

The Word-Conscious Classroom

Building the Vocabulary
Readers and Writers Need

Judith A. Scott • Bonnie J. Skobel • Jan Wells

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To our families, who supported us

To our friends, who encouraged us

*To teachers everywhere, who continue to inspire us with their
dedication and commitment*

But most important, to our students, who adopted these ideas and soared





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Introduction

This book is about developing a word-conscious classroom, where teachers and students are excited by words and appreciate the power of words as tools for communication. When you think about word learning, you may sigh and think of vocabulary booklets where students memorize lists of unrelated words in order to pass a test. Let us assure you—this is not how we conceptualize vocabulary learning, although, to be honest, it’s not far from how some of us started. The purpose of this book is to take you on our journey as teachers and researchers who came together to try to improve vocabulary instruction in classrooms. We want to help you infuse vocabulary learning in your classroom throughout each and every day. We have found that creating such a word-conscious classroom can make a tremendous difference in your students’ abilities to write interesting stories and other text types, read critically, and join in the literary discourse of schools.

When we talk about vocabulary learning, we are talking about both concept development and understanding the meaning of words. Other aspects of word learning, such as spelling and decoding, are related and important, but we are choosing to focus on developing word meanings within an integrated approach to language development. This means understanding new words in both oral and written language as well as expanding the ability to use words, to understand multiple meanings for the same word, to understand the nuances of using a word, and to understand how a word fits into a larger schema of understanding. As we build vocabulary knowledge, we are building both world knowledge and knowledge of how words work in the English language (Hirsch, 2003).

When Bonnie asked her sixth-grade class to describe the most important thing they’d learned as writers from spending a year in her class, Abhidi said, “Before, when we did writing, we just did stories. Putting powerful language, like metaphors, similes, or changing *said* to *yelled* makes my stories more powerful. I never knew that would make my story better before, but it makes my stories more powerful and people like to read them.”

In this book, we take the position that learning about words is as central as breathing in a literacy classroom, because words are the cornerstone of both oral and written lan-



guage. Learning about words is inseparable from learning about reading and learning about writing. And, when they are taught together, a synchrony exists that goes beyond all three.

Come Along for the Ride

In this book, we invite you join us on a whirlwind ride through ten years of laughing, playing, working, and learning together. We think it's important for you to realize how these ideas came together and to know that they have been refined through experiences with real students in real classrooms. The ideas in this book come, for the most part, out of our explorations together as we tried to integrate what we know about good literacy practices with what we know about vocabulary learning. A group of us, including the three authors, were part of a teacher research project with a focus on vocabulary that met for dinners, discussion, and brainstorming sessions for almost a decade. These meetings were part of what we call a think tank model of professional development and exploration (Henry et al., 1999). In this model, teachers and researchers come together, each bringing a high level of expertise in his or her own area. The combined expertise in our meeting room was amazing.

Bonnie had taught for 30 years, served as the social studies helping teacher for her district, and, as a faculty associate (on loan from her district to supervise student teachers), taught the language arts methodology course for Simon Fraser University. At the time of this project, Bonnie was both a grade 6/7 teacher and the principal of an urban elementary school where students came from a variety of cultures and spoke several different languages.

Jan had been a teacher for 23 years, the reading consultant for a large urban metropolitan district in Ontario, and a faculty associate who taught both the reading and the language arts methodology courses for Simon Fraser University. She was a grade 4/5 teacher at the time of the project and later became the primary literacy consultant for the Vancouver School Board. Both Bonnie and Jan had taught several different grades, from primary to intermediate, throughout their careers.

Judy was an assistant and later associate professor in reading and literacy at Simon Fraser University after finishing her dissertation in educational psychology/curriculum and instruction/reading/vocabulary at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Prior to that she



had been a teacher and graduated with a Reading Specialist credential from the University of California at Davis.

Other core members of the group mentioned throughout the book were a band of exemplary classroom teachers: Teresa Blackstone, Alan Jones, and Susie Cross. Cindy Butler was the main behind-the-scenes research assistant for the project, and she entered the teaching profession during this project.

Our common connection came through Simon Fraser University, where several members of the group had served as faculty associates, took classes, or taught classes on literacy. From the outset, it was clear that the members of the vocabulary group shared a common vision and theoretical frame. In particular, we were informed by Lev Vygotsky's notion of sociocultural interactions and the power of discussion as a means to create new understandings and expand our horizons (Vygotsky, 1978).

