

What is a 'Good' Classroom?

Subir Shukla

It is often said that most teachers are not interested in teaching. Hence, the point in trying to identify what makes for a 'good' classroom, especially for teachers, does not arise at all! Just a waste of time, it is said.

Why bother about it?

The people who argue thus also tend to be full of platitudes about the do's and don'ts that a teacher should follow. They tend to overlook the fact that the typical government school teacher has a very difficult situation – a shifting population of children who are at different levels, with home conditions that do not always support education, with having to handle more than one language and more than one class! Naturally, teachers end up finding much of the advice given to them is merely a pile of someone else's dreams that they have to try to live up to, under impossible circumstances.

To my mind, therefore, the question 'what is a good classroom?' is closely linked with what is possible and not just what is desirable. When teachers find that a good classroom is actually possible, more and more of them will actually try to improve their classrooms. Why? Because they will find it is much more fun and satisfying than continuing to live the same humdrum life as before.

What is a classroom?

What do we mean by 'classroom'? In fact, it was a teacher who provided the real answer to this, during a discussion on the future of a foreign funded project, on whether it would continue or not, and what would happen to schools if it did not. This teacher said, "Nothing! Nothing will happen to the school merely because the foreign funding stops. It is a mistake to think that a school is its building, and books and doors and windows. It is, actually, what happens between my children and me. People can come and remove the doors or break the building, but nobody can touch the real thing – that is, what happens between my children and me!"

Thus a classroom is really a learning situation, the physical aspect of which, though important in its own way, is not as crucial as the emotional, intellectual, social and cultural one. A classroom is essentially defined by the nature of interaction among its participants, that is children and teachers, and occasionally others as well (e.g. community members). By itself, the physical aspect can help but not determine this interaction. The focus in this note, therefore, is more on this interaction rather than things that need financial resources.

Work less!

Some years ago, I visited a 'model' school that was implementing what was considered to be 'activity-based teaching'. A teacher from this school complained that such teaching was very, very tiring! On going to his classroom I found that the teacher himself was doing all the singing, action, and so on, while the children sat and watched! Naturally, it was very tiring.

In many ways, even in the traditional classroom this is what we end up doing much of the time. We think out everything for the child, provide all the answers, spoon-feed much of the time and believe that we are very hardworking! Often, even if something is already known to children, we teach the same thing over and over again without bothering to find out whether children can do it on their own or not.

So the first step in getting to a good classroom is: work less! Avoid doing for children what they should be doing for themselves. See yourself as a facilitator rather than a dispenser of knowledge. Make use of their previous knowledge and understanding (and there is plenty of that, believe me). Create room for students to arrive at their own understanding. Instead of wasting time on issues already known to them, identify areas where they really need support and concentrate on them.

Create tasks and beginnings

How can you get around to working less? By finding interesting tasks, which children would like to work upon on their own, leaving you free to offer support where it is needed.

All children are naturally more active than passive. They love challenges, and working on situations that 'move' from one point to another (e.g. games, or making things, or enacting something, or solving a problem). They also find it fun to work with each other, and help each other. Make use of these tendencies to create interesting tasks that you start children off on (as against doing it all for them), and then support them as they complete these tasks.

For example, if you want to teach counting, set up dice games where children are required to count (can you think of a few examples of this?). Or fill up a small container with pebbles, ask them to guess how many there are, and then count to verify. Or, if you are teaching language, create card games where they pull out letter cards randomly and then make words. Or give them a riddle about a character in a story and then read the story on their own (rather than having it read aloud by you) to find the answer. Or, if you are teaching environmental studies, ask students to find out about leaves by making a collection, sorting it, and answering interesting questions. Or ask them to devise an experiment to counter or justify a claim you might have made (e.g. a needle can be made to float).

In all this, your role really is that of identifying tasks or activities that:

- students will find interesting and challenging (that is, they will be possible, but not too easy for their level),
- have a purpose for them (which may be different from the purpose they have for *you!*),
- and
are related to curricular objectives you are focusing on.

Once you have presented the task, children start on them and you offer help only where it is needed.

Finally, once the tasks are over, your role is that of enabling *reflection* on what has just been experienced, in order to consolidate it in terms of learning. Thus children are not learning by memorizing, but by thinking on their own and coming to their own understanding.

As you can see, a good classroom is very different from one where the teacher is doing the talking and pushing and driving much of the time. It is infinitely more relaxing to create interesting tasks and watch students do them, with minimum help from you. All this, of course, does not happen in one go. You have to start carefully, with what can actually be done, before moving on into a situation where your class has children working on their own for a large part of the time.

Don't allow yourself to get bored

Even the most interesting tasks, done repeatedly, begin to wear out and soon stop being interesting. And the loss of interest on the learners' part results in loss of learning. So what is being suggested is not merely doing a few apparently interesting tasks over and over again. There is a need to build in a natural amount of variety in what is being done. In the absence of variety, learning suffers.

A new activity might need to be repeated in more or less the same manner, in the beginning. But very soon, variations in it would be needed. For example, a guessing game where the teacher gives hints for children to guess on the basis of (e.g. I am a plant, whose leaves you eat), after some time would have to be done differently (e.g. asking children to make the riddle, or switching to animals or gases). Instead of asking children to answer as a whole class, they could be divided into small groups or even be required to work individually. Clues could be given in writing, or children be asked to pick up cards on which a word is written or picture drawn, on the basis of which they may have to frame the riddle. In fact, it is very easy to make an activity easier or more difficult depending on the level, background and interests of children, something that is not always possible with the typical textbook lesson.

