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Teaching Secrets: Get to Know Students Through Seating Challenges

By Sandy Merz

Where do I sit? It's the universal first question, at the top of students' minds as they cross the threshold of my room on the first day of class.

Many teachers start the semester with students seated alphabetically: It's easy and aids in learning names. Others may wait to make a seating chart until they get to know their students.

I've tried both of these approaches with my 8th graders. Until recently, I usually seated students alphabetically while paying attention to gender. I'd also get feedback from previous teachers on whether I should watch out for any "bad combinations."

However, these practices don't demand anything from students. Nor do they provide immediate data about the nature of the class.

I've found that by engaging students in seating challenges, I set a positive collaborative tone from the first day. I also gain information about how each class will function—information that might otherwise take weeks to learn.

On the first five days of class, my students determine where they sit based on team problem-solving activities. These activities provide baseline data about class chemistry, learning styles, and students' personalities. The approach requires my students to demonstrate proactivity, collaboration, resourcefulness, and interdependence. They experience my expectations firsthand.

In return, students learn to expect me to be prepared, organized, and supportive—as opposed to being authoritative and having all the answers.

Here's how the approach works in my middle school classroom, which seats 32 students around five large tables. You may want to adapt the activities, select from them, or reorder them. (Currently they're arranged in order of complexity.)

Each activity takes 10 to 15 minutes but there is some preparation. Before beginning, I label the tables and chairs in an orderly way and post the seating challenge prominently.

Day 1: Greet each student at the door and make sure he or she is in the right classroom. Next, before he or she has a chance to sit down, direct the student to follow the posted instructions: "Sit in birthday order so that the person with the birthday closest to January 1 sits in Seat 1. The year you were born doesn't matter. Don't skip seats. When everyone

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is seated, the student in Seat 5 will raise his or her hand and report that the class is ready to begin."

Observe the interactions: Look for organizers, active and passive participants, refusers and disrupters. Be mindful that some students would rather be invisible and that the activity is probably something they haven't experienced before.

If anyone asks you what to do, redirect him or her to classmates and the posted instructions. Encourage students and remind them that you don't know the answer.

When Seat 5 reports in, do a couple of spot checks, show them where your birthday lies (just for fun!), and begin your lesson. By the end of this activity, every student will have interacted with other students and many will have reported to the whole class in a safe, nonthreatening way. (Ok, Seat 5 is under some pressure.)

Day 2: Ask the students to follow these instructions: "Line up in alphabetical order by the name you like to be called. Use last names and then middle names as tie-breakers. Then sit with an equal number of students at Tables 1-4. Remaining students sit at Table 5. When all are seated, the last student raises his or her hand and reports that the class is ready."

Adjusting to have equal numbers at each table produces a lot of interaction and some tension. Watch closely how students with different ideas negotiate. Don't intervene with the answer, but mediate if necessary. Have students quickly report out their names. Treat alphabetizing mistakes kindly, of course.

Day 3 is different. Meet each student at the door with a paper that says, "Read this card completely. Do not enter the room until you understand the instructions. You may talk about the instructions before you enter the room. When you understand the instructions, give the card back to Mr. Merz, enter the room, and begin." Here's what the card says:

1) *Complete this challenge in complete silence: Remain silent for the entire activity. Do not talk or whisper after you enter the room.*

2) *In the room, line up in order by height.*

3) *Then take your seats with the shortest person in Seat 1.*

4) *Do not skip seats.*

5) *When the class is seated, the student in Seat 12 raises his or her hand, and when called on reports that the class is ready.*

Post the instructions in the room as well. Although the task is easy, the silent rule adds some stress, so observe which defense mechanisms students display. Note who is comfortable reading the cards and who avoids the task.

On Days 4 and 5 students sort themselves into groups and sub-groups that may be lopsided. The instructions demand more judgment and decision-making from the students.

