

# Word Walls in Social Studies: One Solution to the “Vocabulary Conundrum”

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Julia Kearney and Lori Bingham (pseudonyms), two middle school social studies teachers in a large urban school, have a problem. They want to have their students asking and exploring important questions about American history, and they want them to have the vocabulary knowledge needed to do so. While Julia and Lori recognize the rich linguistic resources their students bring to their classrooms, they also recognize the intense vocabulary demands of social studies.<sup>1</sup> Julia and Lori recently participated in a professional learning initiative to develop research-based approaches for building students’ academic vocabulary knowledge in social studies. They learned about the potential of strategic word walls, in general,<sup>2</sup> and in social studies,<sup>3</sup> and the instructional routines that can grow out of them.

The simplest version of a word wall is a list of words posted as a student resource. Word walls can also be designed and used strategically to maximize the vocabulary learning students need to meet specific disciplinary objectives. “Interactive” approaches support students as creators and users of word walls, and may significantly influence engagement, word consciousness, and word learning.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this article is to share research supporting the strategic design and use of word walls, as well as teachers’ reflections on effective word wall routines in social studies.

## The Vocabulary Challenge

Vocabulary researchers generally agree that the average high schooler knows between 25,000 and 50,000 word families.<sup>5</sup> This number of words means that students are learning, on average, 11–17 new words each school day. This presents a “Vocabulary Conundrum,”<sup>6</sup> because we know that teachers’ explanations alone cannot develop that

much word knowledge. While teachers’ engaging and explicit instruction around words is crucial for learning important concepts,<sup>7</sup> students actually build most word knowledge incidentally, and incrementally, through repeated, meaningful exposures.<sup>8</sup> Thus, teachers can combine their explicit instruction of social studies concepts with regular, meaningful exposures to related words. Strategic use of word walls can help *all* students reach high levels of vocabulary knowledge through developing *critical concept knowledge* and *word consciousness*.

## Critical Concept Knowledge

Critical concepts are the most essential concepts for a unit or important disciplinary question. In this sense, vocabulary knowledge *is* the critical content for a discipline. It is what teachers are already organizing their instruction around, and it directly supports what decades of research have shown about how humans learn and integrate new information.<sup>9</sup> We want students to have

deep knowledge of these terms and use them in flexible and nuanced ways years later.

Critical concepts come with a host of important related terms. For example, words related to the critical concept of *colonization* might be *indigenous*, *exploitation*, and *empire*, with many more terms related to specific instances of colonization, such as *Jamestown*. Building knowledge of these related terms supports deep knowledge of the critical concepts; they are part of the frameworks that experts build to engage in historical thinking and problem solving.<sup>10</sup>

## Word Consciousness

When we help students develop word consciousness, we promote curiosity in and awareness of words.<sup>11</sup> This includes attention to word meanings, multiple-meaning words, cognates, morphemes (e.g., roots and affixes), and contextual use of words. For example, discussing the root *comun* in communism, which comes from Old French and means “common, general, free, open, public” (etymonline.com), and thinking about other words with the same root (e.g., community, communal, commune) would build word consciousness. Teachers can also attend to the suffix *-ism* in *communism*, which provides a toehold into the meanings of other *-ism* words, and, when relevant to the students’ language backgrounds, the cognates *comunismo*

Figure 1. Procedures and Roles for Strategic Use of Word Walls in Colonization Unit

