

Introduction: The writing on the wall

As far as we know, the first teacher who wrote on classroom walls was the Reverend Samuel Reed Hall (1795–1877), an innovative educator and minister who is said to have first written on a piece of dark paper when teaching a mathematics lesson in Rumford, Maine, in 1816. Later Hall moved to Concord, Vermont, where, it is believed, he had the plaster in his classroom painted black. Soon, many other teachers, following Hall's example, painted plaster walls or plain boards black to create a visual teaching aid. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, enameled walls and then slate boards dominated American classrooms. Hall, who is also credited by American historians with inventing the blackboard eraser and with introducing many other educational innovations, has been honored by the state of Vermont with a memorial in Concord (see photo, p. viii) bearing the inscription including the words “pioneer in the use of the blackboard as a schoolroom appliance” (Levy, p. 39).

In today's classrooms, of course, it is possible to find not only black chalkboards but also green, blue, or other colors, as well as boards of different types of composition such as whiteboards that require dry ink markers instead of chalk. In some classrooms, one also finds flip charts, large tablets of paper used for many of the same purposes and activities as boards. From here on I shall refer to public writing space of these different kinds simply as *the board*.

In spite of the availability of these various kinds of public writing space, however, I have noticed recently that board use in many U.S. schools is declining. In some schools, old boards are being allowed to decay; in many new classrooms, space devoted to boards is decreasing. The reason is not hard to find: Many classrooms now have overhead projectors, movie screens, and TV and computer monitors for student and teacher use. A few even have electronic whiteboards (see Appendix A). Because such equipment not only is expensive to buy and maintain but requires electricity, varying degrees of technological skill, and accessories such as transparencies, film, and software programs, many classrooms – even some in affluent countries – will continue to operate with few or no high-tech tools.

Even when classrooms have access to high-tech tools, however, we should not use these tools at the expense of boards. Boards provide a public writing space that is immediately accessible to both teachers and

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Jeannine Dobbs

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction



Remains of a painted plaster wall used as a blackboard in the Fisher School, Westwood, Massachusetts, built in 1845 and restored and preserved by the Westwood Historical Society. (Photograph by Ralph A. Buonopane, courtesy of the Westwood Historical Society.)

students. Teachers can use the board to record messages they especially want their students to remember, to present new information, and to record what students say. Writing on the board is an active, public, physical activity: Students not only can see something happening, they can physically make it happen themselves. Students writing publicly can receive immediate, personal, face-to-face responses from the teacher and from their peers. Teachers can see not only what students are producing (or not producing) but also can read their body language.

Moreover, because different students rely on different learning strategies, they need a variety of learning experiences. When the teacher writes on the board, students whose learning is strengthened by visual stimuli benefit. When students write on the board, students whose learning is strengthened by hands-on, kinesthetic experiences benefit.

When a number of students write on the board simultaneously and the others write at their desks, elements of competition and immediacy are introduced into the classroom chemistry that heighten students' interest.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Students measure themselves against their peers' public writing: Who can write the most, or with the fewest errors, or show (off) the best ideas or finish fastest?

By facilitating our students' use of the board, we increase their share of classroom discourse or "air" time and create multiple opportunities for them to interact with their peers and with us. Finally, writing on the board is active: It gets students on their feet, it adds variety to classroom routines, and best of all, it's fun.

It is time, therefore, that all of us, even teachers who have access to the newest technology, take another look at the humble board. We need to explore teacher use – how the board can be used to help us manage our classrooms and help us teach – and student use – how the board can help our students learn by giving them more opportunities to generate language, more interaction with their classmates and with us, and more responsibility for their own learning process.

Teacher use of the board

The board can help teachers manage the classroom, can be a valuable teaching tool, and can be a way to record student input.

Using the board to help manage classrooms

Classroom experience soon teaches us that when we have an important message to convey to our students, we may need to write the message as well as say it so that our students will have a better chance of understanding and remembering it – and so that they can write it down if they need to. This is especially true of homework assignments, announcements of plans or of items to be brought to class for special purposes, schedules and timetables, and special class rules, if we have them. When students are assigned to groups, confusion may be avoided if we post the names of each group's members as well as each person's duties: Who will lead the discussion, who will record it, who will report it, who will keep track of the time and keep people focused on the task. If students have special classroom roles or duties on a rotating basis such as attendance taker or cleanup, we can record them on the board. Without being intrusive, we can keep students informed of how many minutes remain in timed activities and tests; or we can post scores for competitive activities. It is sometimes effective to display outlines of lesson plans and agendas: If students can see that a fun activity is planned for the end of a class period, they may help us keep to a busy schedule in order to ensure that there will be sufficient time left for it. Or we may

