Lessons from a Vocabulary Journal

Vocabulary instruction was straightforward when I was in school. If I didn’t know a word, I was told to look it up in the dictionary. As I grew older, I had to use the word in a sentence and, in advanced classes, add synonyms and antonyms. Believe it or not, I enjoyed it. The sentences allowed me to be creative, and I thought I was learning (with a capital L) because I had to know and understand the meaning in order to complete the assignment.

Wrong.

In fact, I have proof—my vocabulary journal from my senior year in high school. Each week we were given a list of 12 words to copy, define, and use in a sentence. The first few weeks my sentences were safe: “The graceful swan was the pariah of the ducks,” but by the third month, my linguistic growth was evident. Not only did I take more risks with the content of my sentences, I was able to pack in words from previous lists: “With a moot lineament, the sagacious lawyer circumspected the spurious evidence his client presented.”

Whatever possessed me to save my vocabulary journal I do not know, but I am thankful, now that I teach. It serves as a constant reminder of what does not work when it comes to vocabulary instruction. So what does work? During my first years of teaching, I knew more of what did not work than of what did. Then Janet Allen’s book, Words, Words, Words: Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 4–12, significantly changed the way I think about and teach vocabulary.

The first place I reconsidered vocabulary was during shared reading. Allen (1999) states that shared reading “offers teachers multiple and diverse opportunities to teach new words and word-learning strategies” (p. 68). During shared reading, I read out loud as the students followed along in their copies of the book. One book that has been a huge hit with my sixth- and seventh-grade literacy students is Jerry Spinelli’s Who Put That Hair in My Toothbrush? (1984). This funny account of sibling rivalry is told from both the sister’s and brother’s perspectives in alternating chapters. The concept I wanted to focus on was that of sibling rivalry, so I wanted to activate their background knowledge to see what they already knew.

One strategy I used was Allen’s “Things We Read from A to Z” (see Figure 1). After introducing the concept of sibling rivalry, I split the students into groups and told them that we would be reading a book about sibling rivalry. I asked them to predict what words they would expect to find in a book about sibling rivalry and to list them in the appropriate boxes. As I circulated around the room, I heard the sharing of “war” stories and “Oh yeah, that’s a good word!” After looking at their lists, I had a pretty good idea of their past experiences with this concept and where I would need to fill in the gaps. I also found that this strategy made them more active readers because they would search the novel carefully, proudly announcing when they found words they had predicted.

Now I was ready to tackle the words in the novel with which they would need help. To be honest, in the past I had highlighted the more difficult words and pretaught them at the start of each chapter. That way, we wouldn’t have to stop in the middle and disrupt the flow of reading (and comprehension) to define a word. Then Allen pointed out that by preteaching the words, I was making my students dependent on me—I decided which words were difficult without even asking them what they knew and did not know.

In Words, Words, Words, Allen shares an incredible strategy that activates prior word
knowledge. I never understood the power of this activity until I actually tried it. Before I began shared reading, I went through the novel and underlined the words that might be difficult enough to interfere with comprehension. I made a list of those words with “rich and lean” contexts (Allen, 1999, p. 18), so I would know which ones I could quickly define in context and which ones I would need to teach in detail. For “How Well Do I Know These Words?” (see Figure 2), I had the students work in pairs as they read through the lists of words from the novel in context. On the corresponding sheet (see Figure 3), students discussed the word and its context and determined if it was a word they still needed help with, one they thought they understood, or one they were confident
they understood. If they needed help with the word, they simply wrote the word in the corresponding column. If they knew or thought they knew a definition, they wrote it in the appropriate column, along with their definition.

The discussion and meaning making during this lesson were priceless (see Photo 1). One word on their list was *hibernation*; however, its context was different from the one they learned in science class: “I hadn’t lifted a weight since Christmas. My vein was in hibernation” (Spinelli, 1984, p. 139). Veronica told her partner she had no idea what the word meant. Jason then told her, “You know, we learned in science class about when bears hibernate in the winter?” She still did not understand it, so he explained what bears do when they hibernate. Once she understood, they talked about what it might mean in this context. For some students, using visuals helped them determine meanings. Across the room, Kerri and Amy were looking at Kerri’s outstretched arm, observing her own vein, trying to imagine what a hibernating vein would look like.

It was exciting to see these students actively defining words. The same students who were just arguing, “She’s touching me!” were sharing background experiences and helping each other put their definitions into words. Some of the connections they made were amazing. Not only did I hear other content area connections, some students used...
songs to help define words. Gerry, a seventh grader, was working on the word petrified and was trying to remember the first stanza to the song “I Will Survive” where the word is used (see Photo 2). I stopped and laughed because his connection made me remember back to middle school when I twirled the baton to that same song for the talent show, and how petrified I was when I walked out on the stage!

