

Teaching Vocabulary in the Literature Classroom

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During twenty years of teaching I have encountered many different approaches to vocabulary instruction. I've been in a literature classroom in California, where students fill every available wall space with interpretive drawings of new vocabulary terms. An English teacher I observed in Michigan teaches vocabulary by introducing a new word at the beginning of each class and encouraging her students to shout it aloud (à la *Pee-wee's Playhouse*) at appropriate moments during her lesson. Another English teacher whose classroom I visited in Vermont sets aside his expensive vocabulary workbooks from time to time and

plays "vocabulary baseball" with his students. But, for many students around the country, vocabulary instruction means an assigned list of anywhere from ten to forty new words to dutifully copy and memorize. Variations aside, English teachers frequently express frustration about when and how to incorporate new vocabulary into their literature curricula. If you are one of these teachers, here are some practical ways to alleviate this frustration.

Why Teach Vocabulary?

As you are no doubt aware, a conventional response to this question is, "Because my students need to learn new words." Indeed, research by Senechal and Cornell, Stahl et al., and Elley supports the belief that even one exposure to a new word in a story as it is read aloud can sometimes be sufficient for young learners to recognize the word later. However, as Beck and McKeown point out, to really *know* a word means to move it from our receptive vocabulary, where we recognize a word and can accurately identify its correct meaning in a multiple choice situation, into our productive vocabulary, where we come to use the word knowingly and flexibly in a variety of situations. Our students' produc-

tive vocabularies grow when we help them develop precision in their definition and usage.

There is also another equally compelling reason for teaching vocabulary in your literature classroom. In addition to gaining fluency with new words, vocabulary instruction can help students learn how these words relate to difficult ideas and concepts in the stories they read, as Pilulski tells us. That's right; learning words can improve comprehension. In certain conditions, your efforts to teach vocabulary have a double payoff—your students learn new words and gain a better understanding of the literature you read together in your classroom.

Concept-Related Vocabulary Instruction

In concept-related vocabulary instruction, students link individual words with larger literature concepts. For an example of the usefulness of making this connection, consider Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Minister's Black Veil." At the end of this story, Parson Hooper, the protagonist, chastises his congregation from his deathbed for begging him to remove the black veil he has worn for many years. Regrettably, the Parson's reasons for wearing this veil are often as obscure to high school students as they

are to the other characters in the story. What is the Parson saying here? Readers who understand the author's choice of words (i.e., parable, visage, symbol, judgment, loathsome) are much more apt to grasp Hawthorne's point that people are quick to judge others negatively, especially those who behave in ways outside the bounds of common societal expectations.

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Concept-related vocabulary instruction features a visual organizational framework (see the four examples in this article) to show links directly. These explicit linkages include the relationship between each individual word and a particular concept, the relationships among the words themselves, and the relationships between new words and ones students already know. However, the visual structure is not a static representation of words. Students actively participate in constructing the visual by attempting to organize specific words into their appropriate relationships. Teachers play a guiding role by helping students practice saying and writing the words in the course of developing a visual representation. Without this practice, many students won't really learn the words no matter how carefully they are organized.

Creating a Concept-Related Vocabulary Lesson

Step One

Consider the piece of literature itself, be it a novel, short story, play, or poem. Why did you choose this particular piece to read with your students? Where will your instructional focus be targeted? What are the central ideas the piece might convey to its readers? (Here it pays to be conscious of the possibility of alternative interpretations. Perhaps your students can help you identify important concepts in the text.) Are

any of these concepts likely to be difficult for your students without additional assistance? If so, this text is ripe for an accompanying vocabulary lesson.

As an example of establishing a central concept, let's imagine you are reading Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," with a high school class. This text is full of rich possibilities for discussion and response. Among these possibilities is an exploration of the relationship between good and evil. Adolescent readers may struggle in comprehending this relationship at an abstract level. How can good and evil exist simultaneously in the same person? Can someone be completely evil or entirely good? A focused vocabulary lesson can help students move beyond a simplistic understanding of this concept.

Step Two

Generate a list of words that relate to the central concept. These terms come from the text, the students, and you, the teacher. In the case of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the text contains a number of words that relate to good and evil: *misfit, disposition, polite, wrath, tragic, committed, balance*. The students might contribute other words such as *guilt, sinful, purity, innocence*. To this array you could add *malice, morality, conscience, virtue, provocation, premeditated, mitigating, selfless, remorse, compensate*. This approach has two advantages over choosing a random list of difficult terms from a given story. First, related words are easier to remember than a random list. Second, the experience of grappling with related words will help students grasp the story concept.

