
Think Outside the Desk: Design Tips That Spark Jewish Learning

Topic

Professional Development

Big Ideas

Classroom layout, seating, space design, and décor influence learning by shaping students' focus, behavior, engagement, and sense of belonging.

Learning Targets

Teachers will:

1. Become familiar with the research on classroom design and its impact on learning
2. Evaluate and adapt classroom design to align with instructional goals and student needs
3. Brainstorm how to design a classroom environment that embodies Jewish values and integrate curriculum themes

Materials / Technology Needed

Nearpod is an interactive teaching platform that lets teachers create engaging lessons with slides, quizzes, polls, videos, and collaborative activities. It allows you to control the pace of the lesson while learners (in this case teachers) follow along on their own devices, making learning more interactive and learner centered. Since this is a **professional development** session, you (the director) will present the Nearpod activity in **Live Participation mode**. Your teachers will act as the learners, experiencing the platform from a learner's perspective while you guide the lesson in real time.

To access the lesson, please click on the link below:

https://np1.nearpod.com/sharePresentation.php?code=4beae9559595f101f643341a4478d589-1&oc=user-created&utm_source=link

Add the lesson "Think Outside the Desk: Design Tips that Spark Jewish Learning" to your Nearpod library.

To launch a lesson in Live Participation mode:

- Hover over the lesson.
- Select "Live Participation."
- Share the CODE or link with your teachers.
- Control the lesson pace; teachers follow along on their devices in real time.

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For teachers to participate:

- Join at join.nearpod.com.
- Enter the CODE.
- Join the lesson.
- Teachers enter their names (if asked to do so).

Background

This presentation highlights key research and best practices on optimizing classroom design for improved learning. Below is a detailed description of each Nearpod slide, organized by number.

Slides:

1. Title
2. Big Idea and Learning Targets
3. Follow the instructions
4. Collaborative Board. Teachers will follow the instructions and share their answers. The Collaborative Board allows respondents to brainstorm ideas, which can spark discussions among participants. Participants can post text, images, and more and interact with each other's responses (like clicking on "likes"). As the presenter, you can read the teachers' answers and acknowledge and amplify them.
5. Let each participant read one of the bullet points. Lead a discussion on each point.
6. Same as 5. For example, in *Chavruta* style seating learners' desks are paired. This style encourages active discussions and questioning between the two learners.
7. Discuss the disclaimer. Discussing the disclaimer will empower teachers to recognize they have choices and strategies in shared spaces, rather than feeling they must simply accept "no, we can't share the space" as the final answer.
8. **Light.** Dimming lights reduces stress and helps hyper learners calm down. Consider turning off fluorescent lights and adding some floor lamps. If that is not possible, cover the fluorescent lights with cloud cloths to give the room a cozy feeling. A [2014 study](#) found that learners who were exposed to more natural light outperformed their peers in reading and math.
9. Collaborative board.
10. **Wall Spaces.** It is advisable to display **schedules, routines, and calendars** in front of the classroom. Psychologists Angela Duckworth and Ethan Kross claim that, by modeling how to plan and update calendars, teachers help learners develop executive functioning skills, which are responsible for managing and regulating cognitive processes such as planning, organizing, working memory, flexible thinking, and self-control. Using **visual routine aids** reminds learners of expectations. Displaying learners' work can help them remember better what they have learned, boost their memory, and gain a sense of responsibility for their own

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learning. Displaying essential questions related to the units of study reminds learners of the “big picture.” Avoid displaying learners’ grades or scores. While it may motivate high achievers, it can be discouraging or detrimental for those who struggle.

11. **Sensory-rich classrooms** can bombard learners with too much visual information, hindering their ability to focus. Young learners especially have a hard time filtering irrelevant information and looking away. As a rule of thumb, research in [2015](#) recommended “20 to 50 percent of the available wall space should be kept clear.” Declutter your classroom regularly to create a calm, focused learning environment. Online working spaces should be as well organized and clearly signposted as the physical spaces. Selecting academically relevant and high-quality posters can reinforce a lesson instead of distracting from it. Featuring inspiring role models can help learners gain a greater sense of belonging and aspiration.
12. Using **dry erase boards** helps learners make “thinking visible” to the teachers and to peers. Individual dry erase boards boost active participation and reinforce learning. It is important to position common boards at children’s height for easy reach, ensure proper distance, and make sure all learners can see the board from their seats.
13. Collaborative board.
14. Set aside a board or wall where learners can post questions and ideas. Posting **sticky notes with questions** about the material being studied helps learners build on each other’s curiosity. For learners who feel shy or self-conscious about sharing publicly, consider providing a question box to preserve anonymity. Discovery boxes stimulate curiosity and inspire children to invent uses, create stories, or link ideas.
15. Collaborative board.
16. **The Shalom Corner.** The Chill or “Shalom” Corner provides learners who are experiencing big feelings a calming spot to unplug for a few minutes and get back to their “thinking brain.” Dr. Burke-Harris asserts that providing a space to de-escalate gives them time to lower adrenaline and cortisol levels. Stock your calm corner with headphones, stuffed animals, paper, coloring supplies, and fidgets to help students self-regulate.
17. Collaborative board.
18. **Sound.** Classrooms can get noisy—minimize disruptive sounds and reduce overstimulation. A [2013 study](#) show that classroom layout significantly impacts young students’ learning. Open-plan classrooms, where multiple grades are located within a single physical space, slowed reading fluency growth, especially for children with weaker attention, likely due to higher background noise from larger

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groups and multiple activities in one space. Reduce distracting noises: add recycled tennis balls to chair legs, sit learners away from A/C units, and use white noise cancelling devices to boost focus.

19. Collaborative board.
20. **Timelines and word maps** can reinforce lessons—especially on Jewish history, Jewish immigration, and global Jewish communities—by helping learners visualize historical events and connections.
21. Collaborative board.
22. Seating arrangements. Match seating arrangements to the learning task. For a more detailed description of types of seating, read this [Edutopia article](#). Ensure clear visibility of all learners for better management, equity, and engagement. Test desk placement by sitting in various seats to check board visibility. Leave space for [brain](#) and movement breaks to boost engagement, behavior, and learning. [Matt Pitman](#), a head of school in Australia, believes that “Rearranging the desks and tables depending on the learning activity signals to students that they also need a shift in thinking. There’s no one-size-fits-all when it comes to these configurations. It depends entirely on the purpose of the task: Are students brainstorming? Peer reviewing? Solving a problem together? Presenting ideas?”
23. **Learning zones.** [Large-scale research \(2020\)](#) shows that learning zones—areas designed for a variety of activities and purposes—help teachers improve transitions, support differentiated instruction and engage learners more effectively. Well-designed spaces also promote student ownership and accountability.
24. Collaborative board
25. Multiple Choice. Let teachers choose the correct answers. The answers are: 1. A and C; 2. A and C; 3) B; 4) A, B and D.
26. **A Welcoming Place.** Create a welcoming classroom by adding plants, rugs, and displaying students’ work on the walls.
27. Collaborative board
28. Multiple Choice. Answer: E.

References and Resources

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