to come up and read or perform).

9 Diagonal

Keep the traditional rows, but angle them a little so that they leave a large diagonal space in one corner at the front. This is another way of creating a little more working space at the front of the class.

10 Reverse

If there is enough space in your room, try putting the tables *behind* the chairs. This means that students can face you without the intervening barrier. When they need to write at length or have another need for the tables, they can simply turn their chairs round and work with their backs to the teacher.

11 No tables

Or try working groups without any tables. You'll find that this frees up a lot of space in the room, which you can then exploit for speaking activities, games, simulations and so on.

12 Facing

Turn desks to face each other, rather than all facing the front.

13 Islands

Group learners round tables. Learners can work closely together with others, but can also get up and visit other groups without difficulty.

14 Change focus

For one or two lessons when you will not need to use the board much, ask the learners to move their seats (and possibly desks) to change the whole focus of the class to face the side or the back of the room. This is arguably a case of 'change for change's sake', but sometimes a new view can also change how people think, speak and react.

Technique: Seeing the room from a student's perspective

After the students have all gone home, take a few minutes to view your classroom from their viewpoint. Choose three or four random student desks at different places round the class, and sit in them for a minute or so. Imagine watching yourself up front at the board. Is the view clear? What might cause problems? What makes each place pleasant or uncomfortable? Based on what you experience, reflect on what changes you could make to the room to improve it.

These are some of the considerations you may need to think about:

- a How cramped are people? Do they have sufficient personal space and elbow room?
- b Can people get up and move around easily? Do people have to push past others to get out?
- c Are there clear passageways or corridors that allow movement? Is it easy for the teacher to get to any part of the room quickly and without asking people to move things?
- d Are sight lines to the front, the board and to other students good for each student?
- e Are there any fittings that get in the way (e.g. windows, cupboards, doors, heaters, etc.) or make particular seats uncomfortable?
- f Are doors or emergency exits fully accessible? Are there any trip hazards (e.g. from where students place their bags)?

Questions for reflection

- Have you always used the default room arrangement? If so, is it because it is really the best one for you and your students, or is it just because it was there?
- Are you worried that changing the seating arrangement might also have unexpected knock-on effects, for example, to do with how the teacher is listened to or how you are perceived by students?
- What positive student comments can you imagine a rearrangement leading to?

→ For classroom layouts for specific group work activities, see Chapter 1 Unit 2 *Setting up the room for specific activities*.

2 Setting up the room for specific activities

I'd like to organise my room differently – to make some familiar activities more exciting.

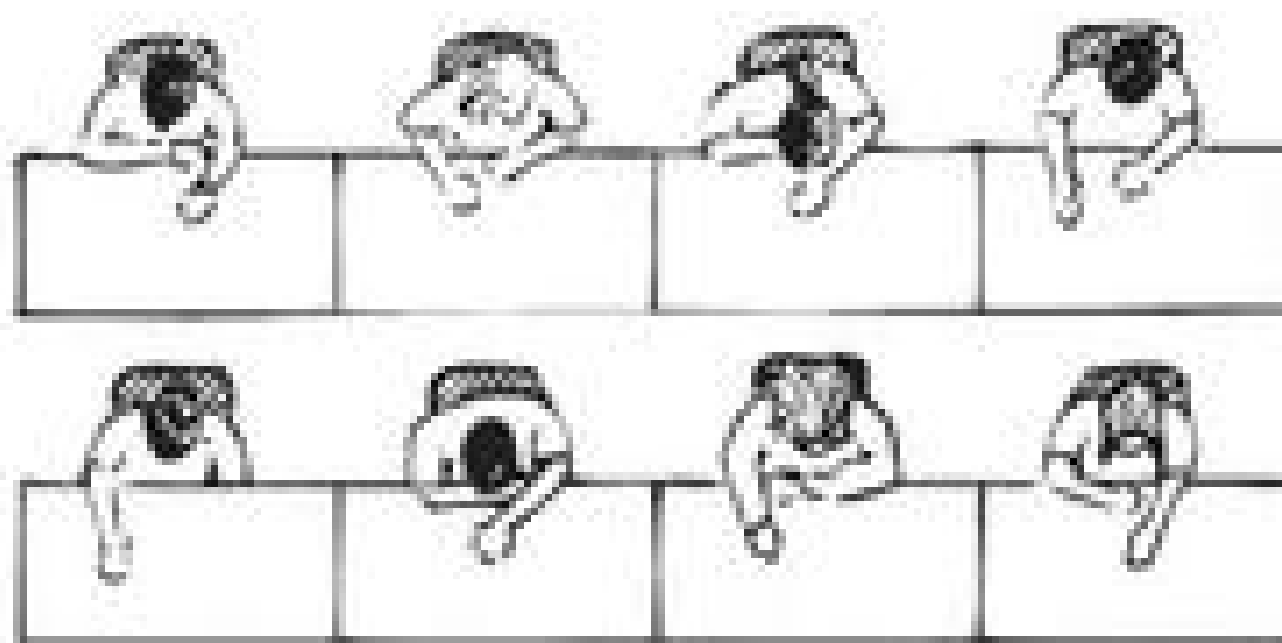
Aim

To create layouts of seating and desks that facilitate and encourage communication in some common activities.

