A Research-Based Guide to Word Walls in the Secondary Classroom
The School Board of Broward County
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Introduction:

Every classroom should help students develop a desire to discover new words, learn new meanings, and understand the broad range of word uses. As students move through the grade levels, they are exposed to varied and complex reading material; therefore, vocabulary development becomes even more essential to student success (McKeen and Ogle, 2005). Vocabulary refers to knowledge of words, word meaning, and how to use words effectively to communicate. Scientific research on vocabulary instruction reveals that most vocabulary is learned indirectly, while other vocabulary must be taught directly (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). In their review of instructional research, Blackowicz and Fisher (cited in McKee & Ogle, 2005) concluded that students need teachers who create an interest in words, provide both direct and incidental instruction, and teach core content vocabulary directly. In order to develop deep understanding of words, students need to see, hear, and use new terms in many contexts.

Accordingly, students must be surrounded by words and motivated to learn them. A word-rich classroom includes frequent use of words that have been taught and interesting words students have encountered in their reading. One strategy many teachers use to create a word-rich environment is the word wall.

What are word walls?

A word wall is an organized collection of words, definitions, and visual representations prominently displayed in a classroom. This display is used as an interactive tool for teaching reading, spelling, and comprehension to children. There are many different types of word walls. Word walls may take the form of a “VIS” (Vocabulary Improvement Strategy), or concept map. Examples are provided below.

What is an Active word wall? What is an Interactive word wall?

Active Word Wall: Words are current with the lesson, and tied to the current teachings.

Interactive Word Wall: Interaction includes cheers and chants for the new words of the week, activities that expand the students’ understanding of how words work and the use of the word wall during writing as a primary resource for spelling.

It is recommended that the Word Wall be both active (current) and interactive.

What is its purpose?

Word walls have many benefits. They teach children to recognize and spell high frequency words, see patterns and relationship in words build phonemic awareness skills and apply phonics rules. Word walls also provide reference support for children during reading and writing activities. Children learn to be independent as they use the word walls in daily activities. The purpose of the word wall is:
• To support the teaching of important general principals about words and how they work.
• To foster reading and writing.
• To promote independence on the part of young students as they work with words in writing and reading.
• To provide a visual map to help children remember connections between words and the characteristics that will help them form categories.
• To develop a growing core of words that become part of a reading and writing vocabulary.

How do I do it?

1. Make words accessible by putting them where every student can see them. They should be written by the students using a variety of background colors to distinguish easily confused words. The words should have a student-written definition, and a student-developed picture to help illustrate the word.

2. Teachers should be selective about the words that go on the word wall. Try to include words that children use most commonly in their writing, or will need for FCAT testing. Words should be added gradually - a guideline is five words per week.

3. Provide enough practice so that words are read and spelled automatically and make sure that word walls are always spelled correctly in the student's daily writing. (http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/wordwall/index.html, 2009)

Every teacher is different when deciding on how to display, arrange, and use word walls in the classroom, but there are some common characteristics.

• All are collections of words that are developmentally appropriate for study by students in the classroom.
• Words are selected for specific instructional purposes.
• Collections are cumulative; as new words are introduced, familiar words remain for further study.
• Activities and talk about word walls provide conversational scaffolds that structure the ways that students study, think about, and use words.
• Words on walls serve as visual scaffolds that temporarily assist students in independent reading (Brabham, 2001).
Making Word Walls Work in the Classroom (Wagstaff, 1999)

- **Make Them Memorable** - Use text as the context for identifying key words to place on your word wall. Remember, if the key words are any old words, they are likely to be treated as such.

- **Make Them Useful** - The more you use the word wall the more your students will do the same. Demonstrations and think-alouds take only a few seconds, if done frequently, will give you more bang for your buck. It is important that you show students how to use the word wall. Putting the words up at the beginning of the year and telling kids to use it without showing them how is setting your word wall up for failure.

- **Make Them Practical** - Incorporate word walls into your daily instruction. By incorporating the word wall in daily instruction, students will gain automaticity in using this classroom reference.

- **Make Them Space Efficient** - If you lack space, use three-panel display boards. These freestanding materials don't require any wall space, and can be moved around the room and placed on a table for easy visibility.

- **Make Them Your Way** - There is no right or wrong way to build a word wall. What to build, what words to add, and when to add them, all depend on what your students need. Organize your walls in a way that is practical to students. Be creative!

