

## SECTION 1

# Designing a Literate Environment

*The classroom environment you create has a profound effect on the social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development of the children you teach. To gain a positive attitude towards school and learning, children must have visual stimulation, organization, space, and a feeling of warmth and security.*

—Mindy Pollishuke

**T**he learner-centered classroom is alive with activity. In it, students' learning capacity is nurtured and developed as they safely risk exploring and discovering. Teachers and students in the learner-centered classroom are colearners, immersed in the explorations of language and literature.

Visiting a learner-centered classroom may be daunting at first. Imagine a place where everyone is busily pursuing different activities—some in pairs, some individually, some in

small groups. This scene may initially appear chaotic, but everyone in this learner-centered classroom is engaged in authentic tasks, purposefully pursuing ideas, information, and learning goals. Some students may be involved in listening activities, perhaps at listening stations with tape recorders or CDs; some students may be at the “publishing center” developing their written work using computers; some may be working with the teacher, one on one or in a small group; some may be developing a project, possibly a play or a poster; and some students may be working individually, reading, writing, or reflecting. The theme of the students’ work is usually seen in their artwork, classroom displays, and writing, which surrounds the classroom.

The most important part of creating a literate environment is establishing a well-organized, stimulating, comfortable, and inviting classroom. A classroom library is the focal point of this print-rich environment. Most of the print in the classroom should be at the children’s eye level. Specific teaching areas, preferably on a rug where all can gather, should be well defined and apparent for both small and large groups. The environment is designed to allow children to move about freely, indicating their internalization of routines and expectations.

# Learning Language by Using It

*Children learn to read and write effectively only if they are admitted into a community of written language users, which I shall call the “literacy club,” starting before the children are able to read or write a single word for themselves.*

—Frank Smith

## BACKGROUND

Immersing students in print by covering the classroom with words in all forms is a powerful way to use the environmental surround to support literacy learning. Years ago, we visited a bilingual classroom that offers a perfect example of this approach. In this effective classroom, when the students finished a book, they wrote the title and author on a construction paper cactus flower and stapled it to their own cactus streamer. Twenty-six brightly colored streamers covered with flowers were suspended from the classroom ceiling as a reminder of all the books the class read.

The classroom walls were filled with students’ writing. Large discovery charts across one wall displayed students’ new knowledge about the Arctic. Each sentence frame read, “I was surprised to discover that \_\_\_\_\_.” Each chart held about thirty interesting pieces of information about the Arctic gleaned from the children’s reading and class discussions.

The math corner was filled with manipulatives and other materials, all labeled in Spanish. The directions for activities and behavior guides at that center were printed in Spanish as well. A large percentage of the math lessons were taught completely in Spanish by a bilingual partner teacher—and the English-speaking teacher is learning a second language along with her students.

Two important conditions for literacy learning in the learner-centered classroom are immersion in print and modeling the conventions of language use. In this classroom, students see their teacher as a learning model, struggling every day with the challenge of learning something new. Students have the opportunity to develop language literacy by being immersed in print, both in English and in Spanish.

Just as parents expect their toddlers to begin speaking as a result of being spoken to for ten to twelve months, learner-centered teachers expect young children to exhibit various literacy behaviors as a result of being read to and immersed in language. Early-childhood teachers make productive use of the emerging literacy abilities that children bring to school. Teachers of older children, also, value and build upon the reading, writing, and speaking abilities exhibited by the students.

## 1 Labels, Labels Everywhere

Print carries meaning; the same configuration of lines and squiggles conveys the same information each time it appears. Once students understand this concept, they have the key to becoming readers. One way to help promote this understanding is by using labels. Labels help learners connect print with objects and reinforce the concept that things have names that can be written down.

Label everything in your classroom: the closet, the window, the bookshelf, Mrs. Smith's desk, the door, the clock, and other objects.

Create role cards to label students' functions in cooperative groups, such as recorder, timekeeper, and encourager.

Brainstorm adjectives and descriptive phrases with the class and add them to the labels: the *storage* closet, the *dirty* window, the *expanding* bookshelf, the clock *that runs too slow*, and so on.

Students can also label events or behaviors with characteristics, which introduces humor, diffuses tension, and reinforces classroom behavioral norms. For example, if two students have a disagreement, the other students might give them the "stubborn" label! Or, on one of those days when you have left something out or neglected to do something, your students might label you "forgetful"!

After gaining experience with the labels in the classroom, children will often use the labels as *anchors* when attempting to write new words on their own. For example, they realize that the sound they want to write on their paper is the first sound they hear in the label that says "desk."

## MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- 3" × 5" index cards
- Felt-tip markers
- Masking tape

## 2 Where in the Room Is It?

Visual discrimination is the capacity to see differences between letters, configurations of letter groups, and different words. Because reading involves various visual patterns (clusters of words, syllables, blends, letters), children need to develop the ability to visually discriminate to become more fluent readers. Children tend to operate on visual patterns in very diverse and personal ways, and beginning readers need

approximately 100 exposures to a word before it becomes a *sight word*.

This game calls children's attention to the words around them and develops their visual discrimination. When making labels for various objects in the room (see Strategy 1: Labels, Labels Everywhere), make a smaller set of cards with the same words. Let students pick a card and search the room to find the corresponding label. By matching their card to the appropriate label in the classroom, children are sharpening their visual discrimination skills. While comparing their personal card next to a label in the classroom, they are visually processing to either confirm or reject the combination of letters on each card. This is similar to the reading experience in meaningful text: The reader samples the text visually and confirms or rejects his or her predictions about the words.

### VARIATIONS

Create bingo cards and have students locate labels and cross out the corresponding words on their cards. Students can also work in small groups using a scavenger hunt format for *Where in the Room Is It?*

### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- 3" × 5" index cards cut in half
- Felt-tip markers

## 3 Wordstrings

A classroom rich in language has print displayed everywhere. Some of the print is teacher written and some is written by

children. Word walls, language-experience charts, enlarged copies of poems from shared reading—all immerse children in language.

A clothesline is a simple and inexpensive way to capitalize on unused space in the classroom. Capture students' language on sheets of chart or butcher paper and string across the room or around its perimeter on a clothesline. These developing word lists provide stimulating, descriptive language created by the students' experiences. Students will return again and again to these familiar records of their developing knowledge, often imitating the teacher and using a pointer as they read the text.

To create a wordstring, paste an illustration or photograph on the center of a large piece of chart or butcher paper and hang it on a chalkboard or easel. Have students list all the words or short phrases that the picture brings to their minds on their own piece of paper. You may want to choose a picture that elicits emotional or aesthetic reactions. The complexity of the picture and the students' associations will vary based on their experience level.

Ask students to volunteer to share their words with the class. Write students' words on the chart paper, surrounding the picture, and hang it on the wordstring. Students can use the picture as a story starter. The displayed vocabulary will enhance their writing. Younger students can use the words to complete sentence frames that can be displayed on other wordstrings.

### TECHNOLOGY OPTION

This activity can be modified by technology, as well. Gather students around the computer and use KidPix or Kidspiration software to develop the icons and supporting vocabulary words. After whole group demonstrations, students could create their own individual wordstrings during computer workstation time.

## MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Glue
- Photograph or illustration
- Chart or butcher paper
- Writing materials
- Felt-tip markers
- Clothesline
- Clothespins

### 4 String 'Em Up

Children need to see and hear language patterns repeatedly until the patterns become familiar and predictable. Pattern books, predictable stories, and songs are an effective source of consistent language patterns. Teachers promote the conventions of print (word separation, difference between letters and words, where a reader begins on a line, how to go from left to right, etc.) by using printed versions of patterns that children recognize auditorily. By connecting the patterns they have memorized with the printed word presented by the teacher, emergent readers begin to embark upon the road to reading independence.

A clothesline offers space to string up a story for chanting or shared reading, retelling, or discussion about sequence. Be sure to have plenty of colorful clothespins on hand!

Start with a favorite story. A class-created story works especially well. Reproduce the text from each page onto large chart paper. Be sure to duplicate the original spacing and print layout exactly.

Reread the story with the class.

Give each student, or pairs of students, one page to illustrate. They can use tempera paint or crayons. Talk with the children to be sure their planned illustration represents the meaning in the text.

As a class, organize the entire “book” across the clothesline and discuss sequence. Reread it frequently. Use the story to point out special words, phonetics, or punctuation conventions, such as quotation marks or exclamation points. You will notice the children reading it independently as well.

After a week or so, bind the story together and add it to the class library as a Big Book.