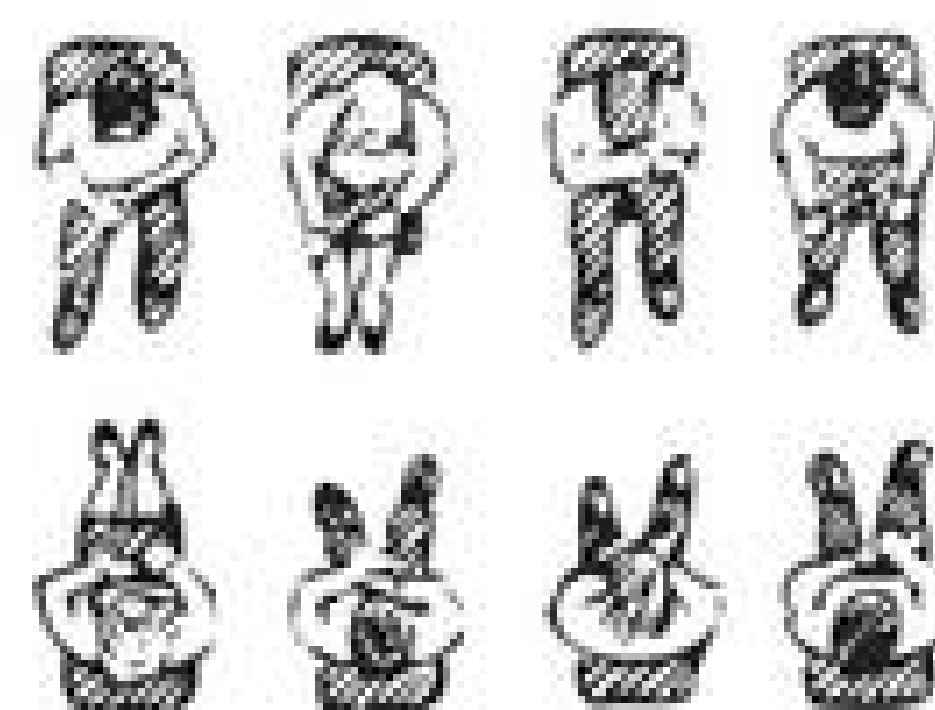
Introduction

If students always do the same or similar tasks in the same seats (perhaps with the same people), there is a danger of *sameness* about everything, and hence boredom and lack of commitment. One activity blends into the next.

