

Posted on February 8, 2012

# WHERE YOU SIT MATTERS

HOW CLASSROOM SEATING MIGHT AFFECT GRADES

Picture 6

Location, location, location. A phrase mostly used in real estate can also apply to the classroom, where, unlike in “South Park,” seating arrangements often impact students’ academic performance.

The four troublemaking main characters from “South Park” consistently appear in either the first or second row of their elementary school classroom, but their academic success is nonexistent. Such is the reality of the critically-acclaimed television show, but the real world markedly differs in this regard.

Where students sit in class can have a major impact on their experience, grades and ultimately the value of their education, according to numerous academic studies as well as anecdotal evidence from professors and students.

Classroom real estate should be chosen wisely, as the decision can have consequences for students’ academic performance. According to a study published in 2007, GPAs decreased by 0.1 point on a four-point scale for every row further back students sit.

## Front-row seats

Appraising classroom rows based on academic success, some professors have observed that the front row remains prime real estate typically held by outgoing scholarly students. “I notice the more prepared and personable students sit in front rows,” said Dr. Chris Hammons, interim dean of the College of Arts and Humanities and chair of the department of government. “Students in the front almost always score higher on exams.”

This is no coincidence, according to Dr. Paul S.



courtesy of COMEDY CENTRAL

Adams, vice president for student affairs at Wilkes University, who studied the benefits of front-row seating. Adams wrote in an article on Creators.com that students in the front row perform better because they become more engaged with the speaker. This encourages better note taking, participation and study habits.

Perhaps more importantly, the front row may be the ideal location for shy, timid students who have trouble paying attention, Adams wrote. Sitting closer to the front of the room does have an effect on student-teacher rapport, which is linked to greater academic performance, according to a Jan. 5 article by Julie Mastrine in USA Today College.

### **Stuck in the middle**

Still, some students prefer the middle rows. Junior LeQunna Bell said she does not feel too close and does not feel too far from the professor whenever she sits in the middle of the classroom. “I don’t get distracted easily because the professor focuses his attention on everyone in the class,” she said. “And I like to participate quite a bit in class.”

This location in the classroom can make paying attention difficult depending on the student. In fact, Dr. Robert Wallace, a member of the National Education Association, considers choosing to sit in the middle of the classroom one of the worst decisions a student can make. “In a classroom setting, a speaker’s eyes tend to go to the front of the room and the back,” he wrote in an article for Creators.com. “They don’t look at the center of a room as often or with the same amount of attention.”

Not all agree with Wallace’s viewpoint, especially when professors, much like homeowners associations, take matters into their own hands. Sometimes these professors arrange student seating to encourage more classroom discussions. Other tactics often employed include specifically calling on everyone or even engaging the class with group discussions or presentations.

Dr. Thomas Kennedy, associate professor in physiology, said he often rotates classroom seating to get more participation from back-row students. Kennedy said this benefits the entire course because more people become responsible for the class discussion, thereby improving the entire learning experience.

While the middle section has its critics, those outgoing students who like to participate should try to sit in this region of the classroom to widen the professor’s radius of classroom discussion.

### **Back-row blues**

If neither the front nor middle is suitable for a student, there can only be one other solution: the back.

For the broker on the value of classroom seating, the back row would have the lowest value. This fringe vicinity of the physical classroom often plays host to the biggest distractions, with texting, chatting and sleeping setting in like squatters at a foreclosed home.

Senior Chelsea Belcher said many distractions occur at the back of the classroom. “I notice a lot

of students shopping online, playing video games or even on their Facebooks during class,” she said. “I like to see everything that happens from the back of the room.”

## **Distractions**

Laptop owners, apprehensive students or students with attention-deficit disorder should avoid sitting in the back, according to numerous studies. Fellow students often are some of the biggest distractions, but it is possible for students who are good listeners to still perform well in courses despite the back-of-the-class distractions. Those who do not listen well or are easily distracted may want to divert from the back row, and it might even be better for them to avoid it altogether and shift themselves and their school supplies to the front of class to help them focus.

Exceptions to the statistics, which state that sitting in the back of the class increases the probability of receiving a D or F by 23 percent according to The Journal of Economic Education, do happen, and some students are successful from the back. Senior Eduardo Guzman said he likes to sit in the back because it allows him to see everything happening in the classroom. He admitted to occasionally texting or updating his Facebook in class but said the location works for him because of his outgoing personality and ability to participate from the back.