How many new words can you include in each vocabulary lesson? My rule of thumb is the more difficult the concept, the fewer the words I initially introduce to my students. You can always add additional terms once students have a better understanding of the concept. Also, the presence of familiar words already in your students' repertoires will help them integrate new vocabulary into this comprehension. As Anderson points out, from this perspective, students will use what they already know to make meaningful connections with new information.

Step Three

Search for logical connections among the vocabulary words. This effort often includes some time spent doodling and drawing arrows and boxes. Sometimes the connections among the words are

obvious. At other times, the concept itself will suggest a unique structure. (See the visual representation for *A Raisin in the Sun* later in this article.) You can design a visual organization in advance of the lesson or engage students in the structure’s development cooperatively. Figure 1 shows a sample vocabulary structure for the concept of “good vs. evil” in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.”

This visual organizer is called a weave chart because its structure helps learners compare and contrast word meanings. Begin this lesson by placing the words “good” and “evil” on the chart. Prompt students to be on the lookout for character actions, intentions, and signs of conscience as they read “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Then, read the story aloud with your students and discuss their interpretations about the various characters. The students fill out the chart by debating the placement of each new vocabulary word as it is introduced by the text, you, or other students. Students can make individual copies of the weave chart at their desks, or the visual structure can be developed on the board with your guidance. As O’Connor’s story proceeds, the placement of some words in both columns (e.g., *polite*, *guilty*) helps students see beyond the artificial dichotomy of good and evil. This in turn helps them understand how a character might believe in good but practice evil or rationalize their evil doings with virtuous words.

Step Four

Develop a follow-up activity to use after the visual organizer is complete and the story has been thoroughly discussed. The primary purpose of this follow-up is to give students more active practice with the words.

However, follow-up activities can also support further consideration of the story and related concepts. In this instance, students write about a specific situation when they experience a mismatch between their actions and intentions and how their conscience ultimately responded to this situation. They must use at least ten words from the chart to complete their piece. The completed assignments are shared later, and the students practice their new words by comparing and contrasting themselves with selected characters from “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.”

Vocabulary before Reading

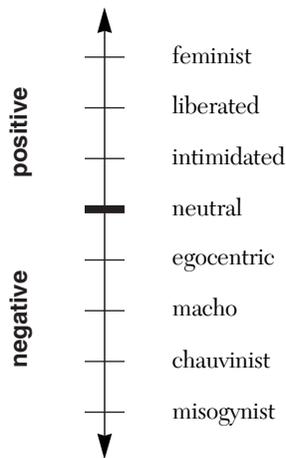
As the above example illustrates, a concept-related vocabulary lesson can be conducted while reading in situations where a strong reader/text connection is easily forged between your students and the piece. At other times, especially when it is advisable to build up students’ prior knowledge in advance, you may choose to conduct a vocabulary lesson before reading. The following organizational structure, prepared in conjunction with John Updike’s widely anthologized short story, “A & P,” is an example of a “before reading” vocabulary activity. In this visual the words are related to the concept of gender politics. “A & P” is intentionally provocative in its treatment of this concept, and time (the story was originally published in 1962) hasn’t rendered its gender issues obsolete.

Vocabulary thermometers are useful for distinguishing shades of meaning among related words. (See Figure 2.) This vocabulary lesson introduces new words to use as tools for analyzing characters’ attitudes about gender equality in “A & P.” Place the new vocabulary in a random list on the board initially and ask students to work together to determine each

FIGURE 1. A WEAVE CHART

Morality	Actions	Intentions	Conscience
good	selfless	virtuous	purity
	polite	provocation	guilt
	committed	mitigating	remorse
	tragic	innocence	compensation
evil	misfit	malice	
	committed	premeditated	
	selfish	provocation	guilt
	polite	mitigating	sinful

FIGURE 2. A VOCABULARY THERMOMETER



word's appropriate placement on the vocabulary thermometer. To put a word on the thermometer, a student comes to the board and writes the word where he or she believes it belongs. Then, turning to face the rest of the class, the student pronounces the word in question (often with teacher assistance) and offers a rationale for its placement. Other students then concur or disagree and offer their own opinions about this word's placement. Additional related words usually pop up during the ensuing discussion and are also included in the structure.