When Judy received a grant to explore alternatives to traditional vocabulary instruction, she invited members of the group to join her as teacher researchers who combined their expertise in teaching with her knowledge of vocabulary research. The diversity of perspectives was celebrated as essential in their construction of new understandings about effective vocabulary instruction. Coming together as a group of experts alleviated many of the issues associated with collaborative projects, such as hierarchy, credibility, and ownership (Henry et al., 1999). Because their expertise as teachers brought them to the group, the teachers didn't feel as though they were unequal partners. Instead, their expertise was explicitly valued and encouraged to flourish. The university participants were also acknowledged as experts in the research community who could offer a different set of skills and abilities to the group. Our unique strengths contributed to our abilities to learn from each other, help each other, reflect on our practices, engage in shared critique of those practices, and support one another in making professional choices and change. In one paper written about this project, we identified these elements of the group dynamic as essential in contributing to the sense of community: (a) safety, built on respect, (b) engaging dialogue, (c) collaboration among equals, (d) personal commitment, and (e) time.

The topic, vocabulary learning, was defined, but how we explored it together and what we produced were not. The teacher researchers and university researchers all acknowledge that they changed and benefited from their involvement in the project (Henry et al., 1999). We were all energized by the opportunity to discuss ideas, practice, and problems with each other.



After Bonnie gave a workshop for a local school, the principal, Grant McIntosh, thanked her by presenting her with this story:

She was arriving at school feeling bored and listless. The spectre of another morning reading her students' stories, dripping with mindless violence and populated by mundane characters, was daunting. She needed a teaching makeover desperately! She yearned to hear real children's voices in their writing, real emotion, real people, the imagination that kids have. Where could she go? It wasn't as if there was a shop like a beauty salon where one can go for this kind of service. Mud mask? Hair color? Nails? Style? Massage? New way of teaching writing?

Just when her life was at its darkest, when she was considering a career in real estate, she got a call that was to change her life—well, her teaching life, anyway. She joined a group of teachers who shared some of the same feelings about kids' writing. They talked about it, they laughed, they cried, and they looked for ways to help children tap into their rich imaginations. She brought real stories with powerful language to the students and let them borrow and steal words and characters and ideas for their writing. She developed all kinds of strategies to help kids discover, enjoy, and play with language. They wrote poems, memories, adventure stories, and picture books. They wrote like readers and read like writers! It was like a renaissance in her classroom . . . (fast-forward three years).

Now every day she rushes to school, flushed with excitement at the prospect of reading her children's stories and seeing the fruits of her labors. Right? Get real! But at least now there is a possibility that she will be able to read some writing that is fresh, interesting, dynamic, imaginative. She'll settle for just one of these. (Skobel, 1998)

This humorous essay shows why we did what we did. In the workshop, Bonnie conveyed her previous sense of despair as a teacher of writing and the excitement she felt as her students began to become conscious of the power of words as tools of communication. Many teachers share her struggle. Perhaps you are one of them. If so, we hope our explanations of struggles and successes will enable you to ponder your own practice and help you with the vital job of teaching students to be better readers, writers, and word users.



How the Book Is Organized

This approach to vocabulary learning may sound daunting. Please realize that the purpose of this book is to strip away some of the anxiety that teachers may feel when they think about teaching vocabulary. In this book you will find practical activities tried by classroom teachers who were exploring how to use what we know about teaching and learning to inform the teaching and learning of vocabulary. In the process, we developed techniques that helped students become both more expressive writers and more critical readers. Adding to a teacher's workload is certainly not our intent. The teachers we know and work with are all juggling the various demands of classroom life with skill and dedication. We hope that this book conveys our enjoyment in discovering ways to infuse this approach into the everyday working environment of the classroom.

The rest of this book is about how to create an enticing vocabulary-learning environment for children, a place where word learning is woven into the daily fabric of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It is based on both theory and actual experiences with children and classrooms. In the first chapter, we introduce the concept of word consciousness and our general theoretical frame. In Chapter 2, we expand on the idea that authors give readers a gift—the eloquence of their words. In Chapter 3, the goal is to raise general awareness and interest in words through games and other stand-alone activities. Infusing word consciousness into classrooms can take place on many levels, and this chapter introduces methods to generate excitement about words as well as increase the volume of vocabulary exposure. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the use of cherished books, touchstone books, and mentor texts to scaffold word awareness, starting with whole-class modeling and facilitation, and moving toward word consciousness in independent reading. Looking carefully at mentor texts allows a student to develop a bank of words. Then, in Chapters 6 through 10, we demonstrate how to encourage students to draw on this bank of words in their own writing. Again, we start with whole-class modeling and facilitation and move toward word consciousness in independent writing.

