

Defining Our World: A Millennial Approach to Purposeful Vocabulary Acquisition

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Late baby boomer that I am, I've done a lot of reminiscing lately about this school year, my twentieth as a secondary English language arts teacher, my tenth as a college English educator, and my very first as a literacy coach. To be honest, survival in the classroom consumed my thinking throughout the 1989-90 school year. I didn't want to be perceived by school administrators as ineffective, so *control* was my guiding principle. From the moment the late bell sounded until the dismissal bell rang, I kept students busy. Oh, they read; they wrote; they listened; they spoke; they even occasionally thought critically—but all according to my highly scripted lesson plan.

Among the most carefully controlled lessons were those from the district-sanctioned vocabulary textbook. Marissa, a student who recently completed her junior year at a suburban eastern Pennsylvania high school, explains her early 21st century vocabulary learning experience in a way that reminds me of one such script:

Each week we get a lesson. Exercises come with each lesson that we must complete. First, we match each word to its definition. The next exercise is to pick which word fits best in the sentence. We also make flash cards to help us remember. There is a test at the end of each week.

What Marissa describes is quite frankly what many parents, teachers, and students expect vocabulary instruction to be. Eleventh grade English teacher Jennifer DeBelli and I wondered what Marissa's fellow millennial classmates, students born in the information age, made of this age-old routine. They didn't hold back:

“I hate being tested weekly on memorized definitions.”

“Completing boring and repetitive vocabulary exercises serves no purpose.”

“Nobody in the real world even uses these words anyway.”

“This is just one more pointless school exercise.”

“It sure would be nice to learn something new.”

While the students’ negative responses to traditional vocabulary instruction didn’t surprise us all that much, we were shocked to learn that most students wanted to maintain the status quo. Anthony explained it this way: “Hey, it’s very simple, quick, and easy. Mindless work like this can be done in less than ten minutes.”

Gina added, “A lot of the words from our vocabulary book I already know, and the workbook exercises are easy, so it doesn’t take much work to learn the words each week. Vocab has always been like down time in our class between papers and such. It’s a nice break from the real work.”

For us, the clincher came when Caitlin admitted, “I really like the easy homework grades even though I forget most of the words right after I take the quiz.”

These confessions were sobering, and we agreed that change was necessary or we’d continue to replicate the cycles of “learning and forgetting” that literacy educator Frank Smith decries when we could instead be empowering students to lead their own literacy learning.

Developing a Millennial Mindset

William E. Nagy minces no words when he begins his book *Teaching Vocabulary to Improve Reading Comprehension*: “Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to reading comprehension; one cannot understand text without knowing what most of the words

mean. A wealth of research has documented the strength of the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension” (1). Almost immediately, though, he goes on to note that, “not all vocabulary instruction increases reading comprehension” (1). Our students had clearly reported that the traditional approach to vocabulary instruction practiced in our high school was scoring them easy points but not helping them to become stronger readers.

We’d need to throw away the workbooks that kept students minimally occupied with mindless drill and practice exercises and instead provide authentic tasks to help students define their 21st century world for themselves. To do so, we would need not only to think differently but also to try to take on what educator and researcher Jason Frand has called an “information-age mindset.” This would require building new curricula for learners born into an information-age world where computers have always existed, an information-age world where the internet is better than television, an information-age world where reality may be digitally altered, and an information-age world where being able to do counts far more than merely knowing. In this world, students learn through video-game style trial and error; they engage in multi-tasking; and they rarely write by hand. They are socially connected with one another, have little tolerance for waiting, and make little distinction between “the owner, the creator, and the user of information” (Frand, 22).

We asked students what they’d like from a new approach to vocabulary instruction that wouldn’t negatively impact their grades or take too much more time than they were already devoting. They responded:

- fun activities that help us *know* the words

- new words—not words we already know
- a process that will actually help when we're reading
- words that we might actually encounter when we're reading
- words in context—not random lists
- words from reading that we like—not contrived word list stories
- help preparing for the SAT

We were quite impressed with the students' list of what they wanted school vocabulary instruction to be, and we had to admit that the traditional approach firmly grounded in the behaviorist learning theory of a bygone era was simply not designed to help students construct new understandings of words in contemporary real-world contexts. Vocabulary researcher and teacher Michael Graves points out that, “[S]imply giving students definitions of words will not result in their learning rich and full meanings, is unlikely to improve their comprehension of the text from which the words were selected, and is unlikely to result in their actively using the words in their speech or writing” (20).

