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Out of the Room and into the Hall: Making Content Word Walls Work

PEGGY H. YATES, KRISTEN CUTHRELL, and MOLLI ROSE

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to share one middle school’s approach to using content area word walls in the classroom, as well as in the hall, to enhance the comprehension and retention of content area vocabulary. Eighth grade teachers and students designed and maintained classroom content word walls, as well as an interactive multi-content word wall in the eighth grade hall. It visually displayed the vocabulary aligned with the eighth grade state curriculum and the annual state assessment. State assessment scores showed an increase in the area of reading, math, and science after students and teachers engaged in these two types of word walls.

Keywords: word walls, content area reading, middle school literacy strategies, comprehension

Educators have long been creating and using word walls in their classrooms to facilitate the process of both reading and writing (Brabham and Villaume 2001; Cunningham 2000). Although word walls have typically been used in the primary classroom, Harmon, Wood, and Kiser (2009) recognize their recent use in the middle school setting, and label them as interactive word walls.

This article describes the experiences of one middle school’s use of interactive word walls. Students in the middle school constructed two types of word walls in their classroom and the entire eighth-grade team of teachers and students worked together to construct a multi-content word wall in the eighth-grade hall. These teachers and students spent the entire year building a multi-content word wall that served as a collection of pertinent vocabulary from the eighth-grade curriculum. Because students walked by the hall word wall several times each day, the vocabulary became the subject of students’ conversations and the object of students’ attention. Additionally, students began suggesting the addition of new words they encountered in their various content-area classes. This word wall enhanced the mastery and retention of new vocabulary—an essential component of all content-area material. “I will definitely use word walls even more next year,” remarked one of the middle school teachers involved in the implementation of the interactive word wall. “Students must learn, retain and be able to apply all content area vocabulary in order to be successful in middle school,” added this eighth-grade classroom teacher.

Word Walls—Why Use Them?

Word walls are defined as collections of developmentally appropriate vocabulary displayed somewhere in a classroom (Brabham and Villaume 2001; Thompkins 2003; Vallejo 2006). They serve as an excellent source of information for students attempting to analyze unknown words, spell unfamiliar words, or define new vocabulary. Teachers choose either to create separate word walls for these purposes or to use one single word wall to facilitate all three purposes (Brabham and Villaume 2001). No matter how teachers present or arrange word walls, most are composed of several common attributes.

- 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.

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### TABLE 1. Eighth-Grade Proficiency Scores (2007–2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Met AYP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007–2008</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008–2009</td>
<td>90.9</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Grown</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: AYP-Adequate Yearly Progress. Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction at www.ncpublicschools.org/accountability/reporting/leaperformancearchive/.*

- Words on walls serve as visual scaffolds that temporarily assist students in independent reading and writing. (Brabham and Villaume 2001)

According to Harmon, Wood, and Kiser (2009, 58), the interactive word walls utilized in middle schools “(a) associate word features and meanings with familiar ideas, concepts, and experiences; (b) actively engage students in multiple, varied, and meaningful experiences with words; and (c) highlight student choice.” The interactive word wall concept emphasizes the difference in having a word wall and doing a word wall. Supporters argue that teachers should not only have a word wall but, more importantly, also do the word wall by involving the students actively in both creating and interacting with the words on the wall (Cunningham 2000; Harmon, Wood, and Kiser 2009).

Using word walls in the classroom empowers both students and teachers. Students view pertinent content-specific words easily, and when given the opportunity to use the words repeatedly, internalization of their meanings for use in the present as well as the future occurs. Interactive word walls allow teachers and students to view documentation of skills and concepts learned together, guide teachers in creating a systematic word study in their content area, and enable teachers to avoid any gaps in the curriculum (Brabham and Villaume 2001).

### One Middle School’s Approach

A rural, public school in the southeast United States with an enrollment of 524 middle school students composed of 51 percent Caucasian, 43 percent African American, 1 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent other utilized interactive word walls at the eighth-grade level. These word walls were used in all subject areas beginning in the 2008–2009 academic year. When looking at the 2008–2009 state test data for this school, the eighth-grade results show double-digit increases from the previous year in percentage of students proficient in all state-tested content areas. The greatest gain was in the area of science with math a close second (see table 1). Increases in state test scores in math, reading, and science occurred while teachers and students engaged in two types of word walls: a multicontent hall word wall and individual-content classroom word walls. Although the use of word walls cannot be identified as the sole factor leading to the improvement in student achievement as evidenced by the test scores, the use of the word walls can certainly be argued to be contributing factor.