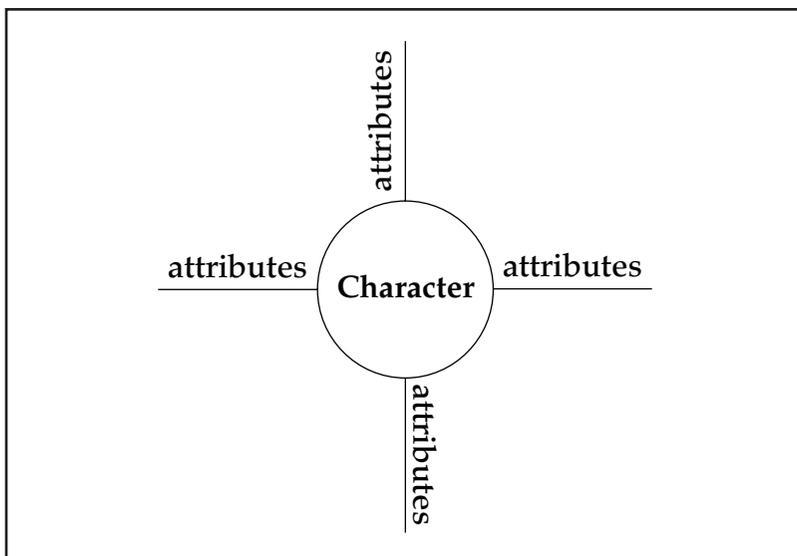
### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Favorite class story
- Large chart paper
- Felt-tip markers
- Drawing materials
- Clothesline
- Clothespins

## 5 Hang-Ups

Clothes hangers are useful for displaying language-experience charts, poems, directions, and other print that your class has generated. Charts expand as a unit progresses and students have additional ideas or information. Hangers allow previously generated charts to remain visible over the length of an instructional unit or longer. Skirt hangers, especially the stacked ones, work well for storage and display.

When the class reads a chapter book, create an attribute web for each of the characters as they are introduced. Hang the attribute webs on individual skirt hangers and display them across the ceiling or along a wall. Have students continue to add attributes to the webs as they read. When they finish the book, have the students work individually or together in small groups to create compare-and-contrast matrices using the attribute webs.



### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Chapter books
- Clothes hangers, preferably skirt hangers
- Clothesline
- Chart paper
- Felt-tip markers

## 6 Shoe Bag Classification

Classifying, a basic activity for conceptual development, is creating groups of things that are alike in some way, or separating them because they are different. This sorting process is a fundamental thinking skill that students develop by using their expanding experiences and their own language.

Closet shoe bags are an excellent device for categorizing, classifying, and organizing information. Hang them on the back of a door, on the bottom lip of a blackboard, or on a windowsill.

Initiate a brainstorming session with the students to generate a variety of words and short phrases about a given topic. Print these words and phrases on sturdy cards. Elicit at least one idea from each child. Fifty ideas are a minimum; a hundred or more ideas ensure a rich, diverse, creative experience. Have children generate words and short phrases about the following:

- A topic or theme they are studying
- Reactions to a story or an experience
- Observations from a school walk or a field trip
- A current event

Working in pairs or small groups, ask students to sort the cards according to their own classification. Next, have students place the sorted stacks of cards into the pockets of a shoe bag. Label their categories or have other students guess the classification rule for each stack. Learner-centered classrooms value and promote divergent ways of thinking!

As a final step, ask students to re-sort the cards based on different classifications. Having students explain their rationale for sorting, and re-sorting, is an important step in any classification activity.

## VARIATION

Another option is to give students the categories for word sorting in order to teach a specific skill or concept. For instance, ask students to sort words based on structural analysis (such as prefixes and suffixes) or based on function (such as animals that live in the woods, on farms, or in the zoo).

## MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- 100 index cards
- Felt-tip markers
- Shoe bag

## 7 Word Ribbons

Learning to spell is a developmental process. Learners go through specific stages as they become proficient spellers. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), phonemic awareness supports and accelerates learning to read and spell. Children with greater phonemic awareness are likely to be more successful initially than children who have few or none of these skills. Word ribbons support the development of spelling, phonemic awareness, and phonics skills. Word ribbons immerse students in print and provide specific word selections for children as they continue to explore print.

Word ribbons are long strips of paper on which words are grouped in predetermined categories (e.g., initial or final consonant blend, vowel sound diphthongs or digraphs, rhyming families, pluralization). Word ribbons can be suspended from window shades, door frames, or other infrequently used classroom spaces. They are a quick reference for students looking for a word as well as a launching point for discussion when a child finds a word that fits, or doesn't fit, into a category. Word ribbons are a great tool for the ever-growing collection of language in your classroom.

Initially, word ribbons should be developed with the class during shared reading. After the first read aloud, reread the story and ask students to find words that fit a particular pattern. For example, words that end in *-tion*, or words that begin with *th-*. Or they can listen for and look for words with the same letter but with different sounds such as the soft or hard pronunciation of sound represented by the letter C or G. These initial exercises focus on phonemic awareness; they help children notice, think about, and manipulate sounds in spoken language.