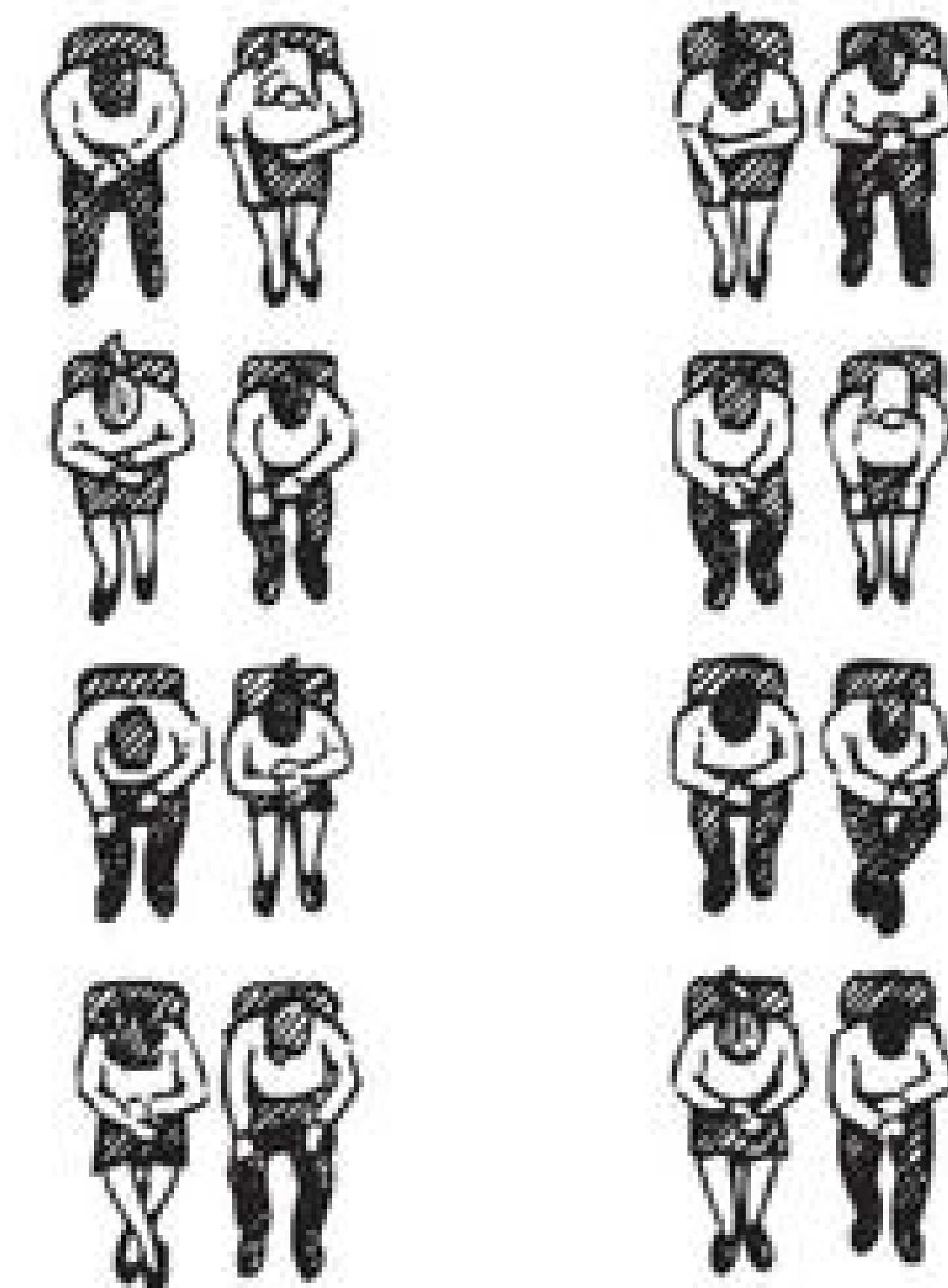
Techniques: Layouts for specific activities



