

Knowing a Word or Defining a Word—It’s a World of Difference

In Lucy Calkins’s book, *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Heinemann, 1994), she acknowledges “standing on the shoulders” of those whose work and ideas have influenced her writing and thinking.

As I continue to read new writing about the teaching and learning of language, I’m awed by the depth of research that has influenced what we consider best practice in word study. In some cases, we have stood on the shoulders of these giants in order to come to a deeper understanding of what knowing a word means; in other cases, we have stood on those same shoulders to find models of what research might look like in our classrooms today. One of the consistent findings from these researchers is that there is a vast difference between defining a word and actually knowing the word in its forms and shades of meaning. That distinction brings me to my words for this column.

One of the first books I read on teaching vocabulary was Dale Johnson and David Pearson’s *Teaching Reading Vocabulary* (1984, Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 2nd ed.). In the first chapter of the book, the authors remind us of the importance of moving away from single definitions for words: “It is not the words themselves that are so critical. Rather it is the rich reservoir of meaning—the conceptual base—underlying words that matters” (p. 1). It is because we know the value of developing a conceptual base for comprehension that I always recommend teachers first build the conceptual base and then attach vocabulary words to that foundational concept. The importance of this practice was highlighted for us as Lynnette Elliott,

a ninth-grade teacher from Orlando, Florida, began a unit on tolerance. She asked students to complete a sentence, “Tolerance is . . .” Being nice to people. When you can run a long ways. Something you do after you’re married. Being able to drink all the beer you want and not get drunk. The act of being tall. Their responses remind us just how much work it can take to help students really know a word.

This range of responses showed Lynnette that students needed multiple types of support in order to understand the concept of tolerance/intolerance. In I. S. P. Nation’s book, *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary* (Heinle & Heinle, 1990), the author suggests that vocabulary teaching can support and come out of this conceptual development in four ways:

- Material is prepared with vocabulary learning as a consideration.
- Words are dealt with as they happen to occur.
- Vocabulary is taught in connection with other language activities.
- Time is spent either in class or out of school on the study of vocabulary without an immediate connection with some other language activity (pp. 3–4).

As you read these research-based statements, think about concrete ways to translate this research into your classroom practice.

When I began trying to help my students make this transition, I used a graphic I called “Word Webs in Practice” (see Figure 1). It helped us examine a concept by webbing its traits or characteristics. Students worked in groups to document their knowledge base of the word in the following

categories: function of the word, antonyms/synonyms, what the concept looks (feels, tastes, sounds) like, when the word might be used, other types or forms of the word (including slang), personal connections to the word, and possible definitions for the word.

In order to solidify and deepen students’ understanding of words and concepts, I asked questions that encouraged them to relate new words to concepts or words we had already explored. This helped students think critically and creatively about a word as it related to their previous knowledge of the word/concept. Some examples of the question stems I used follow:

- How are _____, _____, _____, and _____ related?
- What possible connection could there be between _____ and _____?
- What is the relationship between _____ and _____? (Choose seemingly unrelated items here.)

The wording of your questions can force students

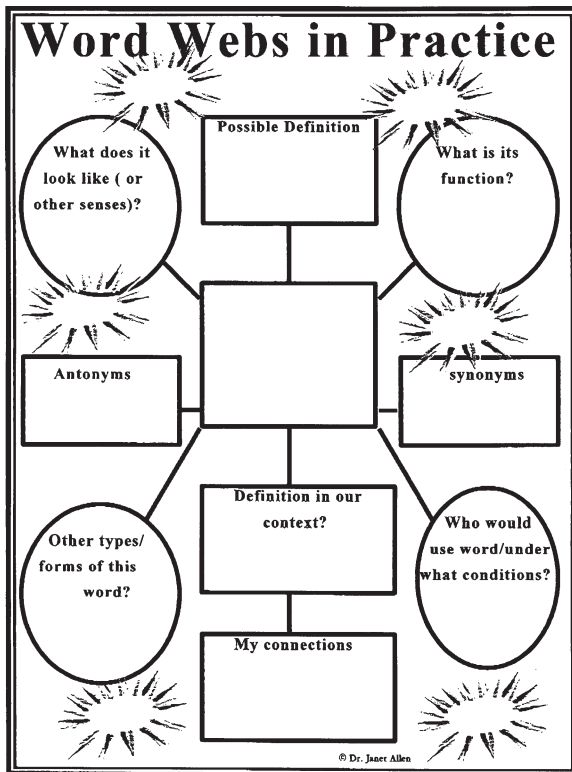


Figure 1. A Word Web helps students examine a concept by webbing its traits or characteristics.

to think about words in new ways: categorizing, classifying, comparing/contrasting, and connecting. The greater the mind stretch required to answer the question, the more your students actually come to know the concept.

I love to hear and read Oprah’s “Things She Knows for Sure.” There are things I know for sure about vocabulary learning:

- It is almost impossible to know words deeply without reading from a wide variety of texts.
- It is almost impossible to become a competent and confident writer and speaker without knowing a lot of words deeply.
- Language is beautiful and not meant to be diminished by shallow definitions of words.
- Knowledge and use of the subtleties of language give a speaker and writer the power to persuade, inform, and excite.
- Changing your practice from wide and random defining of words to a deeper and connected knowledge of words will change the way your students view language—their own and others’.

So, as your new year with a new group of students begins, where will you start? Perhaps Gary Paulsen’s character, Sarny (from *Sarny: A Life Remembered*, Delacorte, 1997), gives us the best advice for any new beginnings:

“Excuse me, Miss Laura, but is there some other way to learn things so I don’t always have to be coming to you and asking?”

“Why, of course, Sarny. You can read books. I have some in the study but not very many. But I will start getting them for you if you wish.”

And that’s how I started into learning. Figure reading is all right but you have to have something to read about and I didn’t know so much I didn’t even know what I didn’t know. Just had to pick a place and start in to learning. (p. 123)

I hope as you pick a place and start learning with your students this year that you will discover rich and wonderful ways to extend what you have learned from “standing on the shoulders” of your professional giants.