Learning to Move:
Connecting Pedagogy with Context through a Difficult Classroom

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Abstract: The physical configuration of a classroom can enhance or hinder certain pedagogies. We trace as a case study the pedagogical rationale behind one CWRL classroom's physical set-up, instructors' responses to that set-up, and the Lab's strategies for improving instructors' and students' relationship to that space.

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bell hooks writes in Teaching to Transgress that, as "a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence. [… Any] radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged."[1] Two CWRL classrooms envision a radical pedagogy by spatially foregrounding student groups in an effort to acknowledge everyone's presence and challenge traditional classroom hierarchies. In these two "pod-style" classrooms there are four hexagonal tables with an individual computer at each student's desk. As instructor Matt Russell explains, "Ideally, this is the kind of classroom that challenges the traditional, distributive and passive model of teacher => class, where, kind of like a play onstage, 'class' is both defined and constrained by the work and presence of the teacher, to whom students are visually drawn." One classroom, FAC7, is a large, square room, with laptop computers for students. The other

[1] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 8.

pod classroom, Parlin 102, is a narrow, rectangular room, with iMac desktop computers for students. Parlin 102 was reconfigured in the pod style in 2003, and since then instructors have struggled with the physical constraints of the room.

In 2004, CWRL developers gathered responses from instructors about their experiences with the classroom in an effort to assess possible changes to the room or to make an argument that the room should be reassigned as a lab rather than a classroom. As we compiled the report of our findings, we realized that this collection of voices comprises a useful study of the ways physical space influences pedagogical practice. The fact that the CWRL hosts these two pod-style classrooms indicates the Lab's commitment to exploring and reconfiguring the impact of institutional space on learning. With the publication of this report, we initiate a public narrative about how to talk about this impact, and we hope that building this vocabulary will help instructors begin to understand their classrooms as a part of their class resources and to be able to consciously work with (or against) the physical context for their pedagogies.

This report, then, models a group discussion about the constraints of a space and a community of teachers' tools for dealing with these spatial dynamics. Until this report, no group action or discussion of classroom space took place, and no orientation to the pod-classroom or, specifically, to the problematic Parlin 102, was conducted. In Classroom Spaces and Writing Instruction, Ed Nagelhout and Carol Rutz explain how a metanarrative about classroom space can foster productive classroom dynamics:

> To ignore unsuitable furniture or to work in spite of noisy distractions is to foster a fiction that requires the classroom to be idealized or normalized instead of being recognized as an environment with specific characteristics that affect the people and activities that occupy the space. […] Working together to identify and name the idea of the classroom, teachers and students redefine this space every semester in ways that best suit their work together.[2]

[2] Ed Nagelhout and Carol Rutz, "Introduction: The Spaces of the Classroom," in *Classroom Spaces and Writing Instruction,* eds. Nagelhout and Carol Rutz (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2004) 7-8.

In order to "name the idea of the classroom" and "redefine this space," teachers in the CWRL (and beyond) must learn to think and talk about the space of the classroom, the theory behind it, and the function (or dysfunction) of that space for the class underway. This report models such a process by examining the study of Parlin 102 in three stages: naming the "specific characteristics" of Parlin 102, and identifying short- and long-term strategies for dealing with the room.

Specific Characteristics: Experiencing the Space of Parlin 102

Instructors describe pressing problems with the room. Its long, narrow shape creates a distant "front" and "back" of the class: fostering cohesive discussion is a challenge, they report. Moreover, bulky desktop computers obscure students' view of one another. Also, the proximity of the pods makes it difficult to walk around the room. And the instructor station, in a back "panhandle" of the room, is at a remove from the class. The shortcomings of the classroom directly contradict two ideals of the room's form: motivating student involvement and undermining hierarchy. Rather than creating a classroom in which, as bell hooks suggests, the instructor and all of the students engage in "recognizing one another's presence," the shape of the classroom resists connection. Jenny Edbauer explains the effect of the room on her class:

> It's a proximity to instructor issue: I completely lost back of room. I had to do awkward maneuvering to get to the students; I felt like they weren't even part of the class. My suspicion is that people who wanted to drift off gravitated to the far corner. It seemed like room was cut in the middle in terms of atmosphere.

This split room, then, resists the group collaboration the ideal pod should create by seating students in groups facing each other. As Miriam Schacht points out, the pods do not successfully redistribute classroom authority:

> It also feels really hierarchical in discussions. I can't just sit at a table with them, because my back would be to half the class, so I end up sitting on the side table, sitting up front at the instructor computer, or at the board. Whichever way I'm doing it that day, I am always clearly marked, by where I am physically, as The Authority. I also find I need to be much more directive about class discussion, calling on people when folks are reluctant to talk, asking very leading questions, etc. Contrast this with 104, where I sit at a table with the students, and where discussions are much more organic, and I facilitate rather than need to direct. I don't like the hierarchy and the rather authoritarian position of the instructor that the physical setup of the room emphasizes.

These two concerns, classroom split and reinforced hierarchy, indicate the failure of the room to achieve its ideal simply by virtue of its organization.