Once the vocabulary thermometer is complete, read "A & P" and use the new words to discuss the various character's interactions and reactions during the course of the action. The story is set in a grocery store in a summer resort town. Its plot concerns three young women who walk through the store in their bathing suits while being ogled by the male store employees. Students get more practice with these same words in the follow-up phase of this lesson, when they are asked to identify television characters who, in their opinion, epitomize each of the new terms in their stances about gender equality. The students can share their findings during the next class session, thereby offering more opportunities to use the words appropriately and consider ways their personal lives are influenced by gender politics.

Vocabulary after Reading

At times you may choose to teach a vocabulary lesson after reading a particular text. This approach can

extend students' vocabulary understanding by forging links to other pieces of literature. The following visual structure, using Kurt Vonnegut's short story, "Harrison Bergeron," is an example of an "after reading" concept-related vocabulary lesson. "Harrison Bergeron" is a dystopian satire about an absurd future, where all attempts to assert individuality are immediately punished in the name of "equality." Its disturbing premise offers a rich opportunity for discussion about the tension between society's laws and the rights of the individual.

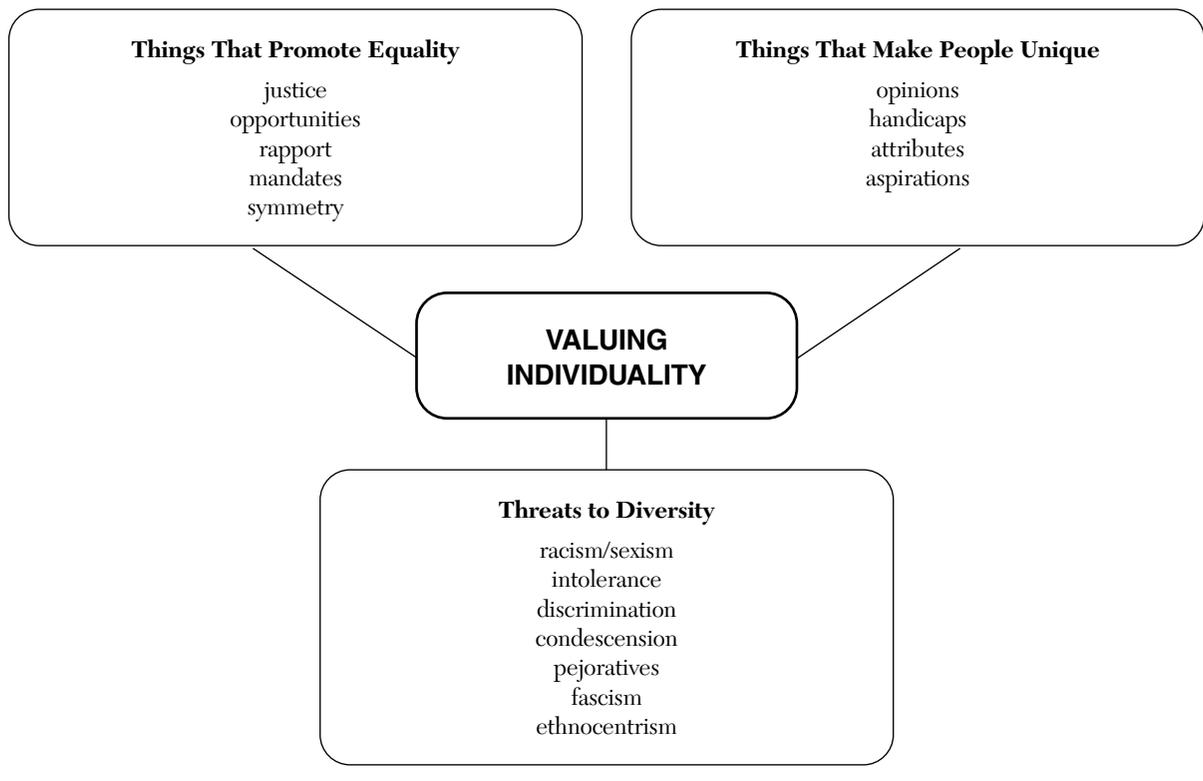
Word webs (also called semantic maps) are useful in situations where new words naturally group together into categories around a central concept. After reading "Harrison Bergeron," introduce the central web concept (e.g., valuing individuality) and three category headings (e.g., things that promote equality, things that make people unique, and threats to diversity). (See Figure 3.) Ask students if they already know any words that might fit into the three categories. Put these familiar terms into the web. Then, while reviewing the story, identify other words that relate to the central concept. Guide students as they guess how these new terms might be categorized in the web. In this way, the new vocabulary words are discussed in the context of the story and connected with words the students already know.

