

Language Field Guides: Co-Vocabulary Curriculum Through Inquiry

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“Okay, what did you get for number six? The word is *numismatist*.” The room is silent save for the sound of shifting in seats.

“Who chose A?” A few disinterested hands wave languidly. “B?” I ask.

“It’s D. Someone who collects coins,” one student says, having mercy on us all.

We move, ho-hum, through the vocabulary workbook exercises—multiple choice, matching, analogies, fill-in-the-blank sentences. On Friday, we will take a quiz on these twenty words. By Monday, the students will have forgotten most of them, and we’ll start again with a new list.

I know this doesn’t work. Not really. Students don’t delight in words, don’t learn how to acquire new words, or retain specific word knowledge for the long term. But I “taught” vocabulary in this way for years because it’s the way I was taught and because, frankly, I didn’t know how else to do it. I taught this way in spite of a body of research to the contrary. Rather than prescribed (and obscure) lists generated by textbook companies, vocabulary words should be chosen by both teachers and students. These should be high-frequency words students are likely to see often in the real world, and there should not be many because students learn these words better when they learn fewer at a time (Marzano, 2004; Sweeny & Mason, 2011).

Students learn—words and anything else—only when they are active agents in the learning. Deep learning happens when students are asked to represent their word knowledge in multiple ways and when discussion of words is central to the learning process (Marzano, 2004, 2009; Sweeny & Mason, 2011). Effective vocabulary instruction should be generative for students. They need to create connections, descriptions, and explanations rather than passively copying knowledge from others

(Marzano, 2009). Finally, students are best supported when they are developing transferable strategies for learning words—including studying word families, word parts, synonyms and antonyms, and multiple meanings (Sweeny & Mason, 2011)

We know what research says. But, what does this look like in our classrooms?

I put this question to my eighth graders and invited them to join me in creating a curriculum. One central question led our inquiry: What can we develop together that will help us learn words, learn how to learn words, and remember those words later?

Turning our classroom into a part-time vocabulary laboratory, we moved through three cycles of inquiry

protocol, each time asking:

- What’s not working right now?
- What do we need or want to do more of?
- What could we try?

After each round of discussion, we experimented to see how our changes affected the experience of language study as well as our outcomes.

Vocabulary Instruction Inquiry

Many students weren’t ready to give up the vocabulary workbooks described earlier, full of yes-and-no, right-or-wrong recall activities. While they acknowledged that this work did not stimulate their thinking and that few of them remembered past vocabulary words, they also reported that they liked the easy grades and brainless A’s in the gradebook.

Through a class discussion, we created some goals for what our word work would need to look like to meet the objectives of our central inquiry question:

What can we develop together that will help us learn words, learn how to learn words, and remember those words later?

- No mindless activities
- More than just part of speech and definition
- Give students something to *do* and think about over time (not just memorizing)
- Should teach habits for learning new words

I added my own non-negotiable to the list: no quizzes.

Bird Field Guides Become Language Field Guides

We needed a starting point, a foundation on which to build. I decided we could play with the idea of a field guide—an illustrated manual that a naturalist might create and add to as they spend time in nature. This was a useful metaphor for thinking about the kind of work I wanted students to do. I liked the combination of text and visual elements, and I was drawn to the idea that a field guide is a living document that a bird watcher, for instance, might compose and also use later to identify new species. In other words, a field guide is both a process and a product. Field guides represent the long-term thinking I hoped students would engage in; they are built through careful observation conducted not in the classroom but in the wild.

I brought library copies of various field guides to class and asked students to read them like writers. We composed a list of the things we noticed and translated those wildlife noticings to word study (Figure 1).

Based on this thinking, we selected one word from our current “article of the week” (Gallagher 2017) and tried an entry as a class. Then, I asked students to choose three more words from their article of the week for which they did not know an exact dictionary definition; they had one week to create their field guide entries. To help them on their way, I created a list of websites I thought might help them accomplish some of these goals:

- Vocabulary.com—gives the word with multiple definitions and professional pieces of writing that use the word
- Niftyword.com—associated words, related words, roots/prefixes/suffixes
- Just-the-word.com—words frequently seen with your word, phrases, word pairings, synonyms, antonyms
- Lexipedia.com—different versions and forms of your word, synonyms, antonyms, “fuzzynyms”
- Graphwords.com—related words

At the end of Round One, we returned to our three-question inquiry protocol: What’s not working right now? What do we need to/want to do more of? What can we try?

