From: Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation
To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Making Sense of Place in Our Classroom Spaces
Date: Thursday, November 16, 2023 9:05 AM

Making Sense of Place in Our Classroom Spaces
by Kayla Yurco

One of the core principles of my discipline, Geography, is sense of place. Formally, "sense of place" is a term for the dynamic processes that co-produce our individual and collective sociocultural and emotive connections to geographic areas. Without all this jargon, it just means that the spaces we inhabit (neighborhoods, parks, houses, and more) aren't merely objective, three-dimensional shapes we locate on maps. Instead, spaces become *places* because we attach meaning to them by how we exist in and interact with them. *Places* are the spaces we have experiences within and about which we carry memories and project future hopes.

Sense of place teaches us that there are no truly objective spaces; places might inspire or challenge us (or both!), but they always affect us. You know the power of sense of place if you've ever felt the bustling energy of a busy city square, if you've ever daydreamed about a new vacation destination, or if you've ever procrastinated by cleaning your house or office so you 'can focus better' (or is this just me?).

Classrooms, too, are spaces where sense of place affects student learning—*and* faculty experience—positively, negatively, and somewhere in between. The size, shape, and layout of classrooms greatly influence us, and our pedagogy, even as they weren't necessarily designed with *all* of us in mind. As faculty, we usually can't renovate or even choose our classrooms, but sense of place still has much to teach us. (Indeed, there are entire journals devoted to the topic of learning spaces.)

To start, we can learn a lot about the importance of physical school environments from our K-12 counterparts. Some consider how "place generators"—certain spatial configurations in early classrooms—engender positive lived experiences that children carry as lifelong memories; that is, a positive sense of place related to the process of learning at its broadest scale. We know that university students have had plenty of learning experiences before they get to us. But higher ed classroom spaces have been linked not only to students' perceptions about learning at the college level, but also their sense of belonging and meaning, demonstrating how deeply important the curation of sense of place can be—and the importance of removing barriers to inclusion for diverse bodies and minds.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, studies within university settings show that students perceive auditorium-style lecture halls as passive spaces where they should listen to their expert instructors without much interaction. Higher education institutions are increasingly moving toward more flexible seating that better enables active learning. But for many of us who still teach in rooms with chairs and desks, even whole tables!, bolted down, there are plenty of easy-to-implement techniques like think-pair-share that effectively engage students more deeply, even in large lectures. These activities let us play with *scale* (a second core concept in geography) because they essentially shrink the size of the classroom, allowing for reflection and connection in small(er) spaces, with positive outcomes for learning objectives.

No matter the size or shape, seating arrangements for in-person classes can significantly impact group dynamics as well as student-student and student-instructor interactions (see more examples here and here). If rearranging furniture isn't an option, there are still ways to change the *feel* of the classroom space. For example, you've likely noticed the unspoken rule that students stick with the seats they chose early in the semester (students at Central Michigan University have even written about this phenomenon). There can be comfort in the routine, but an occasional (or frequent!) invitation or encouragement for students to change seats can help them meet and form bonds with new peers and experience their learning space in a new way.

We can also change up our use of learning spaces during our time in them (temporal scale, by the way, is a third core principle of geography!). In *Uncommon Sense Teaching: Practical Insights in Brain Science to Help Students Learn*, Barbara Oakley et al. (2021) share the necessity of "brain breaks" as "quiet mental interludes" that are critical for students to synthesize and retain course material. Breaks in content can be as short as twenty seconds and still be effective in allowing for consolidation of material; in fact, the authors argue that brain breaks are an *essential* part of active learning. Connecting this back to sense of place, breaks in content can also help re-energize students and, therefore, the overall atmosphere in the classroom, regardless of the room itself or its configuration.

Thinking through our lived, embodied experiences with our other senses can further help us curate sense of place for others. For those sensitive to smells in tight spaces or those with food allergies, offering students a short break to take snacks outside the room can be useful. Managing auditory or visual obstacles between students and faculty (like computer monitors) by moving around while teaching can benefit students; the opportunity to have students move around themselves or to even take a class outdoors can create memorable learning experiences, too.

Then there are the less tangible but still critical spaces of learning facilitated by technology: Zoom rooms, Canvas pages, and interactive polls that all take up *space* in our teaching. Studies show that flipping the classroom (e.g., by pre-recording lectures and using in-class time for active learning) can go a long way for student performance and satisfaction. This is just one way in which it's helpful to

think about the unique spaces that technology can create or complement for our physical classrooms (and the potential for digital pedagogy more broadly).

But the most significant way to curate a positive sense of place for you and your students, regardless of what your learning space feels like initially? Talk to them about how you'll approach learning in whatever classroom you're in. Geographers and non-geographers alike will benefit from talking about the classroom space itself—its benefits, its barriers, and its possibilities (one way to do this is through a pre-course questionnaire). Letting students know about the teaching and learning methods you'll use in your shared space, at what scales, and why, can bring to light their expectations and help counter any assumptions they might have (or might not realize they have) based on the space they're in. And if you talk to students about what you—and they—want the classroom to feel like for the time you share there together, you can better help them co-create an ideal sense of place *with* you.

About the author: Kayla Yurco is an associate professor of Geography in the School of Integrated Sciences and a CFI faculty associate in the teaching area. She can be reached at yurcokm@jmu.edu.

*****

To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, please contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu). We always appreciate a conversation with context for feedback. For additional information about the CFI's Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit our webpage.