Once this word web is constructed, the students will need more practice with the new words to learn how to use them productively. To promote this practice, link the concept of valuing individuality in "Harrison Bergeron" with a related issue in another piece of literature. Sandra Cisneros's short story, "Woman Hollering Creek," is one appropriate example. This story concerns a young Mexican American woman named Cleofilas, who gradually learns to value herself enough to escape her abusive husband. Many of the same words introduced to the students while discussing "Harrison Bergeron" (i.e., *condescension*, *pejoratives*, *aspirations*) can be used to analyze Cleofilas's predicament. Practicing the new vocabulary in this context can help students comprehend this new text and learn how to use the words more flexibly.

Structural Variations

Vocabulary organization can take many other forms in addition to the weave, thermometer, and web structures. Sometimes a particular literature

FIGURE 3. A WORD WEB



concept may suggest a unique organization. The following structure, based on Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, illustrates this point. *A Raisin in the Sun* is Hansberry's semi-autobiographical play about growing up young, gifted, and black in America. In this visual the words are related to the concept of racism. Terry Gibb, a high school English teacher from Rhode Island, developed this visual structure around the concept of racism, its root causes, and ways to overcome its effects. (See Figure 4.) Terry's creative use of a tree to symbolize the concept helped her students organize new vocabulary words and understand the play. In other words, the form of her vocabulary structure fit the function of her lesson. Like Terry, you can invent structural variations to individualize this approach to vocabulary instruction for your classroom.

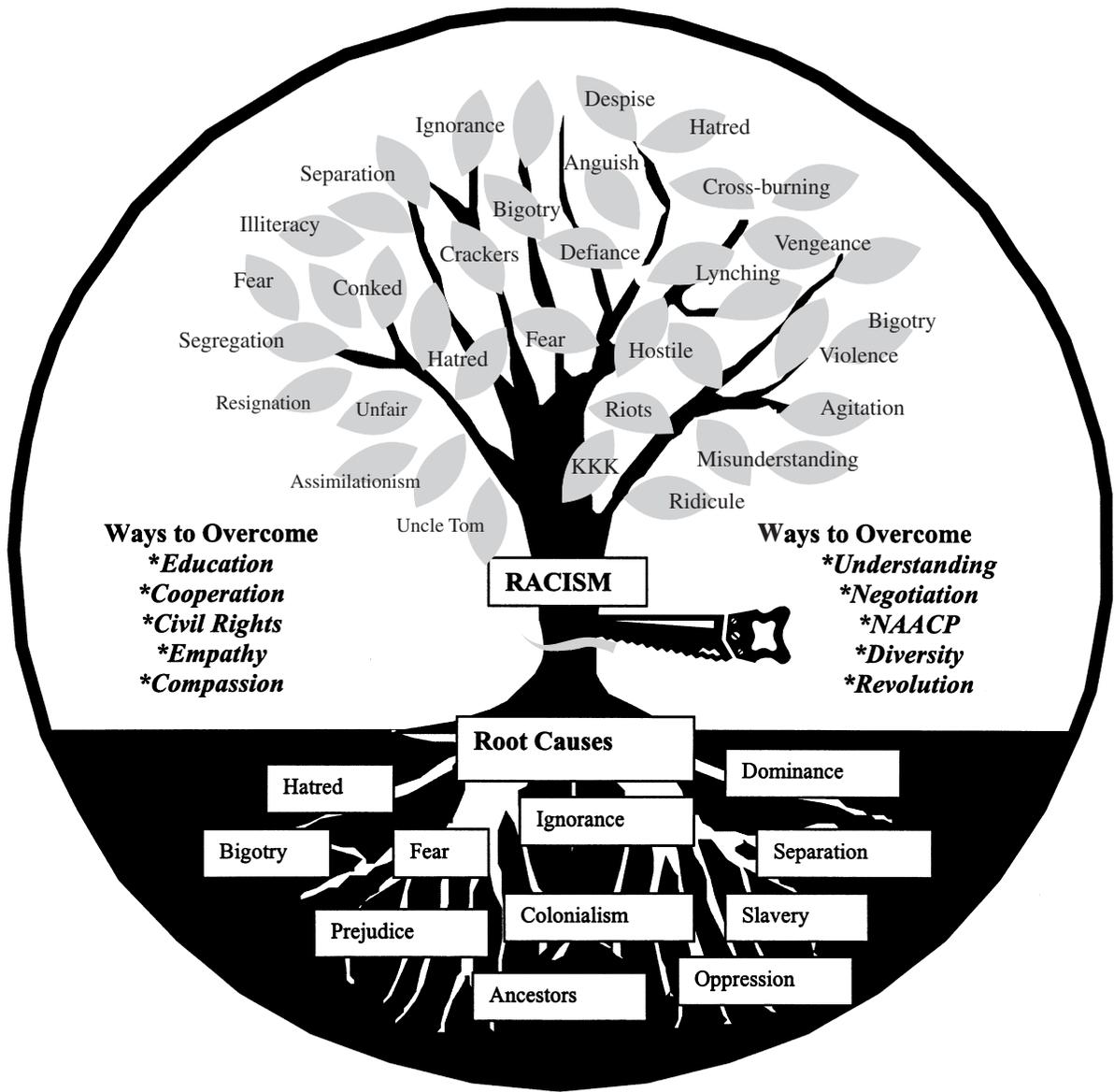
Integrating Vocabulary Instruction into Your Literature Curriculum