As you can see, whether in a session of 40 minutes or a whole day, there can be sufficient variety across the period, enabling children to retain their interest. At the same time, since all children do not necessarily learn in the same way, this variety enables *all* children to find a means suited to their particular way of learning.

Students will find interesting and challenging (that is, they will be possible, but not too easy for their level), have a purpose for them (which may be different from the purpose they have for *you!*), and are related to curricular objectives you are focusing on.

What all this implies is that the old system – of teaching the whole class in the same way the whole time with the same material – is not very appropriate. In an activity-oriented classroom, it should be possible for variety to exist, and even for different children (say in different groups) doing what is appropriate for them. Such self-learning phases, during a day or session, provide the teacher an opportunity to help those children who might need such help more.

Discover how rich you are!

Make a list of all those things that can be found in or around your school: e.g. benches, polythene bags, seeds, sticks, pebbles, charts, leaves, sand, old calendars, strings, and countless other things. You'll find that most of them can serve as learning material for something or the other you might want to teach. For example, leaves help in classification and mathematical operations, sticks in seriation and spatial skills and so on. The best part is that they are all free, and you don't even have to make an effort to get them yourself – asking children to collect such material is part of the learning process.

In addition, there are plenty of things that you and the children can make together, which can be used for a variety of learning purposes. For example, masks, clay toys, picture charts, flash cards of all kinds and so on.

Finally, many of you will be lucky enough to have material that has been supplied (e.g. kits for science or mathematics, or library books, etc.) or even be given a certain amount for purchase of materials. Earlier, teachers used to be worried that if any material is spoilt they would have to pay for it, and this resulted in all this material being kept in cupboards or trunks. But now, authorities have realized that material is actually to be used! Hence, torn books or weathered material is no longer considered disastrous. Use it as well and as much as you would like to.

In interaction with such material, children learn through the use of their sense organs and through the dynamic *manipulation* of material from one state to another, as in arranging or making a model or solving a problem and the like.

Thus it is no more true to say that there is a shortage of material, and in a good classroom one would expect to see plenty of it – in children's hands rather than displayed on the wall!

Get children to run the class

Ah, but how can the teacher do all this? By looking upon children as team members who play a role in running the class, rather than as a 'herd to be managed'. One critical assumption here is that once children have purposeful tasks to do, they do not need 'discipline' (you have to try this out before doubting this statement!). In an atmosphere of freedom where children can talk, ask questions, collaborate in completing a task, it is usual to find that they are able to take decisions, handle responsibility, and are eager to support the teacher in as many ways as possible. This includes handling material collection, distribution and storage; helping other children if needed; maintaining discipline on their own. This last is facilitated best if the whole class (that is, teachers and children together) make commonly agreed upon ground rules for functioning, including deciding upon the consequences of violating them. In such a situation, it is common to find that children rarely need to be made to do something. Instead, they come on their own to find out what they should do.

Of course, the difficulty arises when the teacher himself violates the agreed upon ground rules. If he willingly accepts the consequences, he sends a strong message of equality and participation to his children, and discipline is really no problem.

In a good classroom, therefore, we would expect to see everyone working as a group, having both a say and a responsibility too.

Plan it like it's a meal

Naturally, such a classroom would not come about on its own. It needs to be planned for. Again, you'll find many people saying that teachers cannot really plan. And once again, this is something that is simply not true. Take, for example, the situation when some important and desired guest is unexpectedly arriving for dinner and you have to ensure that you do a 'good job' hosting them. Only a few hours are left. You quickly examine what is already there at home, think of a menu that can be achieved within the time but would also be up the 'standard' you want to set. Then you quickly get what is needed, start making preparations in the order that is necessary but also do those things which *can* be done together. And so on. Do you really think you do not know how to plan?

With your classroom too, you would need to start by finding out where the children already are, where you think they should get to in the time available, what you have to do and the sequence in which you have to do it, and so on.

However, in order to do a 'good job' while the meal is being cooked, you keep checking from time to time whether things are OK or not, whether you have added the salt or things are cooked sufficiently. This is what ongoing evaluation is like – you keep an eye on whether learning is going in the right direction or not. Similarly, it is crucial to ensure that you make sure things are available where they should be, that time is not wasted and all resources you have are well utilized. This is what - in the big words of academic educationists - is called 'management' or 'classroom organisation'. In reality, it is something that anyone who has ever hosted a guest (or done hundreds of ordinary everyday tasks) already knows enough about.

At the same time, you do your best to put your guest at ease, to make him feel wanted and cared for. You want to make sure that he feels like coming to your place again! In classroom terms, this would be called a welcoming atmosphere, and is one of the key enabling factor that helps learning.

And finally...

What this note assumes is that the teacher is not an 'empty vessel' who has to be told what to do. Instead, the teacher here is regarded as a partner with whom the basic principles need to be shared and agreed with, based on which she or he will find her or his own solutions. And the key question that needs to be addressed is that of 'hosting' children, and of doing one's best to ensure that they learn actively in an encouraging atmosphere. Can it be done? Are you ready? Here's wishing you the very best in this effort!