The Effects of Rows vs. Semicircular Seating Arrangements on Students’ Participation

An Action Research Project Proposal

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Rows versus Semicircular Seating Arrangements

Original Stimulus

As part of our coursework, I was permitted to observe teachers and training videos that would prepare me for future teaching experiences. I attended several classes at HPU, ELS, the Bridge Program, and watched teaching training videos in the Meader Library. Throughout my 48 hours of observations I noticed several different uses of seating arrangements (SA). Something that caught my interest was how the teachers changed the SA for different activities. Many of them were very creative and enhanced the students’ involvement. For instance, in previous classrooms I have been accustomed to a SA of rows during presentations. However, in an observed ELS class the SA was a circle and the presenter was seated within it. The students seemed to be actively listening to the presenter, probably because they were more visible. In another class, the teacher always had the SA in a semi-circle. This allowed him to interact more easily with the students, and it also suited his active body language. For instance, when speaking Spanish the teacher would often try to illustrate words through body language and the semi-circle gave him sufficient space for movement. Lastly, I was really impressed by a SA used in a debate presentation. The students were on two teams of three people, and the teacher seated the teams in two vertical rows in front of the class. The two debate teams sat in different rows facing each other. The rest of the class was in regular horizontal rows. The SA made it easy for the debate teams to communicate with each other, and easy for the teacher to evaluate them.
Narrowed Topic-Focus

Observing many different types of SAs for their different situations and activities stimulated my interest in researching this topic. This is an important component teachers should think about when they are managing their class. If SAs are neglected, I believe it can negatively affect students’ participation. Consequently, the focus of this Action Research Proposal is to explore how different types of SAs can affect the students’ participation in class.

Motivation

The idea for my Action Research Proposal came after completing an observation task called “the Learning Environment”. In the task I considered how physical factors in the classroom affected the students’ and the teacher’s mood. I observed that the teacher had not paid attention to the class’s SA. The classroom was very large, and had 28 desks. However, there were only 11 students, and they were all spread far apart from each other. Two students were even seated at the end of the classroom. This SA had a negative affect on the classroom environment because it lessened the communication between the teacher and students. It also cost the teacher time when she had to give the students handouts, as she had to walk to the end of the room. This observation led to the realization of the importance of SAs, a classroom management issue not to be neglected by the teacher. I therefore started focusing more on the different types of SAs in my other observation classes.

Literature Review

Ridling (1994) investigated three different SA types (U-shape, herringbone shape,
and traditional rows), and the effect they had on teacher to student interactions. This can be related to students’ participation because the students’ interaction with the teacher requires them to participate. The results from this study revealed that using U-shaped (figure 2) and herringbone SAs (figure 1), enhanced the teacher’s interaction with students, and the students’ interaction with themselves. The interaction was significantly higher with these SAs, than with the traditional rows.

Marx, Fuhrer, and Hartig (1999) also compared traditional row SA to a U-shape SA, although they referred to it as a semi-circle. The authors compared these two types with the participation of question asking. In other words, they wanted to find if the question asking was higher with traditional rows or with a semi-circle. The authors found that the question asking was higher with a semicircular SA, as this SA gave the students a stronger feeling of being in the presence of the teacher, so the students felt obliged out of courtesy to participate.

Hasting and Schwieso (1995) observed if the student’s participation on individual tasks was higher with a row SA, or in groups with a small circle SA. According to their observations, the task engagement was higher when students were seated in rows. They also found that “children who spent the least time actively engaged with their individual tasks when seated in groups gained most from the change to a rows arrangement” (p. 284). However, when Hasting and Schwieso (1995) conducted a questionnaire the results revealed that the majority of the students felt they worked better in groups. Consequently, there was a mismatch between observed behavior and expressed preference.

Finally, Wannarka and Ruhl (2008) came to a similar conclusion as Hasting’s and
Schwieso’s (1995) after doing an empirical research review. They believed that “teacher’s who want to maximize the on-task behavior of their students during independent work should consider utilizing rows rather than groups” (p. 91). The reason was that the subjects showed more on-task behavior, like hand raising or complying with requests. They also believed that previous research clearly indicated that the nature of the task (i.e., independent vs. interactive) should dictate the SA. More specifically, a row SA with independent tasks, and a semi-circle SA with interactive tasks, like brainstorming or questioning the teacher.

**Research question**

The literature review revealed that a circle/semi-circle SA increased students’ participation in interactive tasks, like brainstorming, and in teacher to student communication, such as question asking. However, there was a mismatch between the subjects and the observers in Hasting’s and Schwieso’s (1995) study. In a questionnaire the subjects expressed that they worked harder with individual tasks in small groups (circle SA). Whereas, the observers believed students worked better individually in traditional rows. My research question is therefore: Do students engage more in independent activities when they are seated individually in rows, or when they are in a circle?

**Methodology**

**Type of Data**

In order to collect data the researcher could write observation notes. Focusing on aspects like the students’ participation level, where a grading scale could be applied to
indicate the level of participation. A grading scale defining levels of participation is provided under *Data Collection*. Also, creating a questionnaire would allow the researcher to get the students’ perspective on the different SAs. Permitting the researcher to see if his/her observations correspond with the students’ views.

**Context**

Since I will teach in Norway the setting would be EFL with students of the same L1. There is a possibility I will be teaching English at a high school level, so the students’ level would range from a high intermediate to advanced. Their age would range from 16 to 18 years old. At Norwegian high schools a classroom would typically consist of approximately 20 desks.

**Data Collection**

The following is a suggestion for how I would collect the data. First, I would follow three different classes for four weeks to write observation notes. During the first two weeks of observations the SA would be in four rows, each row containing approximately five desks. The desks would then be arranged to five circles (five groups), during the next two weeks of observations. I would only take notes when the students engaged in independent tasks, following Philpot’s (1993) grading system (mentioned below). After the four-week period, the students would receive a questionnaire. Containing two pictures of the different SAs and the question: *Do you prefer rows or a circle seating arrangement when you work on independent tasks?* The students then mark the picture that contains the SA they prefer. I would then analyze the observation notes and the students’ questionnaire. The observation notes would have a grading system to mark the students participation in independent tasks. Philpott (1993) graded his students
into five activity oriented attitudinal levels: “A – an extremely active student, AAP – also very active, but less ebullient, AP – an average student, who takes part quite willingly in most classroom activities, but does not stand out for his/hers enthusiasm, APP – generally needs to be pushed to some degree into participation, P – tries to avoid participation at most times, may devote more time to off-task behavior” (p. 7). This grading would be applied to the observation notes to determine the students’ participation level with independent tasks. The questionnaire’s results would allow me to see if my observations match the students’ opinions. If they did not correspond then I would have to further reflect on the reasons for the students’ opinions.
References