“I have always sat in the back of the room,” he said, adding that he feels most comfortable in the back and has no trouble multi-tasking.

This is not the case for all students. Kennedy said he once had a student who had to leave his cell phone at home to avoid texting and subsequently being distracted during class. He recommended that students with this problem should sit closer to the front of the class.

Row placement is not the only critical decision students face when choosing a seat. The position of the seat within the row is equally important. Like being on an airplane or at church, the aisle usually gets taken first as it provides the most legroom and easiest escape route when students decide to duck out of class.

Students who are late the first day usually end up with middle seats, so punctuality is a good strategy for those seeking the aisle. Once students claim classroom real estate, they typically return to that seat with a sense of entitlement.

Establishing “property” within the row usually takes a couple of weeks, which is beneficial to students in establishing their territory. It’s important for students to feel comfortable no matter where they sit, and returning to the same seat does that, according to Mastrine.

Seating real estate has probably been claimed for the semester, but these remain important considerations for future terms. Going to class for the first time or early in the semester should not be taken lightly. Seat position should be a serious consideration when attending college, as it can be the difference in acing or failing a course. Even though sitting in the front will not guarantee good grades, it does help to establish a student-teacher relationship, which helps in improving academic performance.

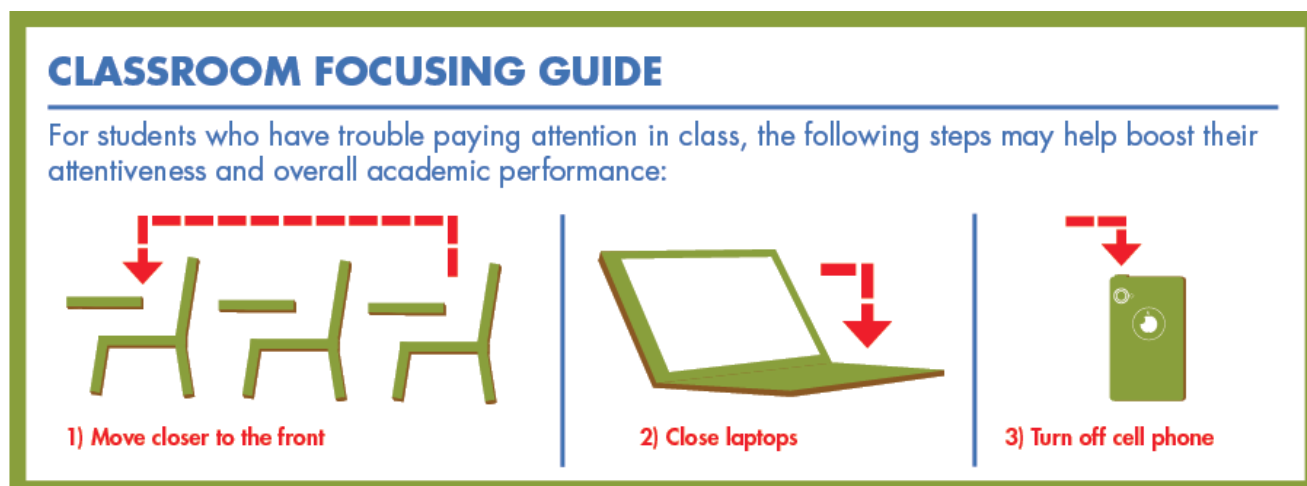
## **Verdict unclear**

Still, detractors claim that there is no correlation between how well a student performs in a class and his or her location in the classroom. Two researchers, writing for an article published by the National Science Teachers Association, concluded that there was little evidence to support the connection: “We found no evidence that grades or student attitudes were affected by seat location.”

Their research indicates that the creators of “South Park,” in not associating the grades of the students with their classroom locations, may have been right all along.

Until more research is done in this area, the final answer to the question about classroom seating arrangements and academic performance remains unclear. Like Dr. Fred Ribich, interim vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty at Wartburg College, asked in an article published in 2009 in the Lodi News-Sentinel, “Is it the chair or is it the student?”

Students and professors will continue asking that question for the foreseeable future.



Picture 9