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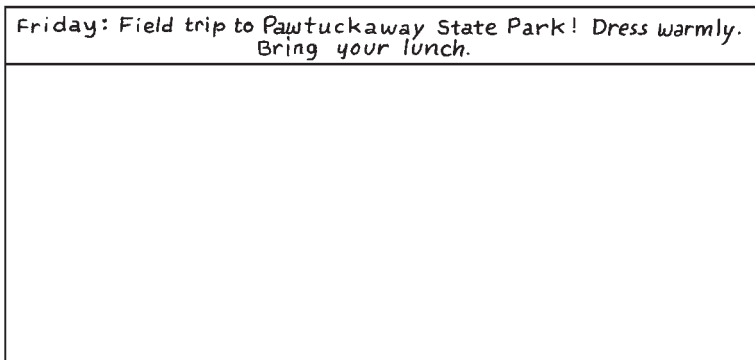
Jeannine Dobbs

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

want to display information mainly as a reminder to our students and/or to ourselves.



Many of these housekeeping messages need to be communicated on a daily basis to keep the class well organized and running efficiently. Writing them on the board can help ensure that our students understand, follow, remember, or record important information; moreover, messages can be used to prevent confusion and to save valuable class time.

Using the board as a teaching tool

In preparation for the day's class, we can use the board as a "get-ready-to-learn" tool. We can write, before or at the beginning of class, provocative quotations or questions, riddles, tongue twisters, scrambled vocabulary words (see Activity A.1.24) or scrambled sentences (see Activity A.3.19). These types of activities give students who arrive early something to get started on, and they help to get everyone focused on English, although, of course, these activities can be used not only as a warm-up but any time during class.

For beginning levels, we might head the board with the day and date. And for all levels, just for fun, we can write greetings and draw illustrations to observe special occasions such as local, national, or religious holidays, birthdays of famous people, and our students' birthdays. Or we can invent occasions like Happy Heat Wave! or Celebrate Spring or Let's Sing Day.

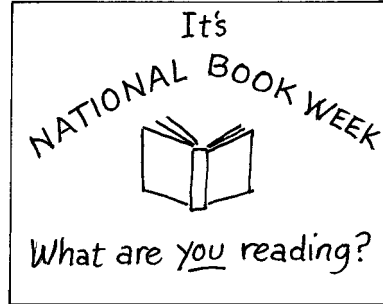
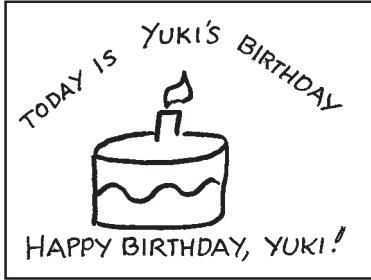
There are many ways the board can be used during class to support teaching. We can, for example, draw stick figures or abstract forms on the board and have students compose oral or written stories about them (see Activities A.4.3 and A.4.6, for example). Or, we can write vocabulary words or questions or statements drawn from a course book

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Jeannine Dobbs

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

reading or other sources and then ask students to respond orally or in writing in appropriate ways (see Activities A.1.4 and B.3.6). You might want to browse through the index to this book at this point for additional, more specific ideas of board activities you might use to support your own teaching.

Using the board helps students focus on what we are saying when we introduce them to new language concepts, and it helps them understand and remember what they hear. Presenting new material “live” on the board obviously takes longer than giving students a handout with the material already prepared – prepackaged as it were. But in most cases, this additional time is time well invested. As we draw or write on the board, we can explain what our drawing or writing means. When the board is used, students get the information gradually, so that they have the time to question anything they do not understand. If the information is complex, the students have time to grasp small pieces of it as it evolves, rather than looking at a sheet of paper bearing long lists of vocabulary words or complicated instructions or rules. If students then transcribe the information from the board to their notebooks, they make it their own. They write down as little or as much of the information as they feel they need; they process the information as they reproduce it.

In addition to using the board to present new concepts to students, we can use it to explain, clarify, illustrate, emphasize, organize, drill, and list information. We can write key words or a brief outline of our complete presentation. We can give examples of how to use new vocabulary. We can draw stick figures to illustrate grammar points (as in Activity A.3.16) and webs to show relationships between concepts (see Activity A.1.8). We can use the board to amplify and highlight the most important information in our presentations. Students may then elect to copy some or all of this supplemental information into their notebooks. Supplying them with a visual record is extremely important because many students are unable to listen to information delivered in a second language,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

evaluate what they hear in order to extract the most important information, and then record it.

We can also use board work to determine students' readiness for new material, to review new material, and to assess students' success at mastering this material. Frequent, quick, informal checks of students' achievements, which many of the board activities in this book can provide (e.g., Activities A.1.24, A.3.4, and A.7.1), help to keep us abreast of students' progress, or their lack thereof, easily and without the stress to students that accompanies quizzes and tests, although tests certainly have their place in the curriculum. Furthermore, students may benefit from seeing how well they do in comparison to their peers because it helps them to assess their own achievement levels more realistically.

