

How Important Are Words Anyhow?

It doesn't take many years of working with schools and issues associated with curriculum development to realize that a big part of school improvement is associated with language, word meanings, and the use of words. Words are the medium through which most curricula are developed and teaching conducted. We convey ideas, opinions, attitudes and directions to each other through the use of words, and even support skill-building and technical processes that way.

Oftentimes teachers don't see the importance of word choice in curriculum until they're ready to prepare formative and summative assessments. For example, a phrase like "students will understand" seems perfectly acceptable because we do want students to understand this topic we're teaching. However, *understand* depicts something so broad it can mean nearly anything on a wide spectrum of human awareness. ***Understand*** is often used in informal social interactions because its vagueness is less intimidating than something like, "I infer from your remarks that...", or "I conclude from your statement that..." For a listener to suggest that understanding has occurred allows a speaker to acknowledge a range of possibilities, all of which might be acceptable. But that same wide range of possibilities makes it difficult to assess a student's learning.

In day-to-day social activities we can be sloppy with the use of language because to do otherwise might make us come across as being pompous, annoyingly precise, or linguistically overbearing. For those reasons some educators avoid the possibility of excessive preciseness by using a day-to-day vernacular with students and colleagues in the school. They let their informal language prevail because it tells others that they're pleasant, easy to talk with, and non-confrontational. When they absolutely must work with educational standards or other phrases that call for intentional kinds of student learning, they try to mitigate any seemingly harsh expectation by translating that language into something less pointed and demanding. When those teachers conduct casual formative assessments with their students, they may find vague or general responses to be sufficient. That acceptance might be couched in terms like, "they get the basic idea" or "that's as much as can be expected from that student" or "he's close enough."

With teachers like that we might as well continue to use the assessment verb ***understand*** because that's what they will use, even when a verb phrase like ***compare and contrast*** should be applied. Perhaps some teachers do that because they believe student self-esteem is more important than learning a fact or demonstrating a skill. Maybe they do it because they fear students will dislike them. Possibly the most common reason is that the teacher simply hasn't become sufficiently ***engaged*** with the intended outcome to see the difference between a vague understanding and a student's ability to distinguish one thing from another.

Engage has multiple meanings of course, as do many English words. A quick look in the dictionary tells us that one who engages may do anything from making a marriage pledge to attacking the enemy, shifting gears in a standard automobile transmission, or hiring a nanny. We

often engage people in a conversation or find a particular person quite engaging. With all its nuanced meanings, the word **engage** fundamentally means a kind of interlocking, or a meshing of two separate parts. To engage is to bind oneself to something in ways that cause it to be part of another thing, or to make a total commitment to fulfilling expectations. It isn't a walk around the periphery but a clear involvement with what's in the middle. In the dictionary examples, it means not that "we're just friends" but that marriage will happen; not just "taking pot shots" at the enemy, but that either the enemy will be vanquished or we will. It's mentally or emotionally absorbing to the point of making something – or our own being – quite different.

So, we were talking about a teacher who may not be **engaged** with an intended outcome. She might have read the outcome and claimed to understand it enough to teach and assess it, but did she develop a mental interlocking with it? Was her relationship with that intended outcome intellectually strong enough to take it apart and see its components? Did she see it as something substantive and critically important, or as simply one more item in the prescribed curriculum or worksheet for students to complete at a minimum competency level?

It may be safe to say that most of our verbal interacting with each other has nothing to do with interlocking anything. We ask people how they are and they say they're fine. If they respond with anything else we think they're a bit socially inept. We suggest to people that it's cold outside and get a quick acknowledgement that it is. If we moved through our day insisting that people become intellectually engaged with us, we'd soon be candidates for psychiatric examination. But, as true as that is on a day-to-day basis, the purpose of schools must be intellectual engagement, so that disciplined minds can examine, reflect, articulate... and then become learned minds. And then those learned minds can interlock with minds that need learning.

Many of today's teachers are in their 20s and 30s, having gone through preparation programs much influenced by standards, benchmarks, and indicators. They are employed in schools that must accede to the dictates of NCLB-driven processes complete with high stakes tests and adequate yearly progress. Although their training may have been scholarly, their interpretation of the AYP challenge is to teach tested indicators well enough for their students to master high stakes tests in language arts/reading and mathematics. Other subjects are beginning to join the list of state-tested knowledge areas and skills. The pressure is enormous and in some districts teacher stress levels are off the chart. To suggest to teachers that they become more intellectually engaged with subject matter and their students could be perceived as laughable.

However, the Curriculum Leadership Institute believes there is an answer to the need for meeting the dual challenges of the standards/test-driven culture and the need for more intellectually engaged teachers. The Institute's Model creates a system in which school districts are asked to:

- convert state benchmarks and indicators into an aligned and locally teachable curriculum through a systematic process that fully involves classroom teachers,
- train teachers and other key professional stakeholders on good curriculum design, and on techniques for transferring curricular intentions for student learning to a "connector" called the lesson plan resource, and
- train teachers how to transfer information on the lesson plan resource to daily lesson plans and pacing guides.

Teachers who are expected to interact with state benchmarks and indicators by converting them into a clear and teachable curriculum, and then to develop instructional materials and processes to ensure student learning, are much more apt to become intellectually engaged with both their subjects and their students. They will recognize that the importance of words is their relationship to meaningful knowledge; that words are more than mere linguistic codes that mechanistically prepare students to accurately answer multiple choice questions.