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January 1, 2013

Activity Permissible Classrooms: The Next Revolution in Teaching & Learning

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The Next Revolution in Teaching & Learning: Activity Permissible Classrooms

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For more than twenty years I have been teaching college and university lecture/discussion courses in the typical classroom setting. The classrooms have usually consisted of thirty to forty chairs with fixed attached desks organized in neat rows, all facing front. There was little opportunity to alter the configuration because of the confined space, time, and the other classes that preceded and followed mine. In the fall of 2008 this all changed when I began to restructure my teaching space to be a more activity permissible classroom. I replaced the stern and imprisoning structure of the fixed desks with exercise stability balls as seats and table top desks. Researching the effectiveness of the activity permissible space revealed that 98% of the students surveyed would like this option in every class.

During the spring of 2010 I expanded the options in the classroom to include fixed-height, stand-up desks as an additional choice for the students. In these courses students had the option of sitting on the exercise balls, standing at a desk, or sitting in a regular chair at a table top desk. Some students used the balls, some used the standing desks, and some used traditional chairs at desks, while still others sat in a regular chair with their legs or feet resting on a ball. It was the most exciting teaching and learning space I had ever experienced.

The far reaching publicity the new space received led me to the furniture maker Steelcase who offered to add their new Node desk/chair to the classroom. Grand Valley State University was one of three schools selected to pilot the new desk/chair. The Node is unlike any classroom desk/chair. It is a free-wheeling chair with a seat that swivels and a swing-out desk that allows for quick transformation of a teaching space to accommodate learning circles, small groups, even movement games. The Node was recently featured in a front-page article in the *New York Times*,

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/05/education/some-schools-buy-new-chairs-in-a-break-with-the-past.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, and on *60 Minutes* (IDEO's David Kelley).

I predict the next major revolution in teaching and learning will come from altering the environment and making classrooms more activity permissible. As environmental studies professor David W. Orr of Oberlin College recently shared, "The chair in short originated in the industrial ordering of education. It is maintained by profit-seeking school suppliers and unimaginative administrators who see no other possible arrangement of the body, or bodies, or any possible downside to the lower back from six hours of enforced seating (Orr, D. Jan. 5, 2013, p. A1&3).

At present we are experiencing a wave of new imaginative classroom design. Faculty and students who I know that have experienced an activity permissible classroom are not turning back. This is plainly obvious from the activity in my classroom at GVSU. When I arrive in the morning the custodial person has all of the Nodes lined-up in neat rows. By the end of this first class period the chairs are scattered in orderly disorder. Moreover, the conversation between students prior to the class starting has been greatly enhanced as students are free to swivel and talk to their neighbors. We have not evolved to sit in confining seats and desks, organized in neat tidy rows.

As I write I am again working with Steelcase to introduce their new Buoy chair into the aforementioned classroom. The Buoy will officially launch in March 2013 and Steelcase has agreed to let me pilot fifteen of these new chairs starting next week. The Buoy has many of the qualities of an exercise stability ball but is much sturdier and will adjust to the height of each student.

(See <https://www.dropbox.com/s/3mft8ld5zmxslbl/Turnstone%20Buoy%20Video.mp4>).

The influence that permissible activity has on teaching and learning has been well documented throughout history. From Plato's and Aristotle's *School in Athens*, to Rousseau's *Romantic Pedestrianism*, to Dewey's *Experience and Education*, to present day educators in Denmark who often use classroom seats that allow students to sit or stand, faculty and students have gravitated to educational spaces that allow for more freedom to move. If we hope to compete with many of the changes happening in higher education, i.e., free on-line instruction, etc. we must make the on-campus classroom experience exciting by making the teaching and learning environment one that moves our students, and one they are willing to pay for. Moving towards more activity permissible classrooms is one path to this future.

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Orr, D. (January 5, 2013). *Ergonomic Seats? Most Pupils Squirm in a Classroom Classic*, New York Times, A1&3.