

Best Practices: Rethinking Bulletin Boards

Teacher magazine

Published: April 23, 2008

From time to time, the Teacher Leaders Network daily dialogue turns to the seemingly mundane details of everyday teaching. Even so, there are surprising twists and turns, as was the case during an in-depth discussion of the venerable classroom bulletin board.

Carolann, a teacher leader with a joint school district-higher education appointment, began the discussion with this query:

I come to you once again for a reality check. As I begin to plan for this semester, I was wondering how much emphasis to put on bulletin boards with my pre-service teachers. In our elementary partner schools I see word/vocabulary walls. I see steps and procedures. I see visual support. I see behavior-management systems at work. Sometimes I see student work displayed. The walls are crammed full.

One of my students last semester told me that when she first entered her practicum classroom, she thought the walls were cluttered. After working with the class one full day a week for a semester, she understood the importance of what was displayed. The teacher constantly used the walls in her teaching.

How do you use bulletin boards and wall space in your classrooms? How often do you change them? Do you do your own boards/wall displays or does an assistant do it for you? How much is too much?

For Cindi, a reading specialist, bulletin boards are "another teacher."

As part of a partnership, teachermagazine.org publishes this regular column by members of the **Teacher Leaders Network, a professional community of accomplished educators dedicated to sharing ideas and expanding the influence of teachers.**

I have always considered my walls to be "another teacher in my room." My students don't come in on the first day of school and see 80 percent of my walls filled. It is a work in progress, and they are the workers. They make the Word Walls, one word at a time, place them on the wall themselves, and interact with those words daily. We play Word Wall games once or twice a week, and once I know that my students are using those words seamlessly, a word or two at a time will come down to allow for others. Word Walls must be interactive to be purposeful; otherwise, they aren't instructional at all. I've seen so many classrooms with Word Walls that just sit, never changing, all year.

As far as student work, Robert Marzano in *Classroom Instruction That Works* recommends the "providing feedback" strategy and indicates it is important to have writing samples on a bulletin board that represent each of the levels of quality writing. Of course that doesn't mean we should put up failing papers with student names on them; instead, I use examples that we get in our writing workshops. Or teachers can write a failing paper themselves as an example (easier and quicker to write than the passing papers!), and stick those up along with the excellent work of students.

Abey offered ideas from her elementary classroom:

I like for my students to be actively engaged with my bulletin boards in two ways. I like for them to help create, cut, and assemble the stuff for the bulletin board, and I like to make the boards interactive.

In most of my classrooms, there have been at least two to three bulletin boards. One became an interactive math center, a second became an interactive language arts center, and a third became an interactive map and globe center. The math and language activities were theme-based and sometimes holiday-based, and my students loved voting for their favorite ideas.

The "moving parts" were sometimes hung with push pins and velcro. I used lots of yarn, felt, plastic, aluminum, etc. (lightweight materials that would work well with push pins and velcro). I also used cloth instead of paper because it held up better and looked nicer, especially if I did a holiday theme. I changed the activities about every 2-3 weeks after giving each student the opportunity to complete the activities. The map and globe interactive area stayed up all year and each week I would add a

new and intriguing map or globe activity. My students had many more opportunities to learn about their state, nation, and world by being actively engaged all year rather than the short time it takes to "cover" the material in an elementary social studies book.

If the students were not able to do the cutting, pasting, and assembling, I was usually able to get a couple of parent volunteers to help me. Within the 80-20 fire marshal rules, I used every inch of "legal" wall space for displaying student work, providing vocabulary, math resources, science resources, etc. I would try to help my students to find these resources easily by keeping down the clutter.

I also saved space for praise and esteem-building. I feel it is important for students to pay attention to themselves and fellow classmates who make wise and healthy decisions, so each day students had a space for writing a compliment about another student or even about themselves when a good choice was noticed. It's amazing how this helped with behavior management. During transition times, students could place a post-it on our "Awesome Choices" wall. Then when we had a couple of minutes in between activities we would have the child who placed the post-it retrieve it and read it to the class. We would then all give the recipient and the student who wrote the post-it a quick indoor-voice cheer.

Rona has seen bulletin boards across the grade levels:

I love walking into a primary classroom and seeing all of the students' work related to learning objectives. They are artistic, personalized, and appealing. On the other hand, when I go to middle and high schools, I am disappointed to see random posters stapled on the walls. Is that a reality or an unfair, broad generalization? I think the walls are an extension of teaching and learning, but there has to be an explicit connection made for students. They have to be a part of the product or the instruction. How much do kids get from posters hung by the teacher and left hanging?

