**Concept Sorts**

**Background**

A concept sort is a strategy used to introduce students to the vocabulary of a new topic or book. Teachers provide students with a list of terms or concepts from reading material. Students place words into different categories based on each word's meaning. Categories can be defined by the teacher or by the students. When used before reading, concept sorts provide an opportunity for a teacher to see what his or her students already know about the given content. When used after reading, teachers can assess their students' understanding of the concepts presented.

**Benefits**

This technique is beneficial when there is a lot of specialized vocabulary to introduce. Concept sorts enhance reading skills by providing the content to which students can attach new oral vocabulary. This technique has been shown to be particularly beneficial for ELL students. Teachers can use this strategy with the whole class, small groups, individually. Monitoring each student's sorting process provides teachers with information about how much the students already know about the topic. This allows teachers to tailor instruction accordingly.

**Create and use the strategy**

1. Introduce the book or topic to be read;
2. Choose relevant, important vocabulary terms;
3. Write or print out the terms on cards (one term per card), making several sets;
4. Create and label the categories OR assist students with creating their own categories as they sort the cards.

**Note:** As with all strategy instruction, teachers should model the procedure to ensure that students understand why and how to use the strategy.

Provide the students with the cards containing the selected terms. Have the students sort the cards and then explain why they grouped the terms as they did. The students continue the activity by developing a chart of their sort.

**Note:** A more structured way to use concept sorts with a new book is to create story categories (i.e., character, setting, problem, & solution) and have students determine where the selected terms go. Teachers can then ask the students to write a short prediction of what the story will be about.

**Sample Concept Sort**

The following example introduces students to a book about trees.

1. Introduce and discuss the following pre-selected terms:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| deciduous | leaves | water | bark |
| evergreen | forests | branches | mountains |
| sunlight | soil | roots | rainforest |

1. Then, ask students to sort the terms according to the following categories OR ask the students to sort the cards in a way that is meaningful to them and follow up to check their understanding of the concepts.
   * Parts of a tree
   * Types of trees
   * Where trees grow
   * What trees need to grow