Day 4: The instructions read: "Sort yourselves into two groups: sneaker wearers and non-sneaker wearers. Next, each group forms two subgroups: students with curly hair and those with straight hair. You have curly or straight hair if you think you do. Each sub-group finds enough chairs and sits in order from the person with the shortest



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hair to the person with the longest hair."

A tree diagram showing the groups may help. Watch how they negotiate and decide where to sit.

Day 5: The instructions read: "Form two groups—students who prefer to spend free time indoors and those who prefer to spend it outdoors. You may like both but choose just one. Within those groups, define your own subgroups based on the last thing you did when you spent free time the way you wanted to. Find a place to sit together and talk about your free time activity."

By the time you complete this series of seating challenges, you will have a good idea about how your classes will function and have a sense of the key players and personalities. The data can help guide you in your planning and execution throughout the course. And by training students to rely on each other and work together, you've demonstrated your norms rather than explaining them.



*Sandy Merz teaches engineering and algebra and sponsors **MESA** at **Safford K8 International Baccalaureate Candidate School** in Tucson, Ariz. He is a member of the **Teacher Leaders Network** and the **ArizonaTeacherSolutions** team. A National Board-certified teacher in career and technical education, he blogs at **Digressive Discourses**.*

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[Pam_I_Am](#)

Score: 0

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7:53 AM on June 28, 2012

This sounds like a set of great activities with useful underlying purposes. Thank you! I will definitely try these in August with my high schoolers.



[Lance Bledsoe](#)

Score: 0

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8:00 AM on June 28, 2012

Really interesting ideas. I'm a high school teacher and my first day seating procedure is that I greet each student at the door as they come in, ask their name, then direct them to their (teacher-selected) seat. My primary reason for doing it this way is that I want to convey to my students that *I* am the one who decides who sits where. If I make it clear from Day 1 that I'm in charge of the seating arrangements, I can use seating to effectively address a number of potential classroom disruption issues (e.g., excessive off-task talking, etc.).

I'm intrigued by the idea of using seating arrangement activities like these as group problem-solving activities and to get to know student personalities. I may give them a try.



SPED

8:32 AM on June 28, 2012

Score: 0

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I actually do not have a seating arraignment until after the first grading period. "A" students have the choice of sitting in the back of the room, while others, based on behavior, and IEPs, 504s, grades have to sit where I direct them to sit. I just have a few rules the first day. Butts down, heads up, one talker, no phones. No after school tutoring if you are not working in class. Friday circles for weekend launch. that's about it, except class notes, and homework are posted on the web site.



AnnieL

8:45 AM on June 28, 2012

Score: 0

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Interesting ideas. I usually allow them to choose seats with the understanding that if I need to, I will make seating charts. I have small groups of special education students (5 - 12 students) and wonder how well these activities would translate. I have no tables, just a small room with 12 desks. Any suggestions?



khcolumbia

8:51 AM on June 28, 2012

Score: 0

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I don't see anywhere in the article how the final seating arrangement for the year would be determined. This is a great way to establish a collaborative classroom, but If the teacher creates the seating chart after a week of team-building activities; seems to me you've lost the main advantage of such activities.

I teach high school Freshman and Sophomores and have been thinking about ways to take advantage of student's strong feelings about their seat locations.

[▶ 1 reply](#)



raeder4

8:58 AM on June 28, 2012

Score: 1

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Mr. Merz:

I LOVE this activity --- Not only does it let them know that I have expectations for them to think and interact, it engages them from the moment they walk in!

I cannot wait to do this! Thank you! :)



acohen

9:12 AM on June 28, 2012

Score: 0

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I am always astonished that educators will go to such lengths to 'observe' student behavior in the service of controlling conduct and delivering curriculum. My experience is that students are

responsive to genuine effort and opportunity to actually share about who they are, where they are at, and what they might need at the beginning of a course and at the beginning of each class. I have found this way of working with students and groups of all ages and backgrounds to be highly engaging and facilitative of classroom community development and of curriculum absorption.