The teacher is the guide in this explicit development of word consciousness. However, the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator, a coach, a leader, and a collaborator. It is through focused discussion, scaffolded interactions, and experimentation that students develop and create ownership over the words they encounter and use in schools. It is also through these sorts of experiences that children learn about the power of language in our classrooms.



In Chapter 11, we turn our attention to assessment and evaluation. Although this topic is addressed at the end of the book, it is not the case that evaluation is considered last in our planning. In fact, establishing criteria for success—developing rubrics and rating scales together with our students—is an important part of teaching. When we show the criteria for success, the learner becomes involved in the ongoing assessment of his or her own learning. The last chapter revisits our theoretical frame and emphasizes the next steps in developing a word-conscious classroom, given the content of the book.

The shared vision outlined in this introduction provides the foundation, as does our conviction that classrooms are best conceived of as communities of children, all of whom are active constructors of meaning, operating on multiple levels of negotiated tasks toward clearly specified outcomes.





Chapter 1

Developing a Word-Conscious Classroom

You can enjoy a piece of art or music because of the pleasure it brings to you. However, if you have taken an art appreciation class or a music appreciation class, your depth of understanding is increased and your level of appreciation is raised. The development of word consciousness is the development of the appreciation of how words work to convey images and thoughts combined with an interest in, and awareness about, the structure and power of words (Anderson & Nagy, 1992; Graves & Watts-Taffe, 2002; Scott & Nagy, 2004). Paying attention to the way writers use words is analogous to becoming conscious of how chords blend together to create music.

Word Consciousness: What Is It?

Word consciousness can be thought of as the metacognitive or metalinguistic knowledge that a learner brings to the task of word learning. Native speakers possess implicit knowledge about the way their language works (Bloom, 2000; Nagy & Scott, 2000). Just as a musician can recognize when music is off-key, so native speakers can recognize when word use or syntax is unusual. Word consciousness also allows a depth of understanding that can help students



acquire not just specific words but also a facility to learn words in general (Scott & Nagy, 2004). This knowledge is generative. That is, it consists of knowledge and dispositions that transfer to, and enhance, students' learning of other words beyond that particular topic or that particular word.

Words are not isolated units. They are multidimensional, with connections to other sets of both semantic and linguistic knowledge (Nagy & Scott, 2000; Cummins, 2000). Think, for instance, of everything you know about the word *erupt*. You may know that it is related morphologically to other words like *eruption*, *erupted*, and *rupture*. You may also have thought about the types of things that can erupt: *volcanoes*, *people*, *geysers*, *boils*, or *pimples*. Or, your thoughts may have turned to what emerges during an eruption: *lava*, *anger*, *steam*, or *pus*. All this knowledge is linked in your mind, along with an understanding of what sort of scenario might include the word *erupt* and other words that might appear with it (e.g., *mountain*, *cinder*, *ashes*). The more times you encounter a word, the more information you build up as a word schema for that concept (Nagy & Scott, 2000; Stahl, 2003).

In order to develop a sense of metacognitive control over word learning, students need to focus on words themselves as well as on how to learn words and how to use words well. In order to develop conscious control over where to place their fingers on a piano, or ways to enhance the timing of the piece, music students usually begin by listening to, and playing, pieces of music written by another composer. This is a commonly accepted practice before students compose their own music. We use this analogy purposefully, because writing is like composing a piece of music. Yet we often do not give students the time or the explicit mediated assistance they need to understand and use words in their own written work as effectively as published authors do. Authors give us "Gifts of Words," wonderfully composed phrases that capture the essence of what they want to say. We ask our students to find these Gifts of Words in the books we read aloud or on our own. Then, part of our instruction involves clarifying how authors use these gifts to create powerful images. We've found that this modeling of word choice by published authors and discussions about conscious word choice help students gain control over words they use in their own writing.

Bakhtin (1981) claimed that learning words involves learning how others have used words, saying that every word is half someone else's. Gaining control over word learning happens when speakers and writers use the word, adapting it to their own semantic and expressive intent. This notion, called ventriloquism, assumes that any use of the word contains both the



voice of the current speaker and the voices of those who have used the same word, or pattern of discourse, within the context in which the word, or pattern of discourse, was learned. In order to become “owners” of words (or patterns of discourse), learners need to actively appropriate, or take as their own, these new forms of speaking and writing (Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993).