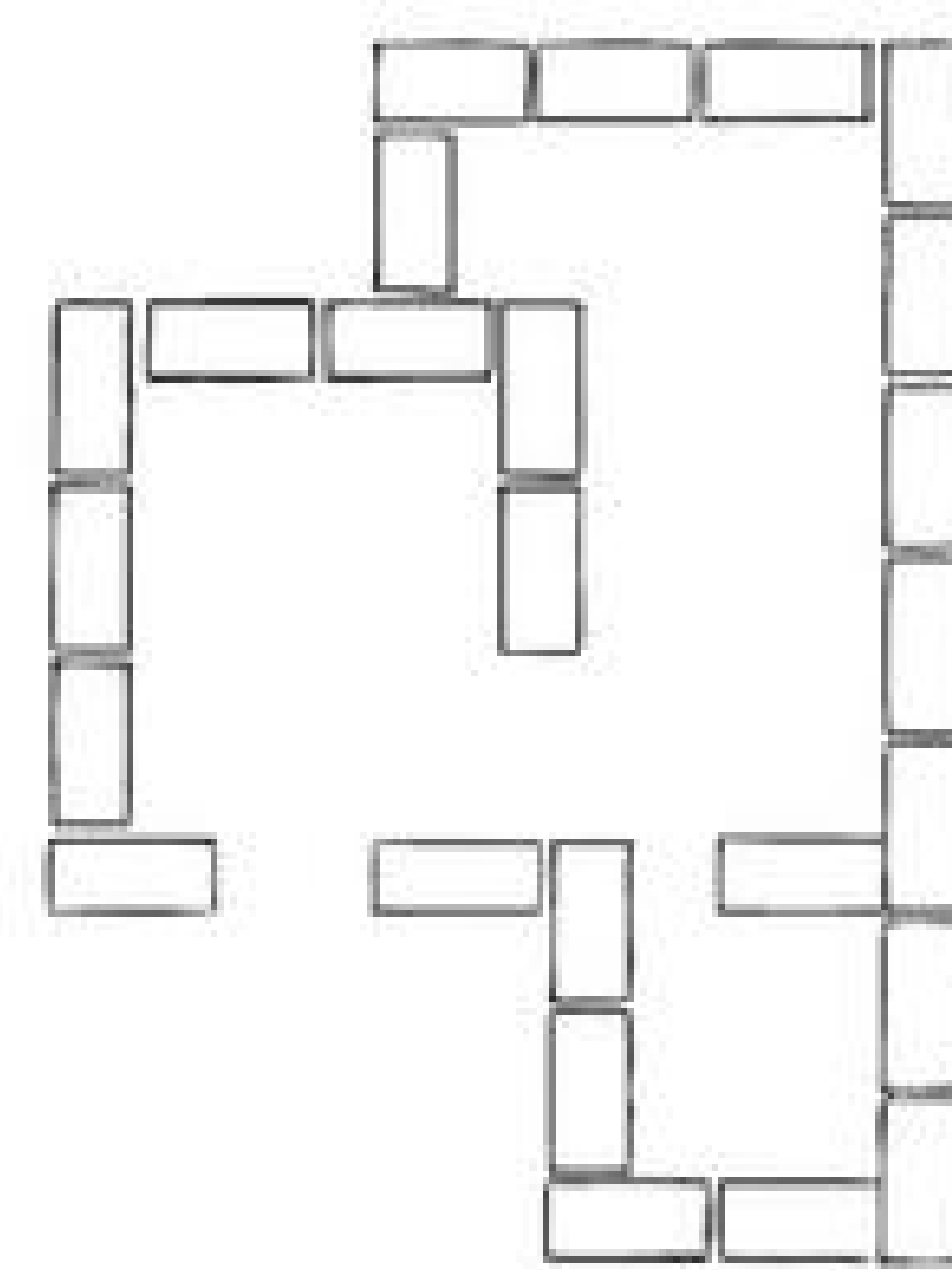
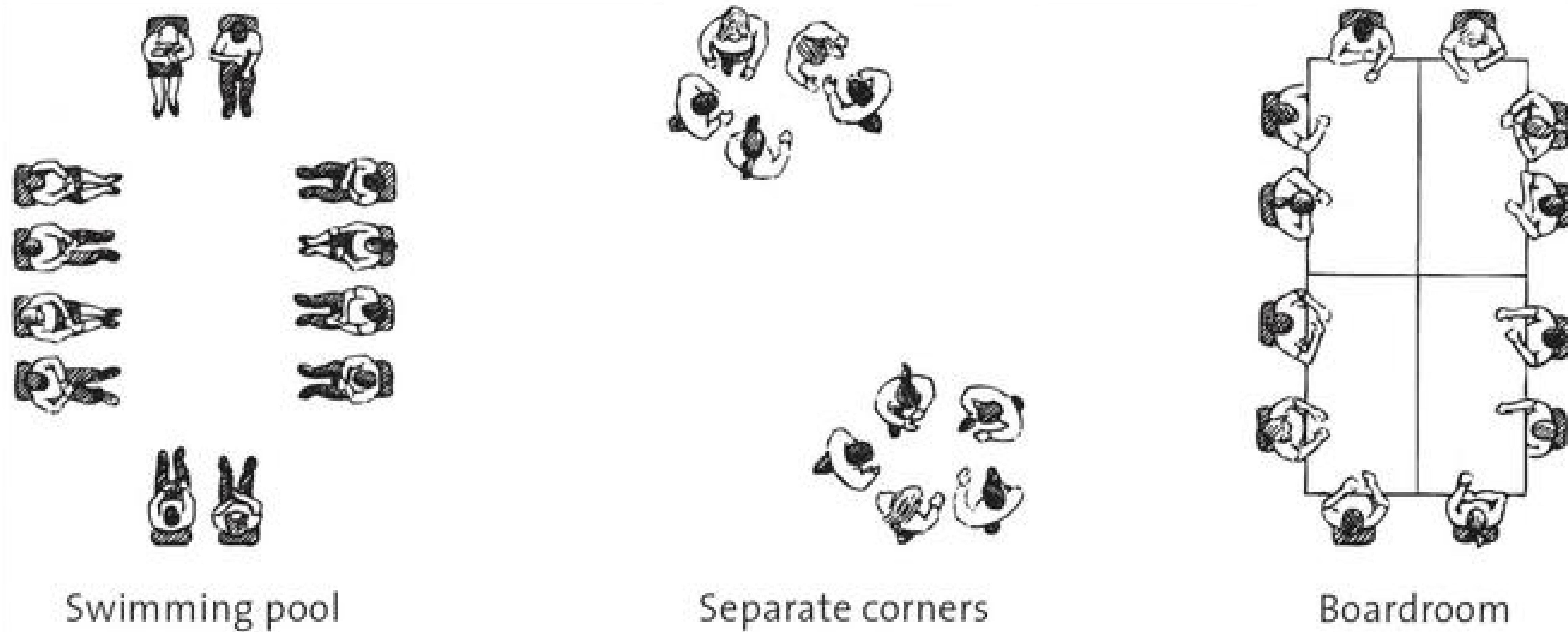
Houses of Parliament