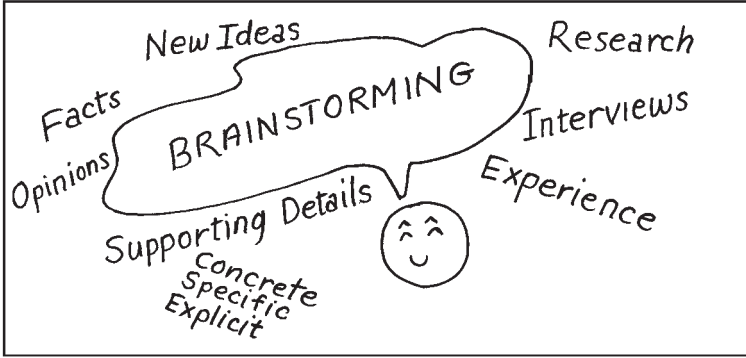
Finally, we can use the board to quickly summarize the day's important activities, to review a language concept that we have just introduced, or as a lead-in to the next day's class.



Using the board to record student input

Just as we use the question-and-answer method to involve our students and enliven and enhance our presentations of new concepts, we can also elicit input from students to make our use of the board more collaborative. We can ask students to brainstorm a topic while we record what they say. We can record questions students ask and the answers that other students offer. We can ask questions and record students' answers.

Michael O'Hare, a supporter of this method of teaching, points out in his article "Talk and Chalk: The Blackboard as an Intellectual Tool" (1993) that the advantage of making a board record is that it can be referred to as long as it remains visible. "What is said out loud," he writes, "must be said to all, but any participant can interrogate the board privately at any time" (p. 241). But, O'Hare warns, teachers should record "participants' contributions in their own words," because if teachers rephrase, students will feel that their comments were somehow "wrong." He also believes that when teachers paraphrase students'



comments, they are exerting a type of control over their students' discourse that tends to "dump them back into 'you talk, we listen' mode" (p. 245). O'Hare, however, is not writing specifically about ESL/EFL students, who make a larger number of erroneous contributions than native speakers do. An exception needs to be made, therefore, to allow for the elimination or correction of erroneous statements. When a student's contribution is not in error but a native speaker might use an idiomatic expression or choose a more precise word, we may want to supplement the student's phrasing with this information in the hope that the student will make it his or her own because it expresses his or her own idea. Of course, one way to avoid the possible problems of paraphrasing, as well as to increase student participation further, is to let students do their own recording.

It is the rare teacher – experienced, new, or in training – who has not used the board as a language teaching tool or been taught by a teacher writing on a board. But many teachers may not be familiar with *students* writing on the board. Thinking back on five years of high school and college-level foreign language classes, I find it difficult to recall ever writing on the board as a student. I now see, however, that my own students look forward to activities that put them at the board and that when they become comfortable using it at my direction, they sometimes initiate using it on their own.

Student use of the board

For students, writing on the board is a hands-on, learning-by-doing activity. What they write publicly usually gets read and responded to immediately. Not only the teacher but also peers become involved in what has been written. It is advantageous, therefore, to have not only

Introduction

individual student scribes use the board but also groups of students working simultaneously while the rest of the students write at their desks. In this way, all members of the class are challenged by the same questions. Students writing at the board often comment spontaneously on each other's content and each other's use of language. Furthermore, students writing at the board often invite their peers' comments because their work is on display and their need to know is great. As they compare their work with that of their peers, their critical faculties are heightened. They learn from their peers' successes and mistakes. Making comparisons, alterations, and corrections helps students become more aware of what revision means. They collaborate and compete. And they become teachers.

Some advantages of having groups of students write publicly at the board are as follows:

- A different atmosphere is created. A group writing at the board is a public group within the whole class, and the students interact not only with those in their group but with the whole class. In contrast, when students collaborate in small groups at their desks, usually little or no interaction takes place between groups.
- No single student can become disengaged and “disappear” without the teacher's notice, as can students in groups at their desks.
- A student cannot monopolize the discourse because written discourse cannot dominate “air time” the way oral discourse can.
- Spontaneous collaboration at the board is a voluntary process in which students can participate or leave at will, unlike the process that occurs when students are grouped at their desks for the specific purpose of editing each other's work or discussing content.
- The teacher's monitoring ability increases. A teacher can “sit in” only on one small group at a time. But, when the board is used, the teacher can observe what is taking place at the board and circulate among students working at their desks, acting as a resource to both groups.