Obviously, building your students' vocabularies is just one important aspect of your literature curriculum. The credo "less is more" may help you balance teach-

ing vocabulary with your other instructional goals. This credo suggests your efforts are better focused on giving students meaningful practice with a select group of words rather than inundating them with a large number of words in a cursory fashion. How do students get meaningful practice with new words? They practice saying and writing them in the course of organizing them into related groups, debating their placement and meaning, and applying the words to the literature you read in your classroom.

Your students' abilities to reason will be stimulated by multiple visual representations of the relationships between words and concepts. The four visual structures included in this article are intended as a jumping off point for you. Many other organizational possibilities exist, and you can actively encourage creative thinking by challenging students to reorganize the words from one structure into a different representation. As Spiro, Bruce, and Brewer point out, your students' opportunities to think flexibly in your literature classroom are dependent upon the number of ways they learn to represent ideas and the practice they get in applying these ideas in different situations.

FIGURE 4. A TREE STRUCTURE



You won't need to develop a concept related vocabulary lesson for every piece of literature you read. In many instances, the texts you assign will not contain difficult or unfamiliar concepts. In these situations you can use other, less elaborate, methods to help students deal with words they don't know. You can model the use of context clues (looking at the sentences around the unfamiliar word for clues to its meaning) and structural analysis (looking within the unfamiliar word for familiar word parts) as strategies for independent word learning. Modeling the appropriate use of reference materials will also be beneficial. It will also be helpful to explicitly share the

meanings of technical words such as *episode*, *archetype*, and *denouement* that pertain to your literature curriculum. With practice using these terms, your students will gain power over the ideas in your classroom.

Finally, like the three teachers I mentioned at the beginning of this article, encourage creative word play to help your students learn to enjoy incorporating new words into their language repertoires. Let students try new words on for size without always being graded for accuracy. Pass along the pleasure you feel when that "perfect" word is on the tip of your tongue at just the right moment. If students leave your classroom with an active desire

to learn new words, they will surely read more literature in the future. And, the more they read, the more their vocabularies will grow.

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WITCH HUNT

SHE'S CERTAINLY ONE OF THOSE POTTER WITCHES. SHE HAS ALL THE ITEMS ON YOUR CHECKLIST. SHE IS WEARING A POINTY HAT,



AND WHAT'S THAT IN HER RIGHT HAND? SOME KIND OF STICK THAT GLOWS AT THE END. I KNOW...IT'S SOME KIND OF WAND. I'M SURE IT IS.



THERE'S A BOOK IN HER OTHER HAND... MUST BE HER SPELLS AND INCANTATIONS