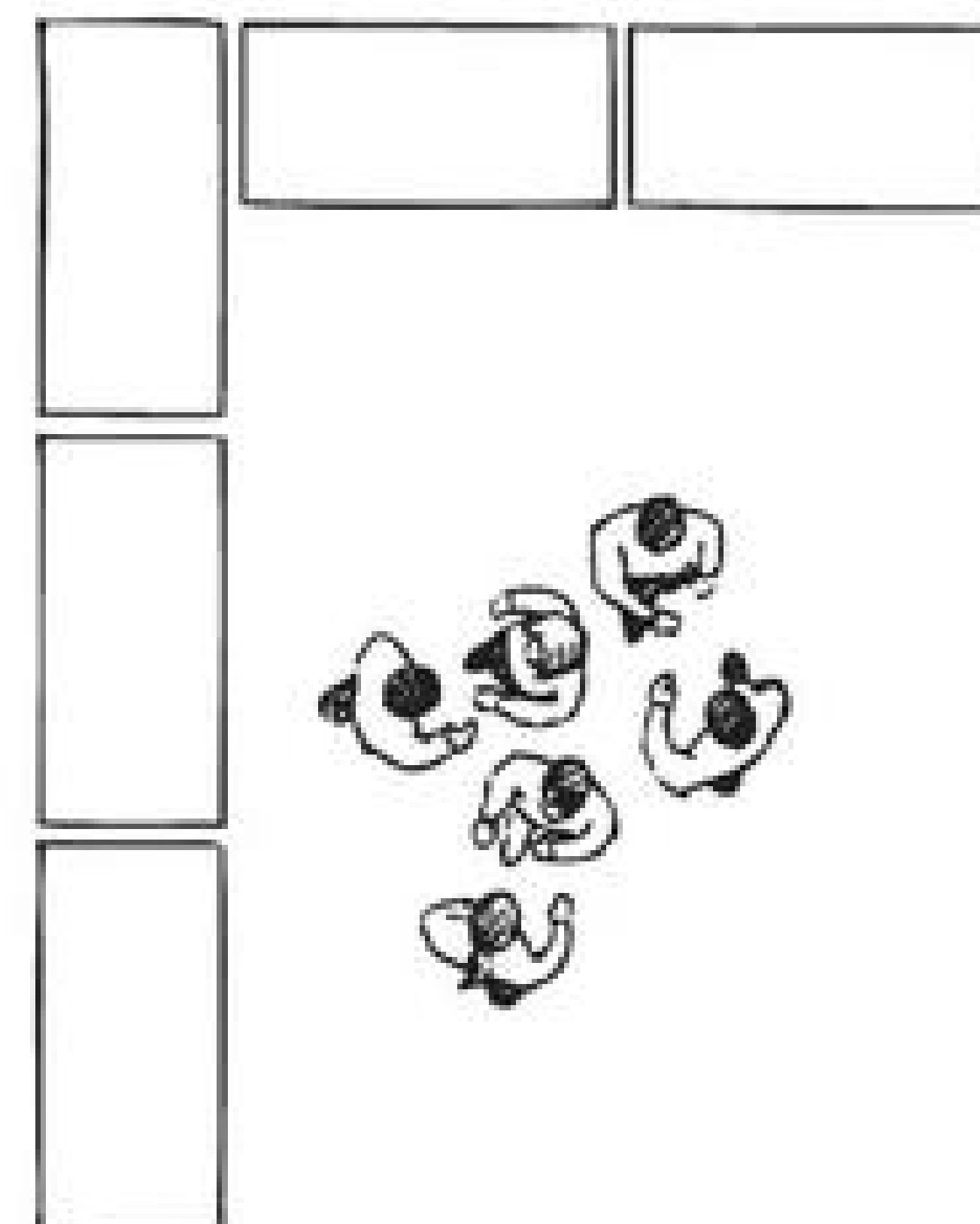
Railway carriages



Aeroplane



Outline plan



Mingling

1 Debates or discussions

If these involve two (or more) opposing viewpoints, try a 'Houses of Parliament' divide, with two ranks of seats (perhaps without desks/tables) facing each other. This isn't suitable for general use, as it deliberately seeks to stir argument and disagreement: *us versus them*.

2 Social interaction and conversational activities

Try making 'railway carriages', i.e. separate blocks that have four or five seats facing a similar four or five. Similarly, make an 'aeroplane'. Or a lounge in a 'hotel'. Or a 'restaurant'. Or arrange seats in a rectangle around an imaginary 'swimming pool'.

3 Planning

Some activities (designing solutions, making plans, simulations, mock elections, etc.) require students to work together in groups to prepare their own ideas before coming back together for a meeting or discussion. The more dramatic the separation of the

different groups in the preparation stage (e.g. into separate corners of the room), the more it might encourage a team spirit and an urge to compete against the other team.