The development of conscious control over language use and the ability to negotiate the social and academic language of schooling are particularly important for students who do not generally fare well in schools. Differences in the type of language structures, interaction styles, and vocabulary found in many homes mean that the language of schooling is significantly different from the language many students encounter prior to entering school (Heath, 1983; Zentella, 1997). The language of books, particularly books found inside schools, may contain a high proportion of words that are rarely encountered outside of school (Chafe & Danielewicz, 1987; Cummins, 2000).

English is an interesting language because only about 100 words make up 50 percent of all the words we use in writing (Carroll, Davies, & Richman, 1971). These words, such as *is*, *the*, *and*, *or*, and *but*, are the glue that holds English together. Beyond these, there is a core set of frequently used words that almost all native English speakers would consider well known. These are words that occur often in both oral and written language, such as *ball*, *mother*, and *house*. It is estimated that we use approximately 5,000 different words to communicate ideas when we speak. However, there are approximately 300,000 different root words in the English language. The 295,000 extra words are the ones that add richness and texture to our language. They are also more precise words that can be used to communicate nuances, such as the difference between *stare* and *glance*, as well as technical terms such as *stethoscope*. Being able to communicate in an academic genre requires the understanding and use of these more precise words. Developing a word-conscious classroom is a way to provide students with activities and a type of apprenticeship that can guide the purposeful development of academic discourse.

For many students, the language of textbooks and novels constitutes a new social language. Children need a chance to learn how to appropriate such language and make it their own. Traditionally, the teaching and learning of words has taken place in schools during reading instruction, where knowledge of individual word meanings is most commonly taught prior to reading a story. Alternatively, specific vocabulary words have been taught as they relate to content areas. The goal of much of this instruction has been to promote the devel-



opment of discrete word meanings (Blachowicz, 1987). This is an admirable goal, but it doesn't go far enough in challenging the academic gap that exists between groups of advantaged and disadvantaged students (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Hart & Risley, 1995; 2003). This book describes how teachers can strategically mentor the development of students' appreciation for words, as well as focus on understanding individual word meanings and patterns of discourse. This type of knowledge is critical when students are learning a new social language with words and patterns of discourse that do not mirror the words and patterns of language used on a daily basis outside of school. Students need to form the knowledge and attitude toward language that will help them develop dispositions toward words beyond the individual lessons taught.

Instructional Scaffolding and Situated Learning

Instructional scaffolding is the heart and soul of our approach. A sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) and the idea of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) both inform our practice. With instructional scaffolding, the teacher sets up learning situations in which students are working at an appropriate level to gain independence in their ability to perform a task. During the learning process, the teacher engages in constructive dialogue, shares responsibility for the learning that is taking place, and gradually releases responsibility until the student is able to perform the task independently (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). As learning occurs, the students move through their zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is defined as the difference between what a child can do independently and the potential steps the child can achieve with adult guidance or with the guidance of more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978; Tharp & Gallimore, 1989). The emphasis is on teachers and students working together in joint productive activity, grounded in authentic experiences, with a goal of student success rather than evaluation.

Think back to when you learned to ride a bicycle or to a time when you helped a child learn this skill. First of all, there was probably a desire to graduate from a tricycle to a bicycle. This usually occurs with adult assistance, although at this point the adult does not yet know how this whole process will unfold or the length of time it will take. Most likely, the progression and transfer of responsibility occurred as a move to training wheels, followed by an adult's holding, with great force, the seat of the bike and running alongside the child. This might have pro-



gressed to a light hold on the seat, to not holding at all but still running beside the rider, to stopping and letting the rider realize her success. Finally, the rider proceeds to doing wheelies in the driveway completely unassisted. The whole time this process is happening there is dialogue between the rider and the adult with encouragement and guidance about how to do the task.