Unit: <i>Colonization, Wealth, Power, and Morality</i>			
<p><b>Example of Specific Text in Unit:</b> <i>Excerpt from Reverend P. Fontaine’s 1757 Letter Arguing for Morality of Slavery</i></p> <p>...to live in Virginia without slaves is morally impossible. Before our troubles, you could not hire a servant or slave for love or money, so that, unless robust enough to cut wood, to go to mill, to work at the hoe, etc., you must starve or board in some family where they both fleece and half starve you. There is no set price upon corn, wheat, and provisions; so they take advantage of the necessities of strangers, who are thus obliged to purchase some slaves and land. This, of course, draws us all into the original sin and curse of the country of purchasing slaves, and this is the reason we have no merchants, traders, or artificers of any sort but what become planters in a short time. A common laborer ... if you can be so much favored as to hire one, is 15 pence per day; a bungling carpenter, 2 shillings 6 pence per day ... for a lazy fellow to get wood and water, £19 per year ... add to this £7 or £8 more and you have a slave for life.</p>			
Procedures	Teacher Role	Student Role	Example
<p><b>Designing Word Wall</b></p>	<p>Preview instructional materials and identify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>critical concepts students will need to understand to answer essential questions</li> <li>words related to critical concepts and broader social studies practices</li> <li>general academic, “all-purpose” words that will help students in multiple units and content areas</li> </ul> <p>Plan for strategic design (e.g., color coding, meaningful placements to show relationships).</p>	<p>Preview instructional materials and identify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>new, confusing, and interesting words as possible word wall words.</li> </ul> <p>Help create word walls materials (e.g., word cards with definitions, diagrams, real-world applications of words).</p> <p>Suggest word wall design to highlight highest-priority words and relationships between words.</p>	<p>Teacher reviews essential questions and instructional materials and selects <i>wealth, power, morality, and colonization</i> as critical concepts and <i>laborer, servant, slave, purchase, merchant, indentured, and provisions</i> as words related to the critical concepts. Teacher identifies <i>advantage</i> and <i>necessity</i> as “all-purpose” academic words.</p> <p>Teacher and students create word wall together, organizing it around critical concepts and adding student-identified words.</p>
<p><b>Using Word Wall</b></p>	<p>Plan for daily writing/ discussion prompts that relate to essential questions. Ask students to identify, reflect on, or categorize word wall words in regular classroom routines.</p>	<p>Participate in daily writing/discussion prompts. Reference word wall during learning activities as an advance organizer or a reviewing resource.</p>	<p>Daily discussion/writing prompts include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Turn to a partner and talk about what we explored today. Use our word wall words <i>wealth</i> and <i>necessity</i>.</li> <li>Look at our word wall. Choose 3 words that relate to <i>power</i>. Explain why.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Evaluating Student Responses to Word Wall</b></p>	<p>For valuable formative assessment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>review brief, daily writing responses</li> <li>circulate during small group discussions, nudging and providing feedback</li> <li>reflect on use of word wall words in summative exams, essays, projects</li> </ul>	<p>With teacher guidance, regularly reflect on depth of knowledge of word wall words—evaluate degree of knowledge, express knowledge, ask questions to build knowledge.</p>	<p>Teacher circulates room and briefly scans responses, determining that students need additional practice with <i>colonization</i>. Teacher shares current events related to <i>colonization</i> and asks students to argue who is gaining and who is losing wealth/power. Students rate their developing knowledge of <i>colonization</i> before and after the mini-lesson and explain what new insights they gained, using at least 3 other word wall words.</p>

(Spanish), *communisme* (French), and/or *Kommunismus* (German).

## Using Word Walls in Social Studies

From our yearlong professional development initiative, we share an example of step-by-step procedures for designing, using, and evaluating responses to word walls. Next, we share reflections on the yearlong word wall use in Julia and Lori's classrooms.

### Step-by-Step Procedures

Figure 1 describes procedures and student and teacher roles in word wall routines integrated into a month-long unit exploring power, wealth, and morality during the 1700s in North America. This unit aligns to two National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) themes — *Individuals, Groups, and Institutions* and *Power, Authority, and Governance*.<sup>12</sup> One of the unit texts is the 1757 letter from Reverend Peter Fontaine, in which he makes a case for the morality of slavery in the Virginia Colony.<sup>13</sup>

In this example, students would grapple with deeper understandings of social studies concepts as they pursued both teacher-generated essential questions and student-generated questions, an essential component of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.<sup>14</sup> Students would also work toward Common Core State Standards literacy goals.<sup>15</sup> by evaluating primary sources, exploring discipline-specific terms and the relationships between those terms, and building evidence-based arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

### Teacher Reflections

We now share Julia and Lori's reflections on word wall design, use, and evaluation. They taught in a large, urban school district with significant numbers of multilingual students and English Language Learners (ELL). In other words, most of their students spoke more than one language and were at varying stages of English proficiency.