Marsha teaches middle school math and science:

I'll have to admit I'm not artistically inclined. But I found an idea several years ago that works well for my personality and the classes I teach. Since I teach two different content areas, I have two spaces.

In my math space, during the 1st quarter, I have a display titled "How Many Ways Can you Describe the Number _____?" Then I fill in the blank. The kids can do graffiti or stick a post-it up there with different ways to express the quantity. For the 2nd quarter, I put up the title "The Answer to this Problem is _____ ." Students then supply some kind of math expression that would be answered by the number I fill into the empty spot. In the 3rd quarter, I try and print out photos that demonstrate the geometric concepts we're studying, and I challenge students to bring in their own contributions. I've gotten some incredible examples from kids, and they've "donated" them to my future-year bulletin boards. During the 4th quarter we do a scaling project and the board holds all the project calendars and ideas.

Science is much easier. Typically our bulletin board is sectioned off by the hours I teach science. Usually, we create class graphs and those results are stored in each section. We try and see if each class has the same results. It's a great way to talk about variability.

I like this bulletin board approach because it is super easy to use once you get the titles up and get the system going. And you don't have to be artistic *at all*. You also don't have to be one doing much work. I really like that part!

Mary T. brought high school into the conversation:

I am learning disabled when it comes to creativity on the walls. I think that is a valid reason for remaining at the secondary level. I have nothing but admiration for the primary/intermediate teachers who can do wonders with construction paper and scissors.

However, I strongly believe in letting the student work take precedence. I just set up my room this weekend and left a huge blank wall for the student work we'll post and use throughout the year, starting with student-generated American Lit timelines that we'll refer to as we move forward. Two things I've loved doing:

A graffiti wall—For the 9th grade poetry unit, I posted blank paper along one wall that came from the end rolls of our local newspaper. The instructions were to share your favorite poems, lyrics, or original verse. I filled the chalk tray with colored markers. The kids loved it, and were instantly published. At the beginning of every class there was always a group reading or writing, and the sharing of spontaneous

congratulations on original verse. (Caveat: I do teach in a high school. At some point the activity gravitated toward a more 'base' kind of message. That was my signal that the activity had run its course. Without comment I would just remove the wall. We were generally at the end of the unit by then, anyway.) The wall went up again at the end of the year so kids could recommend books for summer reading with mini commentaries.

Character charts—I hung my students' life-size fictional character charts out in the hall early in the first year of our new school. (Here's the idea: Get bulletin board paper. Have a student volunteer lay down to be drawn around, dress the character according to descriptions and the era of the character and complete analysis activities on the chart. This was a prewriting assignment for a character analysis paper.) I'm proud to say that this started a trend around the building, and student work has decorated our halls ever since.

The anatomy teacher stole the character idea and had her kids fill in organs on the student "body." (The star basketball player's organs were considered especially 'hot'.) The language department educated us on emotion words using student faces to exemplify the feelings. My colleagues borrowed our timeline assignment after seeing it in the hall.

And everyone's favorite project in the building is the health and sciences project on tattoos, piercings, and other weird things done to the body. The hallway work has turned into a kind of professional cross-curricular sharing venue. We have had lots of informal conversations around it, as you might imagine!

It has interested me that each year the quality of the projects has gone up. I think students are scaffolding off of the earlier projects and looking forward to their chance to be published.

Patty, a Montessori teacher, raised some reservations about over-stimulation:

This discussion on bulletin boards has been very interesting and at an appropriate time of the year for most of us. A long time ago I taught in junior high and middle school and I used to spend hours trying to create bright, beautiful, and educational

bulletin boards and I enjoyed it! Then a dozen years ago I became a Montessori teacher.

We were taught to minimize the amount of visual stimulation on the walls. We covered our boards with fabric in earth tones with no bright paper borders. We learned to put up a few beautiful pieces of art or framed photographs. Additionally we post charts and posters that pertain to the topic being studied and then remove them when we move on to another topic. We post lots of student work in the hallways. We use bulletin boards in the hallways to show photos of students engaged in projects, to post student wishes for peace, or to show our progress as a school in walking a certain number of laps or reading a certain number of books.

As an individual diagnosed as having ADHD, and as a teacher of many students with this label, I am amazed at the effect this has on concentration and focus. Sometimes the environment can just be too stimulating!

—John Norton

*To read the complete TLN conversation about bulletin boards, download the **transcript** from TLN. (Word Document.)*