CSuliteanu

Score: 0

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12:46 PM on June 28, 2012

Sandy I LOVE this!!! I can't wait to try it (with adaptations of course) with my 5th graders. Working collaboratively is an essential skill for every job regardless if you work in a cubicle, as a teacher, or at McDonald's. Everyone needs to learn to communicate according to rules, and these activities provide an extraordinary activity to practice these skills. As a teacher, it's an authentic tool to assess leadership skills, extroverts and introverts, and who challenging students are to the overall goals of a group. Awesome idea, Sandy!



Peter Pappas

Score: 1

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1:22 PM on June 28, 2012

The first days of school are too important to waste by passing out textbooks. You offer a great opening week of activities designed to get the class thinking and collaborating.

Here's my post on a brief lesson that I used on the opening days "First Day of School? Here's How to Get Students Thinking"

<http://bit.ly/qYiFL6>

 1 reply



Carrie Kamm

Score: 0

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2:20 PM on June 28, 2012

Hi Sandy,

This is a cool idea that I will share with the teachers I know. To be honest, I am not sure I would suggest it for a first year teacher on their first day, but this is an activity that students can do any time during the year.

 1 reply



Molly R

Score: 0

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2:47 PM on June 28, 2012

Excellent ideas, Sandy. Excited to adjust for my early childhood students, who do not sit at desks, but tables . Thanks!

Hester Prynne

Score: 0

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2:54 PM on June 28, 2012

Can't wait to try this with my new crop of freshmen this fall!
What a great way to allow their natural personalities and inclinations to come out!



JJCuthy

Score: 0

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4:13 PM on June 28, 2012

Thanks for sharing and thoroughly explaining your innovative "seat challenges." Your ideas made me think about how the challenges could include discipline or content area specific work right off the bat as well (navigating or using a map or timeline for social studies, basic language/design of an experiment in science, creating a seating chart or graph after the challenge to illustrate mathematical processes, writing about the seat challenge experience as a journal entry, etc.)

I love that the seat challenges simultaneously model 21st Century skills and dispositions (collaboration, problem-solving, and critical thinking among others) while creating a community of learners. The challenges also position the teacher as a learner vs. an expert through showing (and not just telling) students which I think is incredibly powerful -- can't wait to try them out and let you know how it goes!

-- Jessica Cuthbertson, Denver New Millennium Initiative

 [1 reply](#)



Profaking

Score: 0

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4:24 PM on June 28, 2012

Great ideas! but how does it work? and How long it takes to have all students seated?
For example, in the activity choosing the name that they want to be called students need to talk to each other in order to find their place. it seems to me that it could be a little bit chaotic.
I would like to try but I am afraid that it may takes too long and to be noisy, still, I like the card one. That one looks challenging to me.
Can you tell me how well worked and how long it took in your class?

 [1 reply](#)



Cynthia Hickerson

Score: 0

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6:23 PM on June 28, 2012

I have used all of these activities, but never thought to use them in this way. I love this idea and will definitely use this in my class this year.
Thank you.



Karl Ochsner

Score: 0

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12:49 AM on June 29, 2012

Great ideas Sandy! I have placed my students in groups by learning styles. I give them a learning styles test so that they can see what can be done for the best learning practices for themselves. However, my first year teaching, I placed all the visual learners in one group, audiolearners in another etc.. One group never heard what I was saying, the other group just moved around a lot and others just had their head down reading. Needless to say, the following year, I mixed groups where they helped each other with their strengths, helping others in their learning weaknesses. It's amazing how we teachers survived our first year! :)



nsberg

Score: 0

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11:03 AM on June 29, 2012

I like these ideas! I'd like to see if my new class of 4th graders could manage activities like these!



John Bennett

Score: 0

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1:38 PM on June 29, 2012

A long time ago, a workshop facilitator suggested seating the students randomly - as yours are. I have used the following approach: students choose a seat. Then if I want say five groups (tables), I have them count 1 to 5 around the room until everyone has answered. Then the "ones" are one group or table, etc. since initial seat choices have friends together, note this approach puts them on different teams - a good thing to help with team chemistry.