Figure 2. Lori's Word Wall for "Growth of a Nation" Unit

### Designing Word Walls

Designing word walls entails: strategic selection of critical concepts and related terms, organization, and aesthetics. Lori's planning for her unit, "Growth of a Nation," started with identifying the main concept that drove the unit, *growth*. She knew her students needed to understand the ways that the U.S. grew from 1800–1860, so the critical concepts—*growth, economic, geographic, social, and political*—anchored her word wall (See Figure 2). Lori's students created the word wall with concept maps, showing the depth of the critical concepts and including important, related terms.

Lori wanted her students to shift from memorizing key dates and people to "understanding key concepts and how

those concepts affected certain eras and intertwined." Additionally, aligned with the NCSS theme of *Time, Continuity, and Change*, she wanted students to make connections across eras and events: "I want students to understand what *equality* meant in the past and what it means today."

Julia's units were built around essential questions exploring multiple topics from the 1930s–1950s. She was well aware of each unit's breadth, understanding the need to organize key vocabulary into critical concepts and related terms. For example, related words like *Blitzkrieg* and *atomic bomb* were listed with the critical concept of *security*. Discussion and writing activities then centered on students' arguments of whether those related words threatened or protected security. This provided opportunities for students to "communicate and critique their conclusions" collaboratively, a key component of the C3 Framework. Julia's word wall categories were designed to help students "...understand which words represent a theme, such as *change*, a broad topic, such as *immigration*, and a content-specific word, such as *tenebrism*." As such, she focused first on helping students develop the concep-



Figure 3. Julia's Word Wall for Industrialization and The Progressive Era



Figure 4. Julia's Word Wall for World War II

tual frameworks they would need for historical thinking. For example, Figure 3 shows a word wall anchored with “Industrialization” and “The Progressive Era,” highlighting the consequences of each.

Julia also designed her word walls to build word consciousness with general academic words. General academic words, or “anywhere words,” are useful in school language and predictive of achievement in multiple content areas, including social studies.<sup>16</sup> Students are more likely to see them in print than conversation, so the reading practice afforded by having these words visible was likely useful for students. Also, over time, this section of Julia’s word wall grew as students encountered and used these words (e.g., Figure 3 versus Figure 4). Finally, Julia used color-coding strategically to illustrate categories of words: people were in green; places were in orange, etc.

Both teachers organized their word walls to align with unit goals, and their efforts to help their students use criti-

cal concepts across historical eras likely promoted word consciousness. Many academic word meanings are colored by the contexts in which they are used.<sup>17</sup> For example, *consequences* can be positive, negative, or unintended. Whether a consequence is positive or negative often depends on vantage point. By moving beyond definitions and engaging in nuanced exploration, students had opportunities to build flexible knowledge and awareness of important words. This developing word consciousness supports increased independent word learning and comprehension.<sup>18</sup>

#### Using Word Walls

Following the strategic planning for designing their word walls, many effective instructional routines naturally followed. Both Lori and Julia provided multiple opportunities for students to practice with and personalize the meanings of critical concepts and related terms.

Lori’s concept map routines allowed her students to regularly attend to their growing word knowledge. Concept

mapping, a learning strategy for building concept knowledge first coined in 1972, typically include nodes and connecting lines to show relationships between major concepts and related ideas.<sup>19</sup> Lori’s students started concept maps for critical concepts at the beginning of the unit and added to them throughout. This regular revisiting of concept maps, and the word wall more generally, allowed students to document their increasing depth and nuance of words like *growth*. Lori reflected, “At first, students were confused as to how a country could grow besides by population. They were later able to understand that growth is not just about numbers or about height.”

In all of Lori’s concept maps, students were asked to practice and personalize word meanings, as well as to make connections across concepts, eras, and events. Figures 5 and 6 include examples of students building knowledge of the term *economic*, and exploring connections with another critical concept, *growth*.

