

Creating Literate Environments



An exciting and inviting literate classroom encourages students to take part in the many learning experiences provided at school. The moment one steps foot inside a classroom one can usually tell what is important to the teacher in terms of the type of working literacy environment he or she sets up for the students. In a classroom that encourages literacy learning, one may find examples of displayed print on the walls, a classroom library, grouped tables and chairs to promote classroom conversations, independent use of classroom resources on labeled shelves, and places for students to work independently or in small and large groups. The question teachers need to ask themselves is, “Does my classroom environment promote literacy learning?” While there are many ways for teachers to think about creating literate classroom environments, this guide will focus on print-rich environments and classroom libraries.

Print-Rich Environment

A print-rich environment offers a wealth of opportunities for students to make use of print and practice literacy habits and skills. While the arrangement of the classroom is often viewed as a backdrop for teaching and learning, with careful attention and preparation, one can create a classroom environment that meaningfully supports an instructional program and student learning. For more information regarding literacy environments, see “Look fors”. In this section on creating print-rich environments, information is provided on:

- Charts that support literacy.
- Functional print used for classroom communication.
- Co-created print as an instructional tool.
- Displaying student writing.
- Organizing and using word walls.

Charts That Support Literacy



Having different types of print in the classroom and using it for ongoing classroom activities will encourage students to look at print in different ways. Displayed print of different types will help students understand how print is a functional part of their everyday lives. Print-rich classrooms are filled with visually prominent “functional” print. Teachers can refer to charts like these to help students learn that words represent important concepts such as days of the week or months of the year. The picture above provides an example of charts that can be either commercially made or crafted by teachers. There is a difference between displaying charts that serve a purpose versus using them to decorate the classroom. In this instance, these charts are used as teaching tools and engage the students in “reading” and literacy learning. Other types of charts that could be displayed include:

- Days of the week.
- Months of the year.
- Colors charts: with pictures and names of different colors.
- Animal charts: with pictures of animals and their names.
- Alphabet charts.
- Number charts.

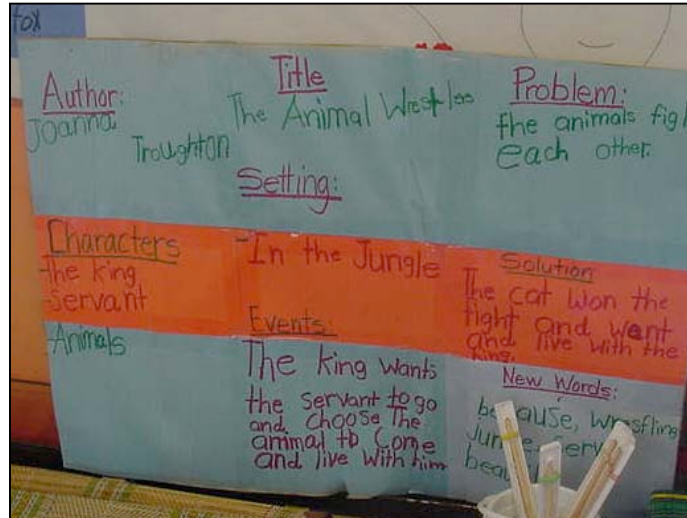
Functional Print Used for Classroom Communication



Signs communicating information are important sources of print and serve as reading material. One source of print that can be used is the daily schedule. Daily schedules posted in the classroom not only make it easy for students to understand how the learning day is mapped out, it also allows for conversations to occur when the need for schedule changes arise. In other words, teachers can discuss and use the classroom print with students to make certain it is noticed and used daily. *A word of caution*, while some charts are important for classroom routines, they are not the only sources of print one should see in a classroom. Valuable classroom wall space needs to be reserved for a wide variety of literacy materials that contribute to student learning. Some examples of charts to promote classroom communication are:

- Daily schedule.
- List of classroom helpers.
- Classroom rules.
- Morning message.
- Student attendance chart.

Co-Created Print as an Instructional Tool



One way to make print a part of the classroom environment is to display print created by teacher and students. An environment rich in print (co-created with students or work that serves as models) becomes meaningful to students when the teacher uses the print as an instructional tool. The teacher uses print within the classroom as a scaffold to extend learning experiences and engage students in the interactive process of learning to read and write. Using a displayed chart or co-constructed work, the teacher and students can review and revisit lessons, and charts can also be used as a reference for independent student work. Charts and text produced by the teacher and students are of high interest and engaging to students because they honor student contributions. Also, because students served as co-writers and are familiar with the work, they will be better able to read the work independently. Some examples of co-created print that can be displayed include:

- A chart used by teacher and students to record story structure.
- Work created during an interactive writing activity.
- Students' retelling of a story recorded by the teacher.
- Students' written responses to teacher's questions about a story.
- A story created by students, but recorded by the teacher.

Displaying Student Writing



Of equal importance in a print-rich environment are displays of independent student writing. Students are often motivated to write more when they see that what they wrote is valued and displayed for all to see. This photo is an informational piece of student writing that has been displayed in a classroom after an experience. It not only serves as a display, but as a reference and way to record an important experience that has taken place. Writing needs to be published and displayed, not just graded and put away. This can be done by reading student work out loud, displaying work on the walls, or compiling student work into books for the classroom library. Other types of student work that can be displayed include:

- Stories written by students.
- Written student responses to open ended questions about a story they have read.
- Independent student writing incorporating concepts from other content areas (e.g., science, social studies, math).
- Worksheets that require students to include meaningful written contributions.