In addition, board work allows us to easily observe students in the act of writing and see how they think in their new language. We see their false starts, their hesitations, and the errors they make but discover for themselves. These observations often lead us to a better understanding of the types of errors they make repeatedly, and of whether or not they doubt the accuracy of their usage. Furthermore, it gives us the opportunity, if we choose, to address difficulties as they arise – to assist by suggesting the word or grammar structure the student seems to be searching for, or to make corrections as problems occur. This immediacy can be very exciting for teachers and rewarding for the students who are intensely aware of their needs at that moment and appreciate having those needs met.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Public writing allows us to emphasize the process rather than the product. By its very nature, board writing is ephemeral and errors are easily erased. Students seem not to become as possessive and sensitive to criticism of their board writing as they do of “finished” writing or of writing that is committed to paper that they can hold in their hands.

Furthermore, some students have more confidence in their written than in their oral discourse and find it easier to participate in written form. Some students dislike asking for help or lack the verbal competence to express their problems and welcome the fact that the teacher or other students can see their problems and offer help when they need it.

Using the board in response to teacher prompts

At the teacher’s direction, students can use the board for numerous activities such as practicing and testing their grasp of new forms; paraphrasing or summarizing other writers; generating their own writing; editing their own and their peers’ public writing; checking answers to quizzes and tests; playing games; sharing knowledge, personal experiences, and feelings; or sharing information about their countries and their cultures.

In addition, when possible, students can be encouraged to draw illustrations on the board to accompany their writing; research increasingly shows a strong link between drawing and language learning. Mona Brookes, author of *Drawing with Children: A Creative Method for Adult Beginners, Too* (1996), writes, “[Y]ou can learn information eight times faster and retain it eight times longer if you draw what you are learning about” (p. 225).

Spontaneous student use, no teacher input

Students who have been made aware that the board belongs to them as well as to the teacher sometimes write on it spontaneously. They may, unasked, join a group the teacher has appointed to write publicly. Or, they may, for example, decide to write the answers to a quiz on the board, even though the teacher has not announced that this is the method of checking answers that will be used. Still others may use the board to communicate with their classmates or teacher or to show off newly acquired language skills.

My initial enthusiasm for making sure that students view the board as part of their domain was kindled by one beginning learner, an adult who was illiterate in his own language because he had never had the opportunity to go to school and who became so pleased with his growing skills that he began to write “Good Morning!” and other greetings on the board each day as he arrived, making visible his pride and love of

Introduction

learning. This act convinced me of the power of public writing and led me to seek ways of sharing that power with other students as well as with my fellow teachers.

A summary

Writing on the board offers many benefits. When teachers are writing and not just talking, the visual element stimulates students' interest in what they hear. More important, visual materials help students understand and remember the new information teachers are presenting. When students write at the board, their learning experience becomes self-centered and active. And when groups of students write at the board simultaneously, the students feel both challenged by their peers and protective toward them – they share with them and they learn from them.

Looking ahead

The next section of this book, Reminders, Tips, and Suggestions, may help you to use your board more effectively and/or more efficiently.

Then the Activities sections suggest numerous activities that both you and your students can do at the board. If you have an overhead projector or a flip chart, or can easily make handouts or use other kinds of visual aids, many of the activities may be used in these ways. The activities contain sections called *Preparation*, *Procedure*, and, where appropriate, *Variations*, optional *Follow-up*, and specific *Comments*. Because the appropriate level of many of the activities is apparent or very adaptable, and because you as the teacher know best whether an activity is suitable for your students, I have not defined the activities according to level.

The purpose of the language-based activities in Section A is to present, practice, or test specific lexical, phonetic, or grammatical items (see pages 25–114) as well as to help students attain increased fluency in their writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills (see pages 115–175). In the first three divisions of Section A, you present target forms in vocabulary, pronunciation, or grammar and students then strive to display or use the new information correctly. These activities also offer the opportunity to review material you have already presented or that students have attained by other means such as course book readings. The activities in the next three divisions in Section A aim to improve students' fluency and skill in generating and comprehending written and spoken English. Section A concludes with several activities that provide a way to review or assess students' class work in a specific area or to assess their overall level of comprehension.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

The activities in Section B are more open-ended and communicative. They call for the sharing of information that may then be used, for example, to build a sense of community in the classroom, to help set an agenda, or to educate both teachers and students about other countries and cultures while offering students multiple opportunities for language acquisition and analysis (see pages 179–216). The activities in Section B are focused as much on content – what is being said or written – as on how or how accurately it is being said or written. In most of these activities, students express their feelings or opinions or provide information about their lives or cultures. Activities in this section are designed to help students (1) recognize their language-learning needs, (2) become more autonomous learners, and (3) develop increased awareness of both the diversity and the congruence found in the classroom, the community, and the world.

Appendix A looks to the future of public writing surfaces, when more affluent institutions and programs will likely take advantage of technological advances such as electronic whiteboards. In contrast, Appendix B provides instructions for teachers who currently have no board in their classroom but are willing to construct one, as well as information about a product that makes it possible to create a portable, reusable but also disposable whiteboard surface.