Taking a New Literacy Approach

To meet the needs of our millennial learners, we would need to dispense with the textbook-generated lists, exercises, quizzes, and tests. Students would now take responsibility for making meaning of self-selected electronic non-fiction texts, including on-line newspapers and magazines. We didn't yet feel tech-savvy enough to consider blogs and wikis here but will undoubtedly include them as options in the next rendition of the assignment. Each team would then identify and explore “key terms” needed to make

meaning of the text and eventually lead the class in a discussion of the ideas and arguments encountered within the electronic texts. We attempted to align our plan with the NCTE Executive Committee guidelines for 21st century literacies, which stress the need to provide readers and writers with opportunities to use new technological tools, work collaboratively and cross-culturally, share information, process multiple forms of data at high levels, produce and evaluate multimedia texts, and address the ethical issues involved.

Student choices of informational texts varied widely and were far more timely and interesting to fellow students than most readings we would have been able to provide. Students explored topics of immediate interest to them, ranging from Johnny Depp and same-sex marriage to abortion, illegal immigration, the War in Iraq, weight loss, and school violence. While students often balked at our traditional reading assignments, they were eager to read and respond to the electronic articles selected by their peers.

Of course, not all millennial students have equal access to technology, and not every student is equally adept at finding and evaluating credible source material, underscoring the need for teacher assistance and instruction. Judith Irvin reminds us that “Understanding the relationship between literacy and technology means that schools should examine what types of academic literacy habits and skills are needed to prepare students for the future they face; how contexts for conducting research, learning, reading, and writing have changed because of the available technologies; and how assignments, teaching goals, and understandings about literacy have shifted” (9). As students found texts that mattered to them, we created mini lessons to support their ability to evaluate the

validity of electronic resources, to make inferences within non-fiction texts, and to use electronic resources to support comprehension when meaning-making breaks down.

Leu and his colleagues recommend that students consider the following five evaluation-level questions developed by Julie Coiro to monitor their on-line reading comprehension:

1. Understanding: Does it make sense to me?
2. Relevancy: Does it meet my needs?
3. Accuracy: Can I verify it with another reliable source?
4. Reliability: Can I trust it?
5. Bias: How does the author shape it?

Like Leu, we found that many of our high school juniors initially accepted the electronic texts they encountered as fact, and only through critical questioning did they begin to realize that all texts—even those that seemed to report the facts—have been shaped by specific authors for specific purposes. Also, like Don Pedersen before us, we found great value in helping students to examine how the authors they opted to share with one another made their respective arguments and wrote with their readers' needs in mind.

Scaffolding Word Study

As students worked through their self-selected articles, we asked them to identify for discussion several terms that Beck, McKeown, and Kucan would refer to as Tier Two words, or “the words that characterize written text—but are not so common in everyday conversation” (7). While students would occasionally highlight words common in the spoken language (Tier One) or select disciplinary specific terms (Tier Three) that they

felt warranted additional discussion and explication, we agreed that we had the most to gain by focusing our attention on how authors used written language in ways that supported our own growth as readers and writers.

Occasionally, students identified terms that clearly benefitted from further semantic analysis or a conscious examination of its affix(es), root, and/or etymology. In this case, we encouraged students to prepare a graphic organizer to show how taking a word apart or tracing its origin might help them to determine meaning or to log how the key term was used in different ways by different authors for different purposes on different web sites. As Nagy and Scott remind educators, word knowledge itself is quite a complex process—far more so than our tradition of looking up words in the dictionary has led us to believe.

First, they point out, learning new words is an incremental process, whereby a young person's initial understandings begin to approximate adult understanding only over time. As students encounter key concepts in multiple on-line texts, their understanding of those concepts increases.

Second, words are quite often *polysemous*. Karen Bromley explains that 70% of our most frequently used words have multiple definitions, a fact that rarely enters into play when students are copying the first definition they find in the dictionary or memorizing single definitions for a quiz, but this fact can't be avoided when students are surfing the net actively pursuing meaning.

