THE DESKS SPEAK: THE UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHIES BEHIND OUR CLASSROOM SEATING ARRANGEMENTS

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"Why are the desks in your classrooms in straight rows? Why are all the desks facing the front of the room?" These common inquiries reflect those of many observers of the traditional classroom. A certain trivialization of the matter is common, especially when it seems like classroom seating arrangements are insignificant. However, there are concrete explanations for these questions available to the astute interlocutor. In fact, I propose the answers to these questions reveal that classroom seating arrangements actually reflect ones' philosophy of teaching.

To begin, let us examine the seating arrangements found in the typical contemporary American classroom. Designations such as Four Squares, Horseshoes, and Clusters, though they sound like by-products of a child's imagination, are actually the names of various seating arrangements. If this doesn't stir an image in your mind, just imagine small groups of four desks pushed against one another so the students face their fellow peers. Perhaps another image that is easy to conjure is of a room where desks aren't present at all, but have been replaced by round tables. Notably, the desks are conducive to *student-centered* learning, which is acutely obvious by the ergonomic tendency to face peers rather than the instructor. These types of desk arrangements have become so commonplace that a classroom with rows of straight desks actually presents itself as abnormal. Yet, a mere sixty years ago educators would have been rift over the thought of moving desks out of their straight, tidy rows that faced the front of the room.

UPON FURTHER REVIEW
A SPACE FOR REFLECTION

Articles included here are intended to provide an opportunity for educators to review hidden assumptions about learning.

To what can we attribute this shift away from traditional seating? The central theories that led to this shift came from the European Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Romanticism was chiefly a rebellion again the intellectualism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, or "Age of Reason" as it has been so deftly termed, embraced the idea that man could be improved through the faculty of reason. The Enlightenment theories promoted the idea that man's nature is corrupt from birth and needs guidance, therefore a distrust of human nature prevailed. In stark contrast, Romanticism embraced the idea that perhaps man could make good choices completely uninhibited by outside sources. This idea purported that perhaps inner-goodness is natural. Following those presupposed convictions, if inner-goodness is natural, then the best thing for the human nature must be to leave it alone so it

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can flourish unencumbered by the corrupting tendencies of structure and society.

This influx of Romantic ideology so heavily influenced nineteenth- and twentieth- century philosophers and psychologists that the principle American universities for teacher education at the time, such as Teacher's College of Columbia University, universally came to accept these Romantic theories without question. These theories eventually became known as progressivism, the term we now use to refer to modern educational methods in American education. Even now, it is the general American belief that natural must mean better, just as most believe desks in circles must be better than desks in straight rows. Interestingly enough, one of the first evidences of Romantic theory pervading American educational theory was the unbolting of the desks from the classroom floor so that they could be arranged into student-centered groupings. Yet this has become so mainstream that today a classroom with straight rows stands out as backward and archaic to the uniformed observer.[1]

In contrast, consider the traditional one-room schoolhouse of the previous century for a moment. All of the desks are nailed to the floor, therefore making a decision regarding desk arrangements obsolete for the teacher. Also, think of the way the teacher is teaching. The schoolmaster or schoolmarm is at the front talking to the students, placing examples on the board, and occasionally calling students up to the desk to work with them on an individual basis. Upon further meditation, one reaches the conclusion that this is a *teacher-centered* classroom. Students face the teacher, and thus learning is received from the teacher.

This presents a picture of the traditional philosophy found not only in American education, but also in Western education. This form of education finds its roots in the ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, where the student is imparted knowledge from the teacher.[2] Our forefathers, children of the Enlightenment, showed their obvious distrust in human nature merely by drafting the Constitution which called for a system of checks and balances.[3] This very system upon which our country was birthed is constructed upon the belief that man's nature needs guidance. The traditional forward-facing desks are a reflection of this deeper philosophy at work. This philosophy identifies the need for guidance and direction in order to educate well. It is the assumption that unguided students will not automatically choose the right thing if left to their own predispositions.

In conclusion, traditional straight desk rows represent the need for guidance on the assumption that the innate nature of the student needs to be molded and shaped. This guidance comes to the student via teacher-led instruction. The helter-skelter arrangements that now pervade the public education system represent the dominant American belief that natural must mean better, therefore education should be student-led, with the teacher present simply to act as a facilitator for the students' natural ability for learning. These explanations lend credence to the idea that desk arrangements reflect distinct philosophical beliefs that provide the foundation for learning.

NOTES

1. E.D. Hirsch, *The Schools We Need And Why We Don't Have Them* (New York: Doubleday), 1996.

2. Phillip Vassallo, "Notes on the Methods of Inquiry of Plato and Aristotle," *et Cetera*, 61(3). https://www.questia.com/read/1P3-711212641/notes-on-the-methods-of-inquiry-of-plato-and-aristotle

3. Martin Cothran, "The Classical Education of the Founding Fathers", retrieved from http://www.memoriapress.com/articles/classical-education-founding-fathers