Seating Challenge #1

"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."

**Seating Challenge #2:**  "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 in pairs at the tables running along the walls and in trios at the tables running down the centre. 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:**  "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.