Third, knowing what a word means extends far beyond the over-simplified notion of denotation as one considers each word's multidimensionality, including its grammatical function, written and spoken variations, synonyms, antonyms, and

connotations. Here students see multidimensionality in action as they consciously explore multiple forms of key ideas as they use search engines and invariably find themselves connected to other articles, blogs, wikis, electronic media, and even interactive dictionaries.

Further, key terms are related conceptually to other key terms. This interrelated nature of words means we can learn a great deal about new words as we encounter different forms in different electronic texts.

Finally, heterogeneity suggests that what it means to know a word is dependent upon the type of word one is learning in the first place. Knowing how to use verb forms adjectivally is quite different from using conjunctions or prepositions. Students need meaningful opportunities to examine how word function depends upon the interrelationships with other words.

After students created a record of their electronic search for meaning, they prepared to lead one another in a full-class discussion and often developed a puzzle or game either to frontload key terms that they'd go on to discuss or to provide multiple opportunities to continue to use the words they had shared during their article discussion. Underlying this new assignment is a Vygotskian social interactionist learning theory that "presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (88).

Traditional textbook drills and test preparation exercises are by their very nature passive activities for most students, almost guaranteeing that what has been "learned" will quickly be forgotten. Allowing students to use electronic resources to find their own nonfiction texts and to define their own terms transforms them into thinkers about

language choices as they construct knowledge as they discuss texts they find personally meaningful. By selecting texts and words for further study themselves, students are making active choices to belong to what Frank Smith calls the literacy club.

Listening to the Students

At the conclusion of the eleven-week experiment, we asked students to compare their traditional approach to memorizing teacher-selected words on a weekly basis to their new, proactive approach to on-line reading, connecting, and thinking. Almost all indicated a clear preference for the latter. The few students who did not explained that memorizing word definitions was *easier* than taking the time to make their own meaning on-line. In an end-of-project survey, students cited the following benefits from a millennial approach to purposeful vocabulary acquisition:

- creativity
- responsibility
- words from everyday life
- interesting on-line articles with meaningful words
- actual word and concept learning
- ease of word learning through use
- enjoyable student-created games and puzzles
- more unfamiliar words in actual use than those pre-selected by textbook
- diversity of words (medical, political, popular culture)
- the joy of discovering words students hadn't known existed
- student-controlled level of difficulty

- exciting class discussions
- public speaking opportunities
- class debates on controversial topics

As students read texts that mattered to them and linked those texts to webs of other texts before leading their classmates in whole-class discussion, students encountered what we believe psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi would term a series of “flow” experiences. Students were in control of the texts they read and the ways in which they made meaning of those texts. They felt competent to become textual experts and lead their peers in discussions of topics that mattered to them. The task itself provided self-selected challenges that met students within their respective zones of proximal development. As students focused on the immediate experience of on-line inquiry, they worked to achieve clear goals and received immediate feedback on their progress from peers and teacher as they acquired not only new terminology, but also ways of thinking and researching.

Shari, a student in the class, explains what she liked best about the change in approach: “Vocabulary shouldn’t be just memorization. It should be understanding and must be done in a way to reflect this.”

Classroom teacher Jennifer DeBelli adds, “The fact that the ENTIRE unit was student-centered was a very positive aspect of the project to get them engaged in the first place. Although we have a lot of class discussion, students don't always have the opportunity to lead those discussions, and I think that was a great learning experience for them, too. They had to manage the class, probe fellow students to elaborate, and actually use new words they had learned in the context of reading.”

While we were working to refine our classroom practice, we suspect we missed the five billionth download from Apple's iTunes website, but we certainly couldn't overlook the vital role that Twitter and Utube have played to Iranians combating censorship. Unlike the Baby Boomers and Gen Xers who are still more likely to get their news from newspapers and television, our millennial counterparts increasingly get theirs from the internet. According to a 2006 survey of 15,000 high school students conducted by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, two-thirds use the Google and Yahoo news portals at least once a week. Students may not be reading as much fiction as we English teachers might like, but they certainly are interested in reading and interacting with a wide array of challenging electronic texts. Clearly, it's incumbent upon us as language educators to take on an information-age mindset to support our students in defining the new world in which we all live.

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