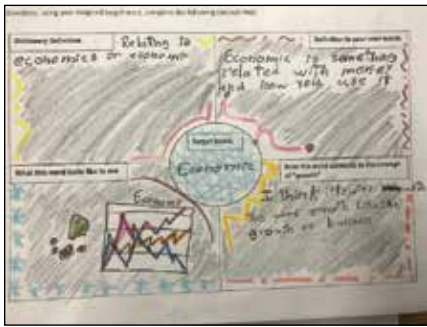


Figure 5. Concept Map on *Economic and Growth*



Figure 6. Concept Map on *Economic and Growth*

Both Lori and Julia regularly used critical concepts and related terms in word-wall-driven prompts (see Figure 7). They used daily writing and discussion prompts for formative assessment as well as writing prompts for summative assessments.

Arguably, the most important part of word walls in a classroom is how they are used. Lori and Julia's classroom routines included references to, discussions with, and writing around word wall words nearly every day, allowing students to practice, personalize, and use important words.

### Evaluating Students' Responses to Word Wall Routines

Both Lori and Julia shared powerful and positive student responses as they implemented their word wall routines. Julia reflected on the smooth integration of her word wall routines and the impact of the strategic design of the wall. While she maintained her use of traditional vocabulary packets, she found students relying more on the word wall than their packets. Julia wrote,

It was easier for students to form their ideas and thoughts when the categories and organization were there to help them on the wall. The frequency with which my students looked at the Word Wall significantly increased when it changed from a list of words written in black ink to a word wall that was categorized and color-coded.

In both classrooms, there appeared to be authentic engagement with and ownership of the word wall as a resource. Because both teachers planned for careful design and regular, strategic use of the

word wall, it was a useful resource that their students were willing and able to use to support their learning.

### Conclusion

The “vocabulary conundrum” suggests that teachers cannot teach all the words that students need to or will learn. However, social studies teachers can enhance and accelerate word learning with strategic word wall routines. And students can learn essential vocabulary in ways that help them build the knowledge frameworks they need to engage in historical thinking.

Vocabulary knowledge varies across every student, and the authentic expo-

Figure 7. Examples of Discussion and Writing Prompts for Strategic Use of Word Walls\*

#### Early or first exposures to words

- Look at the roots/parts of \_\_\_\_\_. What other words do they make you think of?
- Turn to a partner and discuss what you think \_\_\_\_\_ from our word wall means.
- Today we're going to be exploring \_\_\_\_\_. Which word wall words do you think might be most important for this topic?
- What words on our word wall look or sound like words in other languages you know?

#### Continued practice with word wall words

- Compare and contrast \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ from our word wall.
- Is there a word like \_\_\_\_\_ in other languages you know? Is it used in similar ways?
- Generate a few synonyms for \_\_\_\_\_ on our word wall.
- Draft a sentence using \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ from our word wall.
- How does \_\_\_\_\_ cause/influence/relate to \_\_\_\_\_?
- Here are a few sentences/problems with words/symbols missing. What word wall words should go in the blanks?

#### Review with word wall words

- Write down 1 important idea from today and use at least 2 of our word wall words in your response.
- Look around at our word walls—which words were the most important from today's lesson?
- After these last few lessons, which word wall words would still be hard to explain to a friend?

\*To meet the needs of learners from multiple language backgrounds, students should be encouraged to write/converse in the language of their choice, to translanguage, to sketch pictures, and to use definition tools as needed.

tures and opportunities to practice afforded by strategic word wall routines support *all* learners. We conclude with a final reflection from Julia:

Word Walls have proven to be a valuable resource for all students, especially ELLs. Students learn and interact with so many different words throughout the day in all of their classes. While this can be overwhelming, having a word wall that is present, updated, and usable makes a difference in the way students adapt to different classrooms and content-specific tasks. I found that students were able to add to discussions and respond to questions easier when having a large, visible, user-friendly resource available in the room. 🌍

#### Notes

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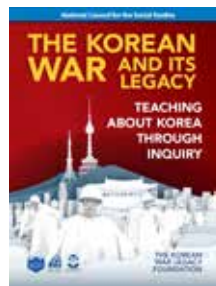
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