Additional information and resources:


http://forpd.ucf.edu/strategies/stratwordwalls.html
Examples: Math

A math word wall gives the students a reference point of what is expected from the question. Often students have a difficult time deciphering the question. Once they know what the question is asking they are more likely able to perform the basic calculation. Create a math word wall and select the words suitable for the grade level you are teaching. You may also wish to add words as you explain each of the individual math key words.

Examples of math words:
www.union.k12.sc.us/.../Math%20Word%20Wall%20Words-3rd%20Grade. doc

Other examples at:
http://www.flashcardexchange.com/flashcards/view/580
Examples: Science

A word wall has many uses in the science classroom. It is ideal for reinforcing vocabulary and connections between concepts. In this article, the author describes an interactive way to use the word wall to create food webs. In addition, an enrichment activity using the word wall as a game that students play at the end of class is also featured. Once students are comfortable with the vocabulary introduced through the word wall, they can engage in a culminating activity that allows them to work in pairs to make as many connections as possible among the words. You’ll be amazed at how many different combinations the groups develop and the various ways that the webs evolve.

Examples of science words:
www.union.k12.sc.us/.../Science%20Word%20Wall%20Words- 3rd%20Grade.doc

Process Skills
classify
measure
predict
observe
record
infer
variable
compare
Word Walls as a Concept Map

In math and science, connecting words to big ideas and concepts helps in the vocabulary learning process. Connecting words on a word wall is a concept map. Used often in math and science, it is also a useful application of vocabulary assistance in the other areas of curriculum as well.

Concept Maps

The following are examples of concept maps that use technical vocabulary imbedded within the concepts learned. The first two examples use technology and project-based learning by having the students create maps using district-licensed software such as Inspiration/Kidspiration (found on BCPS server).

The third example shows a graphic representation of a complete unit of work (cells); these types of maps can be used with or without technology and can also be broken down into smaller units depending on students’ background knowledge. Students can collectively work in sections within each map or alternatively work in small groups on the whole unit.

The fourth example demonstrates how students connect the concepts provided by the teachers (cut out in advance). Students can work separately or together to find and label the relationship between the processes and/or concepts. These maps can be completed with or without technology and are excellent means of assessment.

Concept maps have the students not only apply the vocabulary, but also demonstrate an understanding of the relationship among various concepts. Just as with inquiry-based labs, the level of guidance depends upon the topic and student background knowledge and skills. The final products should then be displayed on the word/concept wall.

Example 1. Homologous structures

http://cmap.ihmc.us/Publications/ResearchPapers/TheoryCmaps/Fig7Birds-large.png
Example 2. Air Pollution

http://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/~johnson/misconceptions/concept_map/air_pollution.html

Example 3. Cells

http://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/~johnson/misconceptions/concept_map/cellstr.html

Example 4: Genetics

www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/programs/graduate_student/tc/osterhage_files/phpThumb.jpg
Example: Language Arts/Reading

The word wall collection should be built gradually, with the addition of several words per week. Words should be written on large index cards for ease of reading, and focus on commonly-used words. Often used with new writers and readers, word walls can also be used for older students to explore homonyms, for frequently misspelled words, or to cluster words related to a particular theme or unit.

Example: Social Studies

“I was introduced to the idea of word walls in my undergraduate study and used it in my 2nd grade class this year. I was amazed at how often my students would use the word wall in their writing and reading. I not only used the traditional word wall with the words that they are expected to know how to automatically spell and read, but I also used a separate subject word wall that contained vocabulary terms from our Science and Social Studies units. I think this worked well when I asked kids to write about these topics and as a review later in the year on the major concepts we learned in class. I can't imagine teaching in a classroom didn't have a word wall! (Craig, 2009).”
Additional Resources:

Word Wall Creator
http://www.edhelper.com/word_walls.htm

Using a Word Wall in Secondary Classroom
http://www.markville.ss.yrdsb.edu.on.ca/mm/oise2005/bestpractice/wordwall.htm

Higher Order Thinking Skills Activities with Word Walls
http://teachers.net/gazette/JAN03/wordwall.html

Visually Appealing Word Walls for Secondary
http://community.scholastic.com/scholastic/blog/article?blog.id=highschoolblog&message.id=8

Different Types of Word Walls
http://www.santarosa.k12.fl.us/reading/WordWall.htm

Word Wall Tips for High School