Learning to ride a bike happens individually for each rider, depending on her prior knowledge and experiences, within her ZPD. How that knowledge or skill is acquired depends on the kind of interaction and collaboration that occurs between the rider and the adult. Using the above analogy, the adult may take the beginning bike rider to a grassy flat field where falls won't be as traumatic, moving to the top of a slight incline as the rider's confidence improves. She might also ensure that it is a relatively empty area and, as she holds the bike, offer the appropriate amount of support. With scaffolding, the original support is gradually removed, leaving students as stronger and more independent learners. This involves the constant adjustment of the amount of adult intervention to the child's developing needs and abilities. Just as the adult teaching a child to ride a bike provides an appropriate level of support that changes with the child's expertise, so does the teacher provide a level of support that changes as a learner's expertise grows. The transfer of responsibility is facilitated by talk. The adult might tell the rider to pedal faster, turn the handlebars, or brake. This talk is meaningful—it is directed at eventual success and helps the learner focus on essential components of the activity. Productive conversations often allow learners to discuss strategies and ideas with each other as well as the teacher.

In the bike-riding analogy, the rider and her immediate needs determine the next tidbit of advice. When to teach how to turn or stop the bike depends on the individual and the circumstances. In addition, adults teach their children how to ride bikes when there is motivation to do so, and the children usually have a say in the direction of their learning. The adult and child are partners who share the responsibility for learning as the adult gives warm and encouraging feedback on strategies the child is using. We don't know of any parent who hands a 5-year-old a learn-to-ride manual and then sits back and observes!

Linking Word Consciousness to Your Curriculum

You may feel that you already have so much to think about in your classroom that a focus on vocabulary might be too much. Why bother? We've discovered three answers to this question.



First, reading the writing of others shows us how powerful words can be when used in exciting and unusual ways, ways we would never think of in everyday speech. Everyday conversational words are limited in scope. We learn about “writerly” ways of saying things by reading the work of published writers. The type of language found in books is quite different from the language found in everyday conversations. Children’s books contain almost twice as many sophisticated words as conversations among college graduates (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988). However, an awareness of words, a love of words, and a curiosity about words don’t just develop by themselves. Students who can recognize powerful language and use it themselves in their writing have developed this awareness through scaffolding by adults in their lives. Not all children have equal access to this sort of scaffolding for English vocabulary from parents, particularly if parents speak a different language. Vocabulary knowledge builds up over time and, as teachers, we need to provide opportunity and access to sophisticated language so that all children can become aware of the power of words, and develop an awareness and curiosity about words that will facilitate their academic careers.

Second, we learn to make sense of unknown words, and we add them to our lexicon through exposure to these words in both reading and discussion. The original author of the Hardy Boys series, Leslie MacFarlane, supposedly said that he deliberately inserted the odd “jaw-breaker” into his stories, words that would challenge his readers to think. He believed in writing “up” to his readers, not down. Older readers who remember reading the Hardy Boys may recall the density of the text—yet we were hooked. The stories drove us on regardless of the vocabulary. When we came to a hard word, as long as it didn’t stop the flow of the story, we read on.

Similarly, very young children listen to the stories of Beatrix Potter. They hear about Peter Rabbit, who, when caught in the gooseberry net by his brass buttons, “gave himself up for lost” but was “implored to exert himself” (p. 33) by the friendly sparrows. While the precise meaning of the words is beyond the 3-year-old listener, the feeling of the words and the emotion of the moment are caught in the power of the language and the contextual clues of story and pictures. This is important because words are learned incrementally over time. The first time you are exposed to a word, you may put it into a general context (in this case, something that might happen in a garden). As you are exposed to it again and again, you figure out a bit more each time (he was caught by some type of net; a gooseberry might be like a strawberry or a raspberry).



Much of the vocabulary students learn before they arrive in school is learned in context—that is, while doing something and talking about it. They acquire new words because those words match the concepts being discussed. This continues throughout the first years of school. And it works equally well with older students. The act of reading aloud brings different settings and times into the classroom, times and places that students visit vicariously. Oral discussions about read-aloud books are an excellent way to build vocabulary growth. While we advocate continuing read-alouds into the upper grades, as students get older, another context for learning new words, independent reading, comes into play. Students read in all subject areas, so they read science, social studies, and math texts in addition to chapter books. They are given articles and extracts to read, and they most often read these on their own.

Becoming a prolific reader creates a situation where a child is exposed to a great many words and becomes able to build vocabulary knowledge as she sees the words repeatedly. Although not all students in your class will be prolific readers, the concept of scaffolding word learning through wide reading—the reading of many different books—means that we ask all students to read texts that are sufficiently challenging regarding new and unknown words. There is a fine balance here because a text too dense with new words will frustrate readers. A masterful teacher is aware of the child’s ability to handle new texts (books within the appropriate ZPD) and uses this knowledge when matching books with readers. This point is another reason why reading aloud to students at all levels is such a valuable use of instructional time. When we read aloud, we are exposing students to a wider vocabulary than many of them can read on their own, and providing the opportunity for them to gain incremental word knowledge.