Parlin 102 in the Short Term: Training and Choice

In addition to classroom observations, we also collected teaching strategies that instructors used to respond to and interact with the challenging space of Parlin 102. This feedback has applications for Parlin 102 and for other technology classrooms by modeling a discussion of theories behind daily classroom strategies. Instructors generated this list of classroom-specific teaching strategies:

> - using pods to facilitate group work.
> - facilitating discussion with online chat in MOO spaces and with iChat.
> - experimenting with strategies of movement. Some experienced instructors suggest that rotating student seating and changing day-to-day their own location in the room creates more class cohesion and combats a "disengaged pod" phenomenon.
> - using Bluetooth keyboard and mouse.
> - setting clear policy regarding students' screen position and computer use during class.

Several instructors described how the constraints of the room led them to make their movement within the classroom more deliberate. Christina Potter emphasized the importance of getting everyone moving:

> I don't worry too much about whom I'm bumping into, or who has to move over to let me by. (Moving keeps them awake.) I move around a lot, and I try to stay as far away as possible from whoever's talking at the time, so that he or she has to address the whole room rather than just me. Occasionally, I make students move around to do group work, just so they get a chance to see each other's faces unimpeded by the screens.

And Davida Charney described the effect of changing her place in the classroom:

> The best continuous discussion I was able to get going was when I started using the remote keyboard while sitting in the middle of the room at one of the pods. I would only get up to write on the board. The guy sitting nearest the console got dragooned into doing stuff I couldn't do from where I was. AND the first thing I did EVERYDAY was to ask everyone to lower the screens down to where we could see each other's

eyes over them. The difficulty was that the remote mouse and keyboard were always a little flaky.

The continued thread of movement suggests a need to escape the constraints of the room's arrangement. Mary Ann Cain's chapter on the relationships between movement and learning help to describe the relationship of this specific discussion about Parlin 102 to teaching practice in a range of spaces. Cain writes, "A main problem in learning new movements is that our prior movements are not learned consciously. Thus, we have very little awareness of how we move, focused instead on what we want our movements to accomplish (the 'ends' we are after)." In gathering instructor comments about their metaphoric and literal movements within Parlin 102, and in recording those comments here, we encourage instructors to become aware of "how we move" in the classroom. Looking toward long-term solutions, Cain reminds us of the diverse possibilities for our movement, and, in connection, for our learning practices, since our unaware patterns of movement "do not come even close to tapping our overall capacity for movement."[3]

> [3] Mary Ann Cain, "Active Minds, Invisible Bodies: Classroom Spaces as Constructions of Experience," in *Classroom Spaces and Writing Instruction,* eds. Nagelhout and Carol Rutz (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2004) 103.

Based on these strategies, we developed a workshop to foster an awareness of classroom structure and movement in Parlin 102 instructors; this report is a continuation of that public discussion. By introducing instructors to the challenges and possibilities of pod-teaching, we introduce the need to create assignments and class activities that will play to the strengths of the room configuration. Moreover, by more clearly articulating the possibilities of pod teaching, we ask instructors to reflect on how their teaching philosophies might be best matched to different configurations: instructors should have the opportunity to request either our pod or large-central-table-style classrooms and comment on why that set-up is important to their course goals.

Parlin 102 in the long-term: a new function

The classroom-specific training, and allowing instructors to match their teaching goals to the type of classroom they request, can improve instructors' relationship to this (and any) space. But Parlin102 is, simply, awkward: no change in configuration or hardware will make it comfortable for 24 students, an instructor, and its technological apparatus. In the long-term, we recommended making it the CWRL's open lab and turning the current open lab, Parlin 6, into a classroom, perhaps as soon as Fall 2005. Parlin 102's windows would make for a more pleasant work space for our instructors and students, who often spend hours in our open lab. Parlin 6, with its center island removed, would make a larger and more regularly-shaped classroom. Moreover, Parlin 6 is already outfitted with an LCD projector and screen.

We would need to install an intercom, or some type of instructor-to-proctor communication system, to make this plan work. We have created models in which the proctor station is located either in its current position, in 102A, or in within 102 proper, with 102A made the new multimedia editing station. Installing our multimedia equipment in that small room would be a helpful change: more of our instructors are assigning multimedia projects and sound and video editing can be distracting to other open lab users.

For a visual analysis of these issues, Appendix A of this report offers two open lab models for Parlin 102. Appendix B offers a model for Parlin 6 as a classroom.

Rather than reading this report as a document that solved the problem of Parlin 102, we hope instructors and students will see this document as a tool providing vocabulary and models for ongoing conversations about the important relationship between learning and its spatial context. Ed Nagelhout and Carol Rutz again remind us that examining this relationship is necessary for understanding the implications of our individual pedagogies:

> Too often, students think of learning and teaching as happening only in certain kinds of spaces. Until teachers unsettle those spaces (or ideas about those spaces), making them visible, students won't recognize that they rely on and feel comfortable in a certain kind of space, equipped and organized in certain ways. And teachers rarely recognize the ways that space contributes to the complex weave/intersection of attitudes, values, constraints, cues, behaviors, and knowledges that affect what we attempt to accomplish as teachers. We want teachers to theorize, define, and make visible the implications of various classroom phenomena in order to promote ongoing analysis of the work done in classrooms by students and teachers.[4]

[4] Nagelhout and Rutz, "Introduction," 5.