

The Physicality and Emotionality of Learning: Design Inclusive Classrooms for All Students

By Sara Lyn Crump, Ph.D.

Abstract

In today's classrooms, the tone and physical space of learning is increasingly important so that all student voices are included and valued. This position paper aims to describe how the learning space is a sacred one in which students who have disabilities, come from diverse ethnic backgrounds and certainly varied learning backgrounds should feel respected, supported and comfortable to share their viewpoints when interacting with the teacher and with their peers daily. With the increasing demands that COVID-19 has stressed upon our public schools, students are often moving from in-person learning to online learning fluidly so these environments and their tone are more and more relevant and important in the lives of our students.

Introduction

I would love to find out how many teachers originally majored in another discipline but gravitated toward teaching as a sort of calling in early adulthood. When I was an undergrad English major at a state university, I told my parents, "Well, I'm NOT majoring in English education because they have to take classes in bulletin boards or something." My judgmental comment would haunt me a few, short years later when I confessed to them that I wanted to earn a master's degree in education and get certified to teach. Teachers have known for generations that the way we present our learning spaces for our students is an important part of how the students feel when they learn in these environments. In our classrooms today this space is even more important for our students who represent a microcosm of our culture. The way we set the tone in our learning environment matters. In fact, it is essential for the learning process because diverse student groups need a sense of calm and community even more now than back in the late 1980s when I rolled my eyes at the suggestion of a 'bulletin board.'

This fall, I started my 29th year to teach English in public high schools in the Midwest. The first day of school, I asked the students to write a letter of introduction to me on their tablets and I shared a letter as well as a photo of my house. The students shared so many stories of their

favorite foods and their least favorite as well as deeper personality aspects like "I have anxiety" so that I could get to know them as we began our year together. Surprisingly, one senior wrote, "I already enjoy the atmosphere of your classroom and your teaching. I'm looking forward to the rest of the semester." Another student wrote, "I like the vibe in here. So, thank you for helping me feel less nervous for the first day." And yet another letter said, "I can tell already by your personality and your room that you are an exceptional teacher." These comments sparked a deeper consideration about how important the environment we create in our learning spaces helps students to feel comfortable sharing their stories and learning daily. My aim in seeking a deeper understanding of classroom environment and its impact on today's learners is framed theoretically in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is narrative inquiry. This position paper intends to use a narrative, a story with a purpose conveyed about theories in curriculum standards and reform that focus upon inclusive classrooms, their tone and student space in a physical and emotional setting.

Stories and an inquiry into such stories exemplify a teacher's experiences when interacting with the curriculum and the students and emphasize the role of the teacher as a major element of the curriculum (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Thorp and Shacklock (2005) argued that these stories provide structure for teachers to understand their interactions with students in the classroom at a deeper level. They explained that "narrative inquiry is concerned with the production, interpretation and representation of storied accounts of lived experience" (Thorp & Shacklock, 2005, p. 156).

In this way, a life history is told by the person who lived it and who can personify a time period, a sociological context, as well as a political commentary and a personal experience that symbolizes a greater message about the world. In storying experiences, the stories emerge as layers of context to help explain the complexities of a life and

that it is "socially constructed" (Thorp & Shacklock, 2005, p. 156) and not random in its occurrences. Lives take on meaning when the stories are told, retold, and interpreted to develop a sense of self.

The stories help the listeners to understand from a larger perspective beyond the personal lens of the original story (Richardson, 1997). When stories are told, a person's voice develops into a pedagogy that is unique only to that person's way of using words and relating a personal experience that can emerge for greater purpose (Thorp & Shacklock, 2005). It is with this theoretical framework that I investigate the impact the physical and emotional environment has in the lives of diverse learners.

Sacred Spaces

I have always considered my classroom a sacred space for learners to be themselves and to interact with me and the curriculum, but I have not thoroughly considered what this space really means until recently. Inclusion for all learners is vital in today's classrooms as well as a flexibility to make learning enjoyable for students quarantining and exposed to Covid-19 which adds a challenging layer of instruction for educators.

As an emphasis to create a safe learning environment for diverse learners, spatial distancing was a priority this fall. Students were encouraged to sit where they were comfortable a safe distance from someone else. Glatter, Deruy and Wong (2016) argued that "Each classroom will be set up based on what is necessary to meet learning objectives. But schools will prioritize configuring classes to inspire learning first and foremost, and, where appropriate, reflect the diversity of environments that students are exposed to outside a school setting" (n.p.). The physicality of the learning environment does affect a student's feelings about learning in that space. Each teacher should use the classroom space and tone to enhance the comfort of their students by personalizing the space and by being a constant, positive presence within the space in which to interact during a pandemic or non-pandemic time. These spaces function as part of the curriculum because they create the setting in which students learn.