As students read at more mature levels, the problem-solving work of figuring out meanings from context and using aspects of their current vocabulary knowledge to work out what a new word might mean becomes increasingly important. For example, a student reading about the biosphere, who already understands the meaning of *bio* from other words like *biology* and *biography*, may pay attention to references to the atmosphere and the stratosphere in her science text and deduce that *biosphere* has something to do with the area around the earth that can sustain life forms.

How many of our students can bring these sophisticated powers of deduction and inference to their daily reading? How many of them will want to? It is easier and quicker to “skip over” the hard words and get the general gist of a piece, especially if it is an excit-



ing story. The general overall meaning is often quite sufficient for anyone to be able to engage in a whole-class discussion, answer a few questions, and appear to be fully informed. Unfortunately, the unknown words remain unknown and the students' overall word knowledge is increased only slightly. Their understanding of the morphology and interrelated network of origin and usage that connects words in the English language is not developed, and in an increasingly detrimental fashion, their ability to decode and comprehend academic language is affected. Creating a focus on the language used by authors creates motivation to closely examine word use.

A third reason to focus on words is that it provides students with the means for more accurate communication with others. Most children want their writing to sound sophisticated but are often frustrated by their communication through writing. Learning how to write well is equivalent to learning any other skill. Sometimes it's useful to imitate the work of more skilled writers until you are able to find your own voice. These models and explanations can provide the framework for expression and can give students the confidence to both experiment and use language effectively to convey their ideas. According to Butler (2002), imitation allows students to see models of successful writing and gives them a chance to work with the text, manipulate models, and transform them in meaningful ways.

Shared Vision and Theoretical Frame

Schools often write vision statements or try to articulate what elements of practice are important for daily interactions with students. We didn't sit down together and develop the framework that follows, but it captures the collective understanding of the group about teaching and learning that emerged as we worked together. In particular, these statements reflect our knowledge and understanding of pedagogy that inform our teaching of vocabulary. These themes and understandings are woven into the fabric of our teaching, and you will see them manifested in many different contexts throughout the book:

- Students learn when they are working and talking with others.
- Students learn when the work is neither too hard nor too easy.
- Students need teachers to help them learn.
- Students need to learn not only words, but *about* words.



- Students learn about words by paying attention to published authors.
- Students can learn to be strategic about word learning and word use.
- Students can learn to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Students learn best when they are engaged and interested.
- Student are more engaged when they work on authentic tasks of their own choosing.
- Students learn best in a safe, warm, and fun environment.

We hope these statements help you understand our particular stance toward teaching and learning. One of the tensions in our group was the lack of connection between what we knew to be good classroom practice and the materials available for teaching vocabulary. One of the reasons for writing this book is to share how we were able to meld vocabulary learning with the set of beliefs and understandings set out in this first chapter. In particular, we realized that the development of word consciousness could be a powerful tool for vocabulary learning that honored and expanded our collective understanding of important conditions for learning. This book blends knowledge of vocabulary learning and classroom practice so that students can read, use, and recognize words as tools of communication.

Backward Planning

Wiggins and McTighe (1998) discuss the importance of understanding the end goals of your instruction and working backward from these goals to the components that need to be in place to achieve them. As a group, we knew what we wanted as end goals. We wanted students who were critical, thoughtful readers and powerful writers who could express their thoughts and ideas well—or at least better than we'd been able to get students to read and write in the past. We also liked the idea of seeing our students interested in and excited by words, with tools to unlock the meanings of new words. However, the goal of word consciousness and vocabulary development was really secondary to the development of our students' overall literacy. We see vocabulary development as one way to facilitate their reading and writing in general. Our challenge was figuring out how to get there.

As we look back on what we did, we can capture it in the following:

- We increased the volume of exposure to sophisticated language in our classrooms.
- We established classroom communities where it was considered normal to ask about



word meanings, experiment with language use, and to have not only the teacher, but other students, serve as vocabulary coaches.

- We used our knowledge of what worked in teaching and learning in other arenas to develop activities where the student needed to pay attention to words in order to “play the game.”
- We fostered communities that nurtured appreciation of word use and developed consciousness about words as tools of communication.