### In the Hall

The eighth-grade teachers decided on the theme of “Riding the Wave of Education” for the 2008–2009 school year. As part of the theme study a multicontent word wall was constructed in the eighth-grade hall. Teachers organized and color coded the word wall by content area—red for science, green for English/language arts, blue for social studies, yellow for math, and pink for computer competencies. One teacher per content area assumed the responsibility of collecting pertinent vocabulary from their content area each six weeks that was connected to the state curriculum and the annual state assessment. A parent volunteer then posted the new words on the word wall. The word wall contained vocabulary that represented concepts and skills that every eighth grader should know and be able to use. The concept of the word wall in the hall was first introduced during the homeroom period. Each day teachers and students discussed possible words for the word wall in each of their respective content-area classrooms. This hallway word wall attracted the attention of students as they traveled up and down the hall (see figure 1).

### In the English/Language Arts Classroom

In addition to the hallway word wall, the eighth-grade teachers constructed content-specific word walls in their classrooms. In the English/language arts classroom two word walls were built. The English/language arts word wall, displayed in the front of the room, contained specific terms that represented concepts or skills learned during class. After students learned a concept or skill, teachers and or students placed those words connected to or defining those concepts/skills on the content word
FIGURE 1. Complete word wall in the hall showing language arts, math, computer competencies, science, and social studies.

The eighth-grade teachers recognized that the state assessment test in math is first and foremost a reading test—word problems dominate the test. This fact commands that students understand, define, and analyze the content vocabulary found within those word problems. The teachers discussed and decided that a word wall would serve as a valuable and practical tool for recognizing, learning, and retaining the pertinent vocabulary used for interpreting and solving word problems.

Therefore, teachers in the eighth-grade math classrooms constructed a word wall to assist students in solving word problems. This word wall contained essential terms, or cues, that signal the order of operations needed to solve various types of word problems. Examples include finding the circumference of circles and determining the area of plane figures. As the teachers introduced the various types of word problems along with their cue words, these words were placed on the word wall for further reference and visibility.
Teachers also constructed a second word wall that contained content-specific vocabulary in math. Teachers organized these critical words by the strands found in the math curriculum, such as geometry, measurement, graphing, and probability. As teachers taught the individual math strands throughout the year, they introduced and modeled terms within each strand. After students practiced using the new terms and teachers posted them on the word wall, students added a pictorial representation of each to increase understanding and retention of the words.

Both walls served as valuable tools for learning the processes of solving both word problems and computational problems. Teachers reviewed the words using games and group activities. Emphasis was placed on connections among new words and the existing words found on each wall. The math word walls offered a visual reminder of the definitions and usage of the critical terminology found within the state curriculum and the year-end state assessment in math.

In the Science Classroom

Science teachers in the middle school also constructed word walls in their classrooms. The words on these science classroom walls were color-coded red to match the science words on the hallway word wall. The red science words on these walls gave meaning and relevance to this massive vocabulary-laden content area. Students assisted in the building of the word walls in their science classrooms and suggested using the various units of study such as geology, chemistry, and science technology as a way to organize the words. These science word walls helped students not only retain the meaning of the terms but also gave them a point of reference for organizing the terms and created a visual cue for remembering the organizational structure of science vocabulary (see figure 2).

What Teachers and Students Say in the Middle School

Interactive word walls that are student generated become a noticeable part of the classroom or the hallway and spur interesting applications of the words. This is most evident in the case of the middle school profiled in this article. On several occasions, teachers reported that students were using words from the word wall in various interactions. Examples include the student that found himself being given silent lunch for misbehaving during class. Applying his knowledge of the meaning of one of the words on the Swell Wall he remarked to his teacher, “You are an impediment to my fun!”