Additionally, the environment functions together with the curriculum and of course, the teacher. Schwab (1969) demanded that the curriculum be shaped in accordance with the practical realities of teaching and learning. He further delineated the four pillars of the curriculum as the teacher, the learner, the subject matter, and the setting. Teachers were considered to be imperative for both shaping and understanding the curriculum.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) argued for envisioning the curriculum in tandem with experience and for the recognition of the idea of the teacher's role in planning the curriculum. This call renewed a sense of urgency for positioning the curriculum within classroom and school landscapes. It further acknowledged the need to recognize the

agency of teachers as professionals and to envision the actual curriculum work that teachers accomplish. Jackson (1990) further enhanced this view by turning the lens onto what happens in the classroom as the curriculum. His theory is essential to gaining insight into the curriculum, with an understanding that teachers drive the curriculum that is lived out between them and their students. In this way, the teacher is the leader who sets the tone for the inclusive nature of the classroom environment to elicit engagement from each person in the class. This environment develops relationship both between the teacher and the student as well as among the students.

Schlein and Schwarz (2015) shared that the relationship between teachers and the curriculum has been seen historically as connected. They described the history of Quintilian, who was the first paid teacher in first-century Rome, explaining that "The teacher was the wise, able person from whom one could learn philosophy, one's trade, and much else. The teacher was and remains a model, the exemplar of the curriculum in action" (p. 6). The authors further argued for an understanding of "teachers as curriculum" (Schlein & Schwarz, 2015, p. 2). The role of teacher as curriculum examines the functionality of curriculum in the classroom and the how and the why of instruction. Teachers have a certain rapport developed with a group of learners that only happens in a dynamic and personal way.

Moreover, Schlein and Schwarz (2015) said, "If teachers are seen as possessing knowledge, then they are the professionals responsible for professional decisions and actions" (p. 7). Thus, teachers as curriculum incorporates a perspective on the increased professionalization of educators due to the critical positioning of teachers and their knowledge and experience to drive the curriculum. Teachers' work when creating curriculum, delivering instruction, and interacting with their student audience generates a phenomenal experience that is larger than the classroom. Schlein and Schwarz (2015) argued that accepting the notion of teachers as the curriculum includes acknowledging that teachers bring their own knowledge of the discipline being taught, an understanding of how to teach effectively, and an understanding of their audience as well as "other contextual features of local curricular situations and interactions. They also bring their desires to contribute to communities" (p. 3). This perspective intends to add to the premise that teachers create the environment by serving as a living curriculum that involves spaces for students to share, think and engage daily not only in the discourse but in each other's lives. Inclusion for all means instilling an understanding of each person's valued story and their contribution to the learning.

Diversity

Within these spaces, students may be placed in AP classes, dual credit, regular tracked classes, gifted or special education classrooms and represent a diverse cross-section of learners. Students in my classes often

have accommodations for learning through the use of a 504 plan. For these learning plans, often preferential seating, repetition of directions, verbal and written instruction and sounds can be important for students while they are in my room. These needs are met by specific plans and accommodations, but there is also an element in today's classroom environments that includes culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002). Geneva Gay (2002) developed a framework that describes learning as culturally responsive, which includes establishing an environment for students to "deal directly with the controversy, studying a wide range of ethnic individuals and groups contextualizing issues within race, class, ethnicity and gender" (p.108). Gay (2002) explained that when students are taught in a culturally responsive way, they experience the curriculum in a way that helps them embrace differences in a non-confrontational manner. She found that "culturally responsive teachers are critically conscious of the power of the symbolic curriculum as an instrument of teaching and use it to help convey important information, values, and actions about ethnic and cultural diversity" (p. 108). When the tone of the classroom is established by the teacher from the first day, the students will be more apt to share of themselves and even discuss controversial issues with consideration of views opposite theirs. Clandinin and Connelly (1999) found people live "storied lives" in that sometimes the decisions they make are purposeful and aware, but other times, these choices are made without a conscious awareness (p. 93). When students share their stories in the classroom where they feel safe, they will gain more in their educational acumen and may not even be cognizant of this willingness to grow and learn.