4 Meetings, presentations and oral report backs

Pull all the desks or tables together to make a single large 'boardroom' table which everyone sits round.

5 Role plays and simulations set in offices, houses and other buildings

Arrange seats or tables to create the *outline plan* of a number of different connected room shapes, corridors, doorways, communal areas, etc. Establish clearly what each shape is: waiting room, surgery, reception desk, lobby with coffee machine, office and so on. Learners can take the roles of people doing different things in all the separate locations.

6 Mingling

When you have a task where learners must mingle, meet and talk with a number of different people, clear the desks/tables to one side of the room to create a 'party space'. Turn on some suitable loud music (if this is possible) as this will help to create an atmosphere and may encourage the quieter ones to speak up, realising that they are less likely to be overheard. You could even serve imaginary drinks!

Questions for reflection

- Which of the classroom layouts in this unit would you like to try tomorrow with your students? What activity would you use them with?
- Are there any layouts here that you would never consider using? Why?

3 Avoiding chaos when rearranging the room

I often want to rearrange the classroom, but I can't find a way to do it that isn't noisy, disruptive and chaotic. My adult students seem to become unsettled and have trouble settling and focussing on the following task, My younger students seem to take advantage of any chance to misbehave and make a lot of noise.

Aim

To change classroom seating arrangements with the minimum of disruption.

Introduction

If you want to frequently rearrange the room, it's important that you can do it as quickly, quietly and efficiently as possible. If your students do this in a noisy or unhelpful way, it can put you off ever making a new arrangement, to the detriment of activities and variety.

Learners in a classroom often feel rather powerless. Unhelpful, time-wasting or disruptive behaviour may arise from a sense of having no involvement or personal investment in what is being done. All the important and unimportant decisions are taken for them, and there is little they can influence. This, in turn, may lead to bad behaviour and noise when they get a small chance to express themselves – such as when the room is rearranged. By giving responsibility, even for small things, we can sometimes address this issue before it becomes a problem. Learners may feel more involved and may start to take some responsibility for what happens in class. There may even be a degree of pride in seeing their own ideas in operation and successfully carried out.

Technique: Using the learners' ideas

- 1 Explain to the class that you would like to use a different seating arrangement for the next task, but you feel that they may misbehave or do it slowly and noisily. Allow a few seconds for this to sink in; then ask your students for their advice, i.e. whether you should rearrange or not, and, if so, how best to do it.
- 2 Have a brief discussion, making sure that you mainly listen to them and echo their ideas (rather than selling or imposing your own solutions). If they suggest a good way of doing the rearrangement, ask if this will really reduce the expected problems. Explain that you will take the chance of following their idea, and that if it is successful, you can do lots more such rearrangements in the future. Make sure they understand that this depends on them.
- 3 Do the rearrangement, and before going on to the task that required the rearrangement, lead a short feedback discussion about how successful it was. If it worked, tell them that clearly and unambiguously. Collect any suggestions for doing it better next time.

Technique: Rearrangement options

Here are some ideas that learners may come up with, or which you could suggest:

- 1 Learners agree to do all the rearrangement completely silently. This will involve picking up furniture, rather than dragging, shoving, pushing or pulling. (You might want to take a minute to teach the verb 'pick up'!)
- 2 Get volunteers, or appoint one or two of the class, to take specific organisational roles. For example, 'Your job is to make sure that all the chairs are moved over to the side wall here and stacked neatly' or 'Monitor what is happening, and remind people to keep the noise down!'
- 3 Move all learners to one side or corner of the room, and select just a small number to do the actual moving. (These could be different people each time you need a move, adding an element of competition about which team does it best; timing the teams is also a possibility.)
- 4 Plan the moves like a military campaign, rather than all at once, and then give the instructions to do them in stages, waiting for each to be completed before going on to give the next one. For example: (1) Pick up your chair, (2) Bring your chair over here and stack it, (3) Go back to your table, (4) Push your table to the side of the room, etc. Tell students to stop moving and be quiet after they have finished each step.
- 5 Or ... get in early, and do all the rearrangement yourself before the class arrives!

Questions for reflection

- Have a look at this story from Ken Wilson in his blog. (2010).

I did an activity with a class in a state/public school of 14-year-olds in Spain once. There were 33 students in the class (I remember because I put them in four teams of eight and asked the one who was left over to help me organise an activity).

I asked the teacher if I could clear the desks to the walls for five minutes. He looked aghast, and I could see that he imagined being reprimanded for doing it. I promised I would take full responsibility if there was any trouble with the school director.

He reluctantly agreed.

I told the pupils to clear the desks to the walls quickly and QUIETLY and put the chairs in four rows of eight. I timed it. It took one minute and 25 seconds. The activity I did took nine minutes, and then they put the desks back. A certain reluctance to get back to normal meant that the replacing of the desks took more than two minutes.