Organizing and Using Word Walls



Learning new words and imprinting them into long-term memory is important for children to be able to read successfully. Displaying systemically organized print supports success in reading and writing. Here is an example of students using a word wall as a reference when they write. This word wall is organized by having letters of the alphabet in order in a row along the top. Under each letter is a list of frequently used words beginning with that letter. Commonly, teachers and students will create a word wall together adding new words as needed. Students are encouraged to read, copy, and use words from the word walls whenever they are writing. The word wall is a powerful tool, because it helps students write some words quickly and easily while they are composing text. In the English language, many of the words posted on the walls can serve as roots for analogies and teachers will often use the word wall to teach spelling patterns in words. For example, the word *and* can be changed by adding an “s” at the beginning to make a new word *sand*. These roots help strengthen a students ability to go from known to unknown words. Noticing features in words is an important skill that supports literacy learning. Other word walls can also be used to organize words that:

- Rhyme.
- Are important vocabulary for a specific content area.
- Are sight words.
- Are found in a recent story read by the whole class.

Classroom Libraries



What can you say about the organization of this library? A library that has little organization is not inviting to students and may not be used at all. Take a look at the physical space. There is not enough room for students to sit comfortably and enjoy reading books. Chances are, there is little opportunity for students to look at a book and return it to its proper place so that others may locate it to read. The classroom library corner supports the idea that for students to be literate they need to be exposed to lots of printed materials and given time to explore and experiment with books. A classroom library is essential if students are to enjoy immediate access to literature. It has been found that well-designed classroom library corners significantly increase the number of students who choose to participate in literary activities during choice time. Research tells us that the more children have access to books, the more they will read and become better readers. In this section on classroom libraries, information will be provided on:

- Creating a comfortable and quite space.
- Organizing the classroom library.
- Using local materials.
- Sorting books.
- Including a variety of text.
- Promoting independence.

Creating a Comfortable Quiet Space



The classroom library is a relatively quiet corner and is organized so that it truly feels like a separate space. A big library space is not necessary, just as long as it is well-organized, comfortable, in a quiet corner, and open for use by students. The space shown here accommodates a few students, yet it has enough space for them to spread out and be comfortable as they read. This particular classroom is designed so that the teacher can hold large group instruction with some students sitting at desks or tables and also have small groups in areas such as the library corner. Things to consider when creating a classroom library may include:

- Placing local mats on the floor for students to rest comfortably on.
- Using bookshelves as dividers to create the sense of a separate library space within the classroom.
- Selecting a quiet corner of the room, preferably near a window with good circulation.
- Setting expectations when using the library.

Organizing the Classroom Library



An organized, attractive, and inviting classroom library promotes good reading behaviors and habits. Displaying books on open shelves with covers that are visible invites a student's interest. Notice that the books are in labeled baskets. This photo is an example of books sorted and labeled according to reading level. Classroom libraries can also be organized by genre, author, and theme, as well as reading levels. Teachers will need to become familiar with leveling procedures in order to organize this type of classroom library. Things to consider when organizing classroom libraries include:

- Sorting books according to set criteria and labeling them.
- Putting books on shelves that are within students' reach.
- Neatly organizing some books right side up with front covers facing forward.
- Helping students to understand the ways in which the library can be maintained.

Using Local Materials



It doesn't take a lot of money to create inviting classroom libraries, however, it does mean that administrators and teachers have to find creative ways to support classroom libraries. This teacher found boxes and appealing paper and created attractive boxes for books. Teachers need to take the time to think of ways to use local materials to promote a creative literacy environment. Making use of local materials is not only cost effective but is also a way to empower teachers and students to define their own literate spaces within their cultural context. Some local materials that can be used to create classroom libraries include:

- Cardboard boxes
- Milk crates
- Shoe boxes
- Woven baskets (hand made or store bought)
- Plastic tubs or baskets
- Locally made furniture (i.e. bookshelves, tables, benches etc.)

Sorting Books



Teachers play an important part in setting up classroom libraries. They need to be knowledgeable about the books they have in their classrooms. This group of teachers and their principal are working together discussing and sorting books. Sorting books can be a fun and easy process when you work with other teachers. Sorting books helps teachers learn about text features, layout, and levels of difficulty, and helps teachers to understand potential challenges in language, subject matter, and vocabulary in books. Once leveling is accomplished, a teacher can help students become aware of books that are easy and available for them to read, and books that may be too challenging. After gaining more confidence in identifying text features, a teacher can involve older students in the sorting of books. This creates an excellent opportunity for students to learn about different genres and purposes for reading. See *Developing Leveled Early Readers* for more information on sorting text. Things to consider when sorting books include:

- The grade level and the general reading level of the students.
- Book and print features.
- Content, theme, and ideas expressed in the text.
- Text structure.
- Language and literacy features.

Including a Variety of Text



A classroom library containing a multicultural variety of books is essential, particularly for students who are learning a second language. Students need to have access to books that help them learn about themselves and the world. By providing students with a rich, varied selection of books, new content and language structures can be explored and background knowledge, which is critical to reading success, will be enhanced. When classrooms offer books that engage the reader, students are more likely to use the library and read more books. The following are the types of text that may be included in classroom libraries:

- Vernacular language text developed by local educators and authors.
- Text in English that include themes students can relate to.
- Teacher-generated text in vernacular languages.
- Student developed text.
- English text relating themes and topics children are unfamiliar with, yet are interested in.

Promoting Independence



When books are sorted and labeled, it makes it easier for students to check out books they like to read. As you can see, these students are getting books without the teacher's assistance. The expectations have been made clear by the teacher, if you read a book, you are expected to return the book to its proper place on the shelf. An organized classroom environment promotes students' independence in literacy activities and empowers them by making them feel that this is truly their library to organize, use, and manage. Ways to promote students' independent use of the library include:

- Selecting labels that are easy for students to understand and use.
- Taking time to communicate to students the ways in which the library resources are organized.
- Setting expectations for students' use of the library.
- Allowing time in the daily instructional schedule for students to routinely use the library.