List the words on your prepared word ribbons as they are discovered. Post the ribbons so they are visible and accessible to the class to continue adding new examples. As children read and reread the posted lists, they are working with graphophonics; they are learning how to relate letters and sounds

together, how to break apart spoken words into sounds, and how to blend sounds to form words. Eventually, students will make these kinds of discoveries about words spontaneously during shared reading or during their individual reading time and request that new word ribbons be created.

### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Favorite read-aloud story
- Long strips of paper
- Felt-tip markers
- Masking tape

## 8 Class Mailbox

In the learner-centered classroom, students engage in relevant, purposeful reading and writing activities. These tasks engage students in real-life activities and are highly motivating instructional strategies. These activities should include mechanisms that encourage students' writing and provide opportunities for meaningful correspondence. As much as possible, students should have an opportunity to choose what they will write and what format they will use. Provide ample time for writing throughout the school day.

Setting up class mailboxes offers a purposeful opportunity for students to communicate in writing. You can purchase an inexpensive mailbox at a hardware store and decorate it with a montage of students' drawings, theme-based pictures, or each student's handwritten name.

You can also set up individual message boxes for each student. Ask each student to bring in an empty round cardboard oatmeal carton. Discard the box lids and lay each carton on its side. Next, glue the cartons together in a pyramid. (For a class of twenty-one students, begin with a row of six cartons,

topped with a row of five, then four, etc.) The result is a “mail-box pod” in which each student has a space where notes can be delivered.

### TECHNOLOGY OPTION

Set up electronic pen pals. Allow students to use electronic mail to communicate with students in other classrooms on the campus, or anywhere in the world. When students write for authentic reasons, such as informing others or gathering information or communicating with a variety of other people, their integration of writing conventions improves. When students receive a meaningful response to their writing, the feedback enables them to become more skillful communicators.

### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- One standard mailbox or one round oatmeal carton for each student
- Drawing materials
- Glue
- E-mail network

## 9 Message Center

The Message Center, originated by Carolyn Burke of Indiana University, provides an opportunity for interaction through writing and a purposeful way to develop fluency with written language. Students post messages that inform, persuade, commend, remind, or react. The center encourages sharing ideas, demonstrates the functional nature of writing, and facilitates communication among individuals, small groups, and the whole class. Information, notes, and communications can be

posted at the class Message Center. Compliments, invitations, advertisements, and reminders can also be placed at the center.

Create a Message Center by designating a specific area in the classroom where messages can be posted. Choose wall space or an easel with a pad or board. The center should be inviting, attractive, and organized with the appropriate writing and posting materials to facilitate communication.

Write a special greeting or message to your students. In your message, describe the center. Explain what it is and its most appropriate use. For example, discuss and post guidelines for who can use the board, when it can be used, and some of the purposes and logistics of using it (e.g., be sure to include the sender's and receiver's names). Use the center for special announcements such as "It's Joe's birthday today" or "Don't forget about the field trip on Friday" or "Who would like to help clean up the desktops this afternoon?" Students become used to checking the board and anticipating directions and information from the teacher, news of the day from the main office, and personal correspondence from their classmates.

### MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Wall space or easel with a large sheet of chart paper
- Felt-tip markers
- 3" × 5" index cards, note paper, or sticky notes
- Masking tape or tacks
- Writing materials

## 10 Personal Word Banks

Flexibility and choice are important elements in the learner-centered classroom. Rather than create universal spelling lists, encourage your students to keep personal word banks. Students can choose interesting words from shared reading,

current-events articles, content area lessons, or from something they have heard on television and would like to learn to spell.

Create word banks by punching holes in index cards and hooking them on a loose-leaf binder ring. They can also be kept in a recipe box, a shoe box, or even a cut-down milk container.

Have students add several words to their word bank each week (the number will depend on the grade level). Students should write each word and illustrate it, use it in a sentence, or both. Provide some time for word bank sharing, either as a whole class, in small groups, or with a partner.

These word bank words become a rich source for vocabulary building. Have students nominate their words with the class voting on words of the week. Ask for nominations and list them on a piece of chart paper or on a section of the blackboard. Have students campaign for their words, or someone else's, by making brief speeches about the merits of the word. After the vocabulary election, list the words of the week on a word ribbon or a visible place in the room. This activity usually leads students to choose intriguing words that are fun to say, complicated to spell, or mysterious in meaning. By creating word banks, the entire class learns many new words that become their own.

## VARIATIONS

Once the banks contain a dozen words, have students work with a partner to classify or alphabetize the words. They can also use the words to create silly sentences.

## MATERIALS YOU WILL NEED

- Index cards
- Loose-leaf binders, recipe boxes, shoe boxes, or milk containers