



Meaningful Vocabulary Learning

All students benefit from rigorous, engaging vocabulary instruction that is aligned to content learning. But such instruction is especially important for culturally diverse students, who frequently find it challenging to master the academic language needed for school success. By “rigorous, engaging vocabulary instruction,” we don’t mean lessons in which students fill out worksheets or look up definitions. Nor do we mean instruction in which the teacher does most

of the talking and students have few opportunities to use the language of the lesson. Rather, we mean lessons that give students many opportunities to interact with vocabulary in meaningful ways.

Classrooms that effectively promote vocabulary learning start with a positive climate in which students are actively involved in word learning and are encouraged to make personal connections with new vocabulary they encounter. In such classrooms, students work with their peers to consolidate meaning through multiple information sources.¹ Of course, these are the very conditions that we teachers strive to create throughout the day, not just during vocabulary instruction. And these same practices are especially effective in fostering learning for students who bring diverse cultural experiences to school.

Active Involvement

Students acquire vocabulary most effectively not through passive experiences, but through lots

of opportunities to become actively involved in their learning. Second grade teacher Arlette Simmons keeps a word jar on her desk. “I read students *Donovan’s Word Jar* by Monalisa DeGross (HarperCollins, 1994) at the beginning of the year to introduce the concept to them,” she said. The story of a young boy’s love of words resonates with her students. Ms. Simmons encourages them to add intriguing words they encounter to the word jar, and once a week she shares these words

with the class. “One of the children added the word *jubilee* to the jar,” she said. “He explained that his grandparents celebrated their wedding jubilee for 50 years of marriage. We sang the word, danced the word, chanted the word. We had our own jubilee!”

Personal Connections

Ms. Simmons’s word jar also promotes personal connections because it

provides a forum for her students to talk about their encounters with the words. But sometimes students need to learn predetermined academic vocabulary, so teachers have to be extra creative to build personal connections.

When George Zheng’s 11th grade U.S. history class engages in vocabulary review, Mr. Zheng reinforces their memories through photographs he took of them as they worked together to learn the words. He posts the photographs on digital tablets set out on tables around the classroom; students rotate in small groups from one table to the next, where a tablet shows photographs of them

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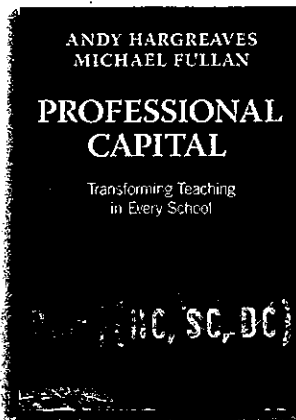


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the Video**

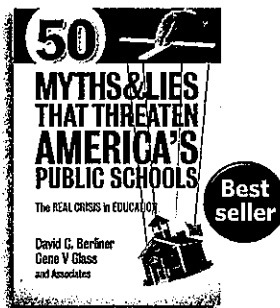
See how a 9th grade earth science teacher uses a word-sorting activity to give students a chance to interact with content as they build vocabulary in the video at www.ascd.org/el0315fisherfrey.

WINNER

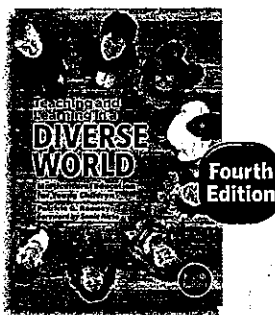
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working on an assignment, as well as key words and phrases that were associated with that lesson.

For example, for the unit on American imperialism, one table had photographs of a small group of students analyzing several 19th century political cartoons, and another table had pictures taken during a class debate on the sinking of the U.S.S. *Maine*. Seeing the photographs of themselves at work helped trigger students' recall of the authentic use of content vocabulary that happened during these conversations.

Opportunities to Consolidate Knowledge

Learners solidify and deepen their knowledge when they are able to consolidate the information across sources and experiences. During this process, they build *schema*—organized patterns of facts and concepts. You can see a toddler building her schema over time as she moves from calling all animals “doggie” to recognizing the differences among cats, dogs, and birds. In a few more years, she will be able to distinguish a poodle from a dachshund.

Content vocabulary learning also requires extensive schema building, which is best accomplished by giving students opportunities to consult materials and interact knowledgeably with one another. In the video that accompanies this column (www.ascd.org/el0315fisherfrey), 9th grade earth science teacher Adam Renick introduces a word-sorting lesson so his students can consolidate their emerging knowledge about geological features associated with five California regions. Previously, small groups had each researched an assigned region and presented their findings.

In this lesson, Mr. Renick is promoting consolidation of students' knowledge through a short interactive partner task in which students sort into categories 30 terms that describe the regions. He also encourages the students to consult others who had previously presented on a region to clarify their understanding.

Closing the Vocabulary Gap

Gaps in word knowledge among children of different ethnicities and socioeconomic groups have been acknowledged for many years,² and we know that these word gaps contribute significantly to achievement gaps. It's time for all teachers to make intentional, meaningful vocabulary instruction a priority. Every day, we should think about which words our students need to know and then align experiences to promote our students' mastery of this vocabulary. When this happens, the achievement gap will begin to close. ■

¹Blachowicz, C., & Fisher, P. J. (2014). *Teaching vocabulary in all classrooms* (5th ed.). Boston: Pearson.

²Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

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