

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.

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