

## Teaching Secrets: Get to Know Students Through Seating Challenges

By **Sandy Merz**

June 27, 2012

*Where do I sit?* It's the universal first question, at the top of students' minds as they cross the threshold of my room on the first day of class. [← Back to Story](#)

Many teachers start the semester with students seated alphabetically: It's easy and aids in learning names. Others may wait to make a seating chart until they get to know their students.

I've tried both of these approaches with my 8th graders. Until recently, I usually seated students alphabetically while paying attention to gender. I'd also get feedback from previous teachers on whether I should watch out for any "bad combinations."

However, these practices don't demand anything from students. Nor do they provide immediate data about the nature of the class.

I've found that by engaging students in seating challenges, I set a positive collaborative tone from the first day. I also gain information about how each class will function—information that might otherwise take weeks to learn.

On the first five days of class, my students determine where they sit based on team problem-solving activities. These activities provide baseline data about class chemistry, learning styles, and students' personalities. The approach requires my students to demonstrate proactivity, collaboration, resourcefulness, and interdependence. They experience my expectations firsthand.

In return, students learn to expect me to be prepared, organized, and supportive—as opposed to being authoritative and having all the answers.

Here's how the approach works in my middle school classroom, which seats 32 students around five large tables. You may want to adapt the activities, select from them, or reorder them. (Currently they're arranged in order of complexity.)

Each activity takes 10 to 15 minutes but there is some preparation. Before beginning, I label the tables and chairs in an orderly way and post the seating challenge prominently.

**Day 1:** Greet each student at the door and make sure he or she is in the right classroom. Next, before he or she has a chance to sit down, direct the student to follow the posted instructions: "Sit in birthday order so that the person with the birthday closest to January 1 sits in Seat 1. The year you were born doesn't matter. Don't skip seats. When everyone is seated, the student in Seat 5 will raise his or her hand and report that the class is ready to begin."

Observe the interactions: Look for organizers, active and passive participants, refusers and disrupters. Be mindful that some students would rather be invisible and that the activity is probably something they haven't experienced before.

If anyone asks you what to do, redirect him or her to classmates and the posted instructions. Encourage students and remind them that you don't know the answer.

---

### **Back-to-School Savings**

Start the school year right. Get **up to 60% savings** on a six-month subscription to *Education Week*, where you'll find more insights on teaching, learning, and school leadership—as well as essential news and analysis.

**SUBSCRIBE TODAY >**

---

When Seat 5 reports in, do a couple of spot checks, show them where your birthday lies (just for fun!), and begin your lesson. By the end of this activity, every student will have interacted with other students and many will have reported to the whole class in a safe, nonthreatening way. (Ok, Seat 5 is under some pressure.)

**Day 2:** Ask the students to follow these instructions: "Line up in alphabetical order by the name you like to be called. Use last names and then middle names as tie-breakers. Then sit with an equal number of students at Tables 1-4. Remaining students sit at Table 5. When all are seated, the last student raises his or her hand and reports that the class is ready."

Adjusting to have equal numbers at each table produces a lot of interaction and some tension. Watch closely how students with different ideas negotiate. Don't intervene with the answer, but mediate if necessary. Have students quickly report out their names. Treat alphabetizing mistakes kindly, of course.

**Day 3** is different. Meet each student at the door with a paper that says, "Read this card completely. Do not enter the room until you understand the instructions. You may talk about the instructions before you enter the room. When you understand the instructions, give the card back to Mr. Merz, enter the room, and begin." Here's what the card says:

*1) Complete this challenge in complete silence: Remain silent for the entire activity. Do not talk or whisper after you enter the room.*

*2) In the room, line up in order by height.*

*3) Then take your seats with the shortest person in Seat 1.*

*4) Do not skip seats.*

*5) When the class is seated, the student in Seat 12 raises his or her hand, and when called on reports that the class is ready.*

Post the instructions in the room as well. Although the task is easy, the silent rule adds some stress, so observe which defense mechanisms students display. Note who is comfortable reading the cards and who avoids the task.

On Days 4 and 5 students sort themselves into groups and sub-groups that may be lopsided. The instructions demand more judgment and decision-making from the students.

**Day 4:** The instructions read: "Sort yourselves into two groups: sneaker wearers and non-sneaker wearers. Next, each group forms two subgroups: students with curly hair and those with straight hair. You have curly or straight hair if you think you do. Each sub-group finds enough chairs and sits in order from the person with the shortest hair to the person with the longest hair."

A tree diagram showing the groups may help. Watch how they negotiate and decide where to sit.

**Day 5:** The instructions read: "Form two groups—students who prefer to spend free time indoors and those who prefer to spend it outdoors. You may like both but choose just one. Within those groups, define your own subgroups based on the last thing you did when you spent free time the way you wanted to. Find a place to sit together and talk about your free time activity."

By the time you complete this series of seating challenges, you will have a good idea about how your classes will function and have a sense of the key players and personalities. The data can help guide you in your planning and execution throughout the course. And by training students to rely on each other and work together, you've demonstrated your norms rather than explaining them.

---

*Sandy Merz teaches engineering and algebra and sponsors [MESA](#) at Safford K8 International Baccalaureate Candidate School in Tucson, Ariz. He is a member of the [Teacher Leaders Network](#) and the [ArizonaTeacherSolutions](#) team. A National Board-certified teacher in career and technical education, he blogs at [Digressive Discourses](#).*

**WEB ONLY**