When my eighth-grade students first used this strategy, they were a bit hesitant to write words in the “Still Need Help With” column. After I reviewed the directions, Mark finally understood. “Oh,” he said. “I get it—all the words we write down in this column, we have to look up in the dictionary!” I had to laugh, then assure them that all I wanted to know was what they knew—it wasn’t a trick that would send them to the dictionary. Once they realized that, they relaxed and began to negotiate meanings with their partners. After they placed all of the words in one of the three columns, I read through their lists and was surprised by how many words they already knew. Next, I identified which words they still needed help with and planned my strategy lessons accordingly. From those words, I selected the ones with a lean context and made them “word of the day,” using a graphic organizer to study the word in depth.

For example, most students struggled with the word persecuted. Using Allen’s (1999) strategy, “Making Connections” (see Figure 4), we looked at the word and its context and discussed possible meanings. Next we determined what the word was not, as well as contexts in which we would find this word. Some of the contexts they generated were personal (home, school, parents, teachers) or historical (Holocaust, slavery, Salem witch trials). Finally, students made a personal connection that would help them remember the word. Rick, a sixth grader, made a powerful connection to the word persecuted. The KKK reminded him of the word “because there was this one guy who started kicking me when I was in the third grade because I was black.” Another student, Alethea, connected the word to the mistreatment of the Jews in the novel Number the Stars by Lois Lowry, which she had read earlier in the year for silent sustained reading.

Once we had read enough of the novel to see some solid examples of sibling rivalry, I wanted to do an in-depth look at that concept. Using Allen’s (1999) concept ladder for more abstract ideas, we defined and applied the concept of sibling rivalry to deepen our understanding of the characteristics (see Figure 5). We brainstormed some
of the roots of sibling rivalry, including: anger, embarrassment, button pushing, unfair treatment, jealousy, and favoritism. Famous examples included the Olsen twins, the Wayan brothers, Tia and Tamara (from the television show Sister, Sister), as well as Donny and Marie Osmond. Students also agreed that sibling rivalry could be minimized by apologizing and talking to each other more, sharing, having separate rooms, treating siblings fairly, and paying more attention to the siblings individually.

Now I was ready to see if they understood the concept, could define it in their own words, and apply it to their lives. Alex summed it up best: “[arguing] for 1st place in the family.” When it was time to apply it to their lives, Alethea demonstrated her grasp of the concept as she wrote, “It does exist in my family. . . . like if my mom gives my brother something and my little sister gets only a little piece, she fights with my brother for it because she thinks that my mom likes my little brother more than anyone in the world.”

I also used the concept ladder with my eighth-grade students who were reading the novel Tears of a Tiger by Sharon Draper (1994), which deals with teens facing the deadly consequences of drinking and driving. The students were still struggling with the concept of immune, so I used a poem I thought they might connect with more easily. The poem, “Immune,” by Angela Shelf Medearis (1995, p. 37), discusses how young people think they
are immune to death. I asked my students to write about what they thought the word meant in the poem, then connect it to their own lives. Mark wrote, “I think the girl that is writing thinks the word immune means kids cannot catch anything... I like it because sometimes kids do think they are immune to getting hurt, and it reminds me of some stupid stuff I have done and paid the price for it.”

Allen (1999) states that, “Making vocabulary study meaningful and useful for students has always been the difficult part” (p. 40). By allowing students to activate their background knowledge, make meaningful connections, and build concept knowledge, I was able to observe them learning new concepts, applying them to their lives, and remembering definitions beyond the next day or week! My students and I were learning that finding meaning doesn’t happen before we read, but each day as we read and connect those words to the complex lives we all lead. Also, we were learning that making meaning is continuous; it doesn’t just start Monday with the weekly word list and end Friday with the test. Making meaning builds with every experience and continues to grow as we read and share our experiences.

As for my vocabulary journal—we’ll just keep it our little secret. I’ll save it for days when I need a good chuckle or a gentle reminder to keep my instruction meaningful.

References


Call for 2001 Orbis Pictus Nominations

The National Council of Teachers of English announces a call for nominations for the 2001 Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children. To recommend an outstanding children’s nonfiction book published in 2000, please send a letter to one of the Orbis Pictus Committee co-chairs, Karen P. Smith, 64 Juniper Hill Rd., White Plains, NY 10607 or Richard Kerper, Elem. Ed. Dept., Millersville University, P.O. Box 1002, Millersville, PA 17551-0302. Please include the following information: the author’s name, book title, publisher, copyright date, and a short description of what you liked about the book. Nominations for the 2001 Orbis Pictus Award must be received by November 30, 2000.