Teachers should encourage students to share their stories daily so that students develop an understanding of the fact that a person is not one-dimensional and only what we see on the outside, but there is a whole backstory to each person's persona in a classroom setting. Just as we include our passions, interests and experiences into our lessons, teachers' decisions in how they fill the learning space for their students whether in person or on a virtual platform, they should recognize that their personality and tone is a signature to the feeling created in a learning space.

Space is often not considered as an important factor in experiences of teaching and learning. Yet experiences happen somewhere, and teaching and learning is contextualized within the confined of specific classrooms and schools. They are further embedded in particular contexts and cultures. There are so many ways to share space in a classroom. I usually think of it as a physical place, the room itself but throughout my experiences, I have concluded that spaces can have many different definitions and roles that include an emotional space in a classroom.

In Igoa's (1995) work with immigrant children, she relies on the dialogic to create energy in her classroom. Igoa (1995) explained that "there is a lot of good energy in the classroom because transformations begin to take place" (p. 118). When we share space with our students, we can

focus on this positive energy to push our students as readers, writers and as thinkers. Students who feel comfortable in a classroom because of the aesthetics of the environment whether it is involving the smells of candles, lamps, student work on the walls, school spirit and colors, plants or even posters and photographs, the personalized signature of the teacher communicates to them that they are important and trusted to be independent learners. Jacobs and Weber (2020) discovered that "The classroom should serve as a safe space for children and adolescents to express themselves, their heritage, and their stories without experiencing negative social, academic, or institutional stigmas" (p. 1). This notion is prevalent for all learners in our safe spaces including students from diverse backgrounds ethnically, socio-economically and learning abilities.

Special Education

Teaching during the current times requires flexibility among educators, students and parents. Not only do we need to insure that our spaces are inclusive for all learners, we must work with our students to practice equity in our teaching practices for students who qualify for special education accommodations. Fransisco, Hartman and Want (2020) found that "Special education is often seen as as a way to provide equity for individuals with disabilities; however, it may seem that the current way special education is structured does not pave the way to that equity...There are so many layers in the intersectionality of special education and inclusion, such as race, gender, and socio-economic background" (p. 5). These layers of diversity are represented in special education populations as well as regular education students.

A current student enrolled in the dual credit English class I teach wrote her personal narrative about a keychain her mom gave her to remind her that she is strong and can do anything anyone else can. Catie (pseudonym) was born with mild Cerebral Palsy. Her narrative focused on the message about her disability that does not prohibit her from being included in both physical activities nor learning experiences.

In her narrative, Catie writes, "I remember feeling the cringy embarrassment if someone asked because it only reminded me that my deficiency was there, and everyone saw it. Everyone saw me getting pulled out of my classroom for physical therapy. My mom, however, made sure I was never treated any differently. She couldn't stop the questions, but she made sure teachers didn't help me up when I fell." Afterall, we all want to be included and counted "in." Teachers set the tone to invite all learners in their classrooms to be valued and important. Catie's story rings true of my work with her. According to her IEP, she can have extended time and does well with redirection and verbal re-iteration of directions. Catie understands that she needs these extra accommodations for success so she leans in and embraces them so that she can "not be treated any differently" as she so aptly stated.

Jeffrey Dorman (2009) revealed that environment has everything to do with learning outcomes for students. He explained that "One of the stronger areas of classroom environment research has been the study of links between classroom environment and student cognitive and effective outcomes" (p. 70). Dorman (2009) found that there was a significant correlation between classroom environment and student efficacy for academics. He discovered that "significant positive correlations between academic efficacy and teacher support, involvement, investigation, task orientation and equity" (p. 79-80). This finding indicates that environment impacts students as they learn in many different capacities. Also, teacher attitude connected in establishing an inclusive and welcoming tone within the classroom environment helps students with disabilities. Rodriguez, Saldana and Moreno (2012) explained that "positive teacher attitudes are an important predictor of the successful education of children with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorder" (p. 1). The environment we establish from the first day of school does matter for all students who enter our spaces to learn each day.

We share our spaces with all learners which is at a heightened level of importance in an age where our country has racial tensions and students can be abruptly put on quarantine and required to figure out how to learn online. It didn't take me long at the beginning of my career to realize that it really is not about the bulletin boards, but more about the physicality of the learning space and the emotional tone the teacher creates that can motivate students to want to be there to learn daily and to share their stories.

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