

In the Classroom

En Classe

This section presents descriptions of teaching techniques or practical classroom activities.

Cette section est consacrée à la description de différentes techniques ou activités d'enseignement.

STAND UP! SIT DOWN! TALK! TALK! TALK!

Joyce Cunningham

(True confession heard at the altar of McGill University)

Good ole Protestant work ethic! It had me finally in its grip! So much so that I thought that I had to stand to teach.¹ Sitting down would be viewed as relaxing too much. It might possibly slow down my lesson. My Director might walk by just then and misconstrue this position as “Obviously, not doing her job”. Finally, I often felt too driven by nervous energy to take the time to sit down. It was a shock when I finally realized what an invaluable tool sitting down could be for a language teacher.²

It finally dawned on me that standing also often facilitates teacher-centered activities. By this I mean, whether you stand in front, slightly to the side or at the back of the class, students’ eyes will inevitably turn toward you easily seeking your opinion or advice on a particular point. You are by dint of your “altitude” placing yourself in a dominant, decisive position. They will be forced to look up to you (rolling their eyes heavenwards).³

In a language classroom, many activities endeavour to promote discussion in groups so as to encourage students to negotiate information, drawn conclusions and resort to peer correction. Previously, in a discussion such as brain-storming, which might have involved the entire class, I probably would have taken a stance somewhere outside the group in order to lift myself out of the discussions. However, with time, I realized that the students still felt observed and somehow, more obligated to “perform”. Many could not rid themselves of the sensation that my eyes were riveted on them when I was striving to become less visible. By finally sitting down with my students in any chair but the centre front one, I then sat at their eye level. I became more transparent and played a less prominent/dominant role than when standing.

This idea also applies to separate groups of students. If space allows, I try to sit quietly with each group as I go around the classroom, monitoring myself, of course, that I do not remain too long with any group. To a certain degree then, I become a participating member of their group — never completely shedding the teacher image, it is true, but at least, evolving into a more nearly silent observer who can quietly redirect questions back to the other members of the group and who only gives an opinion or solution when absolutely necessary. Some students actually seemed less nervous with my presence in their group and less centered out as could be seen by more relaxed body language and better concentration on the topic at hand.

Try it out in your next class. It will be interesting to know if you sense a difference. Perhaps your students may react to your “strange new place” initially but they soon grow more accustomed to you among them. If you are explaining a point to all the class, presenting information or giving instructions, stand up and walk around the room if you wish. Once you have organized them into a group or groups, sit down with them.

FOOTNOTES

1. Or is it . . . “teach to stand”?
2. The allusion to sitting, however, excludes a permanent or semi-permanent position at the front of the class *behind* a teacher’s desk. It is the opinion of the author that such a position distances students from a teacher and tends to re-enforce or facilitate the traditional authoritative role of a teacher. Moreover, as Mark Heyward explains in *Places and Spaces: Environmental Psychology in Education*, “In an arrangement in which all students are facing only the teacher, class discussion is inhibited because nonverbal communication among students is at a minimum”. Heyward, Mark, *Places and Spaces: Environmental Psychology in Education*, Bloomington, Indiana: The Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1978.
3. Articles consulted such as “Physical and Social Distancing in Teacher-Pupil Relationships”, Schwebel, A. J. and D. L. Cherbin, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Volume 63, No. 6, 1972, pp. 543-550, make reference to mainly grade schools assigning permanent seating or assessing pupils’ behavioral and social interaction and attitudes. Little or no mention is made of the effect of the teacher’s mobile position in a classroom and the reaction of the students to it.

THE AUTHOR

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