But it isn't a big chunk of your time, is it?

When I returned to the same school two years later, a teacher I hadn't met the first time said, 'Are you the man who moved the desks?'

■ 1 *The classroom*

- How do you feel about the comment, 'It isn't a big chunk of your time, is it'?
- Do other teachers in your department or school ever (or never) rearrange their classes? Have you ever talked to them about why they do or don't, or what problems they have and how they solve them?
- Are you worried about a fellow teacher (or headteacher) looking through a classroom window and seeing your class apparently in chaos?
- Have you ever had a complaint from a classroom next door about the noise your class is making? Was it fair? Did this affect how you viewed noisy moments in class?
- If you frequently reorganise your classes, do you find that students sometimes complain on being asked to stand up and change seats yet again? Do they have a point or not? How do you respond?

4 Effective seating arrangements

I always arrange my teenage class in alphabetical order of surnames. I'm starting to wonder if this is the most useful way of doing it.

Aim

To seat students in ways that are more useful or effective than sequential or random placements.

Introduction

In some schools teachers deliberately ask students to sit in specific seats for whole class work, such as listening to the teacher explaining something. This arrangement may be:

- Alphabetical order of surname or first name.
- Age or height.
- Recent test scores.
- Gender (all the boys on one side, all the girls on the other; or girl/boy, girl/boy).
- Good and naughty (the naughtier you are, the closer you are to the front).

However, very commonly students simply stay wherever they sat down when they came in the room (which, in a multilingual class, might often mean all of one nationality / language group clumped together).

What these ways don't do is creatively match up people for specific reasons, such as those who might work well together or who might support each other. The techniques in this unit suggest some ways that the teacher can arrange people within the whole class. (For making arrangements useful when working in pairs and groups, (see Chapter 5 Unit 8) *Keeping pair work and group work interesting.*)

Of course, if left to choose for themselves, many students will always sit in the same place every lesson. Most of us do it when we enter a classroom. Some seats feel comfortable, safer, more suitable, more like 'ours'. Even experienced teachers who briefly return to the student role on refresher training courses find that they quickly establish their own place in a room.

When we are the teacher with a class of students, we have to decide how much we go with the natural unfolding of things or how much we intervene to reshape the room and events to achieve what we hope will be a better result. Learners might well show reluctance or unhappiness at being asked to change to a different place, but it's worth taking the risk. Part of the job of teaching is helping people discover things that they didn't know they wanted. When students meet and talk with new people, there may be surprising new learning. The extra effort and initial discomfort may be more than counterbalanced by other pleasant and surprising results.

Of course, some seating layouts may prove not to work at all. As a teacher you need to remain alert to genuine unhappiness, people who simply do not get on together and groupings that do not gel.

Techniques: Organising learners in whole-class work

Here are some ideas for organising learners in different ways for different purposes. All of these require the teacher to proactively make the organisation happen. This may be at the beginning of class or at one or more points later in the lesson.

1 Mixed nationalities / language groups

You may decide to deliberately place students from different language groups next to each other – or more importantly, make sure that learners who speak the same language do *not* sit together.

2 Language support

You can sit stronger students next to weaker ones in order that the former can help the latter. This can work well for short periods of time, but may be unfairly demanding on the stronger student if done over a long time and could be embarrassing for the weaker student.

3 Differentiated learning

Contrastingly, you can group learners by language level – sitting stronger students next to each other and weaker students together. This allows you to offer different tasks, or variations on the same task, to different students. Make sure that any differentiated arrangement you make does not visibly separate or pick out the weaker students in any way that could be embarrassing or uncomfortable.

4 Friendships

The 'wherever they sat when they came into the room' arrangement very often reflects friendships, but is also typically quite random – people sit wherever there is a remaining space. You may want to engineer things a little more, deliberately placing people that you know like each other close together.

5 Learner-planned seating

Ask your learners to plan who sits where. This task could be done in groups where each group has a blank plan of the desks and seats. Each group's arrangement could then be used for a lesson (or a week) – and then the next group's plan and so on. You will need to check that there is no deliberate unkindness involved, e.g. placing students who don't like each other together. You may want to allow some time (e.g. after the lesson) when students can feed back to you if they are uncomfortable with any future lesson's seating plan.

Technique: Organising random seating

Sometimes you may decide that you do want an entirely random seating arrangement, perhaps to help energise the class, to break up sitting-together patterns that are getting stale, to help people meet and work with new faces. You could do this, for example, by:

- Asking students to line up in an order, e.g. order of birthdays or alphabetical order of family name or length of hair – then getting them to sit down in the new order.
- Asking students to meet up with someone they haven't worked with in the last three weeks and find a spare desk to sit at.