Also, I'd suggest keeping these random groups together for a while to help them build that team chemistry. Research suggests that it takes up to forty hours to get the efforts of the group to surpass the collective individual efforts. The randomness of choice insures that the capabilities will be uneven and provide good initial adjusting / encouraging among group members to optimize group outcomes.

There is good reason to randomize the groups again (I use the same counting but with their previous group seating as the starting point). This helps students experience different levels of group success - with most groups becoming more successful due to each student's experiences.

AND, finally, I like very much the "assignments" that have been included in the original posting and in the comments. One I've used involves the Tangoes game pieces: for each group, one person is the "instruction developer," one is the "assembler," and one is the "observer" - with additional group members added to observers or assemblers. The instruction

developer chooses the card without showing to others; and then (without seeing the assembling, provides instructions one at a time as requested by the assembler(s). Once the assembly is "complete," the observer(s) check the agreement between card and assembly; they also are to consider how things go and what might work better AND to insure only instruction developer sees card and instruction developer doesn't see the assembly efforts. After completion, fastest accurate assembly group wins, all groups reflect on how things went and how could go better, and then with roles changed within groups the efforts are repeated. Lots of fun, lots of chemistry developed, and lots of skills developed!



Fern White

Score: 0

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6:19 PM on June 29, 2012

What wonderful adaptations of some tried and true ways we groups students.

I usually allow students to self select seating with the understanding that counter productive behaviors will earn them seating assignments. In 17 years of teaching, only two classes have FORCED me to assign seats! I do create collaborative groups for various activities. Groups remain the same for duration of a project. But may jigsaw as needed.

So although I make not give seating assignments unless I have to, these activities align with my style and will provide great observed data for how to select members for working groups as projects and activities arise.

Thank you!!!



savvykathy

Score: 0

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5:27 AM on June 30, 2012

I am interested in the idea of seating challenges. I can see that it would be a good activity to do at any time and that it could be adapted for different purposes. I understand that you are a teacher in a Magnet School and that your school is a candidate for IB. What is your experience with ESL? Does your school admit students that are not proficient in English? I am curious how a seating challenge would work in a classroom with a high percentage of English Language Learners. Some of them will not be able to read English well enough to follow the instructions. Would having the instructions in individual native languages be appropriate and recommended? Or do you think that keeping the instructions in English would highlight more of the baseline data that I might be looking for?



Wanda Gibbons

Score: 0

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11:13 AM on June 30, 2012

After 30 plus years of teaching you don't come across many "new" ideas to try. Your seating arrangement is new in terms of the tasks and length of time it takes. I like this idea and will try

it.

One thing I do is have students fill in the "All About Me" sheets where I ask who their friends are in the class. Then I can have them sit with their friends when I want that kind of arrangement.

Some other ideas for seating or group arrangements that I have successfully used include:

leave one shoe in a pile as they enter the room. I randomly divide the shoes into as many piles as I want groups and then they find their shoes while thinking about the first part of the assignment I have planned. Takes a moment or two but you have them all engaged, thinking and you have created entirely new groups based on my choice of where to place the shoe. Kids like this just because it is different and unexpected.

I hand out coloured pieces of paper to each student as they enter the room. They then arrange themselves in groups according to the colours.

Hand out papers with animal names on them. The students mill around making that animal noise or action until they find the "animals" in their group. I used this when we were studying Animal Farm when we needed groups. Lots of fun and very funny. Most kids loved it.

These ideas do not necessarily involve a lot of cooperation by the students to arrange themselves but then I am forever telling kids that groups or partners are not a life time commitment. They last for 1 class or 10 depending on the assignment or reason. Kids are generally pretty happy as they know this will change. The line of "this is not a life time commitment" must work well as I have heard students repeat it to each other and all seems to work well.

All group arrangements take time but it is time well spent as we all have to learn to work with others. A class that learns to cooperate early in the year will learn and share more over the course of the year than one that is always fighting groups.

Maybe we could check back in early in Sept with reports of how the seating challenges went.



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