In another instance, a student added the word omniscient to the Swell Wall with the approval of the class. All the students wrote that word down in their notebooks in the vocabulary section. They then began to look for examples in their personal reading and everyday lives. This word intrigued several students and three of them found the word at church, on the news, and on a selection test.
A few weeks later, the teacher was reviewing the three different points of view from which a given selection is written and these points of view in turn would be added to the content wall. While reviewing third person, a second student asked the teacher for an example of a book written in third person. Knowing the student’s reading affinities for fantasy, the teacher offered *Harry Potter the Deathly Hallows* as an example and explained that the reader is privy to all of Harry’s thoughts and emotions as well as his actions. A third student raised his hand and made a connection to *omniscient*. He remarked, “I think we should move *omniscient* to the content wall because that is what third person point of view is!”

Another student made an interesting connection to the annual state assessment test. The student was heard saying, “The end-of-grade test used two of our word wall words this year!”

Overall, teachers at the middle school felt positively about the utilization of the interactive word walls. “I have seen my word walls make an impact on my students’ learning this year,” remarked one teacher. “I am so excited about creating word walls in my classroom again next year. At the beginning of the school year there will be nothing on my walls—we will begin building word walls on the first day of school and every day after that!”

**Practical Suggestions for Your Classroom**

As skills and concepts were taught and reviewed, word walls in all of the classrooms became a focal point for what the students learned together. A critical step in strengthening comprehension involved the duplication of words. If a word was on a word wall in the classroom, then it would be placed on the word wall in the hallway. This provided multiple encounters with the words, which enhanced the probability of students not only learning the meaning of the words but also retaining that meaning over time. According to Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001, 128), “probably the most powerful way to teach new terms and phrases is to use an instructional sequence that allows for multiple exposures to students in multiple ways.” Following are several helpful suggestions for building and using interactive word walls in your classroom and in the hall.

1. Discuss your word wall daily. Making the word wall come alive by discussing the words, using the words daily, and encouraging the application of the words provide multiple encounters with words and thus enhances the comprehension and retention of the words and their meanings.

2. Build connections between and among the grade-level content areas. These connections provide valuable encounters with words that will improve the retention and use of new vocabulary.

3. Add the word to the students’ notebooks when a word is added to the word wall. Students should identify its part of speech, definition, and make a personal connection with the word. This personal connection can be in the form of a drawing, word picture, or a narrative.

4. Teach students to use words from the word wall during the seminar. While they are discussing current literature, reward them with extra points if they use words from the wall as they share ideas, comments, or ask questions. This will enhance the use and retention of the meaning of vocabulary in the classroom.

5. Model the use of precise and engaging vocabulary from the word wall when teaching *style* in writing. Teach students how to constantly view the words on the wall as vital components to their writing.

6. Organize an English/language arts word wall by skill areas. For example, organize the wall by tone, mood, theme, style, and character traits to enhance students’ knowledge of the vocabulary associated with each skill area.

7. Add inquiry to the word wall. Pose an interesting question at the beginning of the week that can be answered by considering one or more of the words on the wall. Encourage the students to discuss the question throughout the week with their peers. This inquiry element makes the word wall more interactive and keeps it from becoming static and unnoticed.

8. Utilize font size to denote similarities in overlapping words across content areas. This provides visual cues for students as they develop an understanding of vocabulary with similar meanings in different content areas (i.e., estimation in math, prediction in language arts, and hypothesis in science). Reinforcing the connections leads to greater understanding of the concepts in all areas.

9. Emphasize twenty-first-century themes across the core content areas by using a different font for each theme. The themes include: global awareness; financial, economic, business, and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; and health literacy (Partnership for Twenty First Century Skills 2009). The visual cues of distinct fonts for each theme remind students of the core content area’s relevance within the twenty-first-century framework. Students develop multiple meanings of the vocabulary as comprehension increases through the emphasized themes. For example, any word on the content word walls related to the theme of global awareness could be printed in Berlin Sans font. The visual cue would assist the student in recognizing the higher level of meaning beyond the core content area.
Conclusion

Interactive word walls are a promising instructional tool in all content areas for this middle school, as evidenced by gains in state test scores and positive teacher and student feedback. When seeking to strengthen comprehension, the use of interactive word walls or multiple word walls in the classroom should be on every teacher’s short list of planning considerations. Indeed, word walls serve as a collection of important vocabulary that students need to know and use throughout the year. More importantly, interactive word walls at the middle school level have the potential to truly engage students in their learning and promote even greater understanding of the content.

REFERENCES