You will find more ideas for doing this in Chapter 5 Units 7 and 8.

Technique: Getting students quickly into the right places

This is an efficient way of getting students to quickly sit in the place you want them to be in. Draw a plan showing classroom seat positions. Photocopy it a few times for future use and different classes. On one copy, write the names of the students on each desk, indicating where they should sit. Pin this up on the wall outside the room or just inside the door. Train your students to look at this plan as they arrive and go straight to their seat. It will be chaos the first time you try it, but persevere – it gets better when they have done it a few times.

Questions for reflection

- How are students organised in your class? Do you allow them to sit wherever they choose to? If so, is this inertia on your part – or a deliberate decision that this is the best way to do things?
- Which of the ideas for organising your class appeal most to you?

■ 5 Varying teacher positions

I seem to get stuck at the front of my classroom throughout most of each lesson.

Aim

To experiment with various teacher positions in class.

Introduction

In many movies, cartoons and photos of classrooms, the teacher is typically to be found standing centre stage at the front of the room, face-to-face with the students. This is the classic teacher position, for fairly obvious reasons: the teacher can make eye contact with everyone; all students can see him or her clearly; the teacher can make announcements and give instructions with ease. In traditional education, the teacher might well have stayed in this location through whole lessons, days and courses, perhaps even with the addition of a desk as added protection from students.

But then, in the 'old days', there were also very different assumptions about how people learnt, about the importance (or unimportance) of interaction, engagement and active learning, about the unchallengeable hierarchical relationship of teacher to student. In our more active, more interactive, more democratic classrooms, we can usefully challenge the assumption that the front is the default, best or only place for a teacher to be. Why shouldn't instructions be given from anywhere in the room? Why should the teacher be restricted to only one or two places?

There are many reasons why you might want to play around a little with where you stand in class:

- To explore how being in different positions changes the way the class works: Do students understand instructions and tasks any better?
- To experiment with working alongside students rather than watching them from in front.
- To challenge student assumptions about your role in class. By not being at the front, you subtly start to reduce expectations that you are always 'in charge'. You send the message that you are not always about to make an announcement or give an explanation.
- To see how being in different places changes your own feelings about what it means to be a teacher. Do you feel any closer to your students? Do you feel less in charge? More involved? More or less comfortable generally?

→ Try the experiments in this unit alongside Chapter 2 Units 4 and 5, and Chapter 4 Unit 2.

Techniques: Different teacher positions

The ideas listed here are a few simple experiments. Try one or more of the following ideas:

- 1 If your classroom chairs are arranged in a semicircle, sit mid semicircle, as part of the group, rather than in a separate seat at the front.
- 2 If your class has fixed desks in rows, make one desk (perhaps towards the back of the room) your *base* for a lesson. Keep coming back to this place rather than to the front of the room. (NB such an arrangement may not be viable in a culture where students would feel they were being rude to have their back to the teacher.)
- 3 Give instructions from different locations at the side or back of the room.
- 4 Try clearing a space mid-room, and use this to give instructions. (Yes, you will need to keep turning around to make eye contact with people in different parts of the room!)
- 5 Have a whole lesson during which you deliberately avoid the front of the room, e.g. never sitting down at the front of the class.

When considering where to stand or sit, bear in mind:

- **Special needs** Do any of your students have hearing problems? If so, make sure that they can see your lips when you speak to give instructions or explanations. A window or light source behind you can make this much more difficult as you might appear in silhouette.

Techniques: Standing or sitting?

There's no secret rulebook which specifies that teachers have to stand all the way through their lessons – though many teachers do it so much you wonder if they think that sitting down is in some way illegal. But sitting down can have definite uses:

- 1 **Give yourself a rest** When students are doing tasks they may not need to be monitored all the time. Take the chance of resting for a few minutes.
- 2 **Signal changes of tone and pace** Sitting down suggests a slower pace, a different tone and a less in-your-face teacher mode. Use it to set certain activities apart from the rest. For example, if you are going to read a short story to the class, make a point of sitting down, getting comfortable and opening the book – all classic storytelling preambles. Discussions are another whole-class activity that can benefit from the teacher sitting; they seem to signal *participation* rather than *leadership* in the interaction.
- 3 **Signal that you are trusting them to work without supervision** Sitting down sends the signal to students that you are not about to jump in to organise them, stop their task, start suggesting things or offer corrections. This allows students to feel a little more trusted and a little freer. They might relax into the work a bit more.

When considering whether to stand or sit, bear in mind:

- **Cultural issues** In certain cultures, some postures may be considered inappropriate or offensive (e.g. sitting in such a way that the soles of one's feet are directed at students or sitting on the floor – or asking your students to). If you are teaching outside your own culture, it's important to become aware of and show sensitivity to cultural norms. Locals are