While no one hated it, reviews were mixed. Many students reported that this was “fine” or “okay” or even “eh”. Others said that they felt it was “more fun than challenging” and “thought-provoking”. One student

A Nature Field Guide . . .	A Language Field Guide might . . .
Shares an image of the species	Include images and visual representations associated with the word
Describes where the species is found in the wild	Share where one might find this word “in the wild”—this might include connotation / denotation
Considers the origin of that species	Describe where the word comes from—its origins, its etymology, its recognizable word parts
Describes the sound the species makes	Share the correct pronunciation of the word
Describes common behaviors of the species	Describe common contexts or situations when this word might be used
Identifies the species’ broader family	Share synonyms and antonyms, related words, and alternate forms of the word
Gives locations in which this species has been spotted	Include sentences from our reading that use this word, include sources that use this word (authors, websites, etc.), include sentences sourced from people in our lives using this word

FIGURE 1. *Nature field guides vs language field guides*

responded that the field guide “works better because it’s way more interactive, interesting, and it’s easier to learn the words when you get to choose how you learn them.” Again and again, students used the words *freedom*, *choice*, and *creative* to describe what they liked about the field guide experiment.

Students who identified as visual learners enjoyed the experiment more than those who considered themselves to be nonvisual learners. Overall, students resoundingly shared that this was preferable to the vocabulary workbooks they had been used to, so we knew we were on the right track.

I pooled students’ suggestions into one document, projected it on the board, and we circled up for a discussion about what we should change for the next round.

Asking More Questions

For Round Two of our language field guides, students felt strongly that we should reduce the number of words from three to one. I wasn’t so sure, but in the spirit of co-creation I acquiesced. Students also asked to

- Have a digital option rather than composing in their notebooks
- Work with others who were thinking about the same word
- Build in opportunities to share at the end of the week with the whole class

Students again chose their word from our current article of the week. Of course, choice is critical for engagement but also for appropriate differentiation—students come to class with a wide array of existing word knowledge. Allowing students to choose their own words helps each learner work at a level appropriate to them. But I began to notice that students weren’t always selecting words that would lead them to rich inquiry.

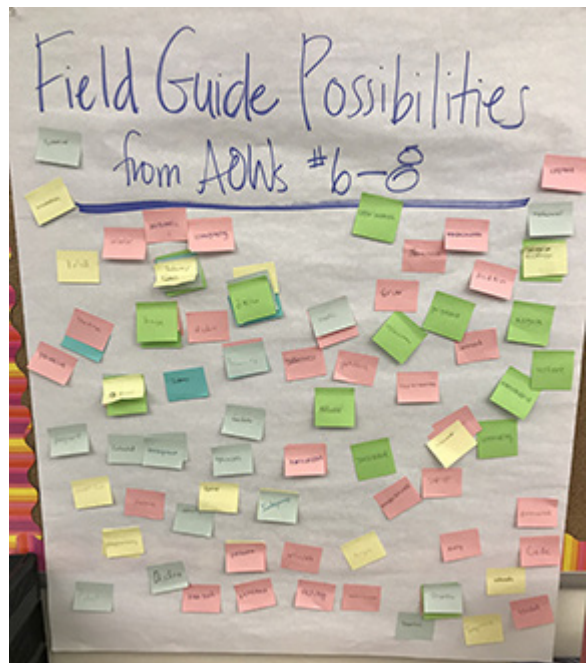


FIGURE 2. Collecting words.

For example, in Round Two, a handful of students chose *the aughts*. It was perfectly natural that many eighth graders would not know what *the aughts* refers to, but without many related words, antonyms or synonyms, or a variety of ways to use the term, these field guide entries fell flat. We needed to blend choice with teacher-guided curation to ensure the best student outcomes.

Other word-selection problems arose when a few students had genuine mastery of every word in an article. It turns out that what makes for a compelling article of the week doesn’t always make for incisive vocabulary instruction for every student; we needed a wider variety of words from which to choose.

We reminded ourselves of our central question again and considered our three-question inquiry protocol, discussed in small groups, and shared out as a class. Even though I didn’t feel the digital field guide entries

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With a play on the field guide, in this lesson, students choose words from their reading that are either unfamiliar or that they would like to know more about. As they collect words, students use a publishing tool and a list of genres to create a multigenre glossary entry for each word. They continue this activity as they read, eventually using each of ten genres to create a glossary of terms. When students have finished making their own glossaries, these documents can be compiled, bound, and kept in the classroom as an artifact of learning and a resource for future students.

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<http://bit.ly/2DQcCFq>

packed the same punch as the notebook entries, many students appreciated this option. Ultimately, I was happy to remove a barrier to their language study. Students reflected that they enjoyed seeing what their peers had discovered about their same word, but they still wanted wider sharing within the class. And, we discovered, like Goldilocks, where three words was too many, one word wasn't enough.

Finding the Right Fit

Based on their suggestions and my observations, we made a few new changes in our final round of inquiry:

- Students suggested words from articles of the week over the course of four weeks. I removed words I didn't think would work well.
- Students completed one field guide entry with a small group and one field guide entry on their own.
- At the end of the week, each group presented their word and what they had learned about it.

Having a wider variety of words allowed each student to find a word they were interested in learning. Students were encouraged to find a “really hard” word to work on as a group. A few groups reported that working together was more than fun—the discussion generated about the word helped them understand it more fully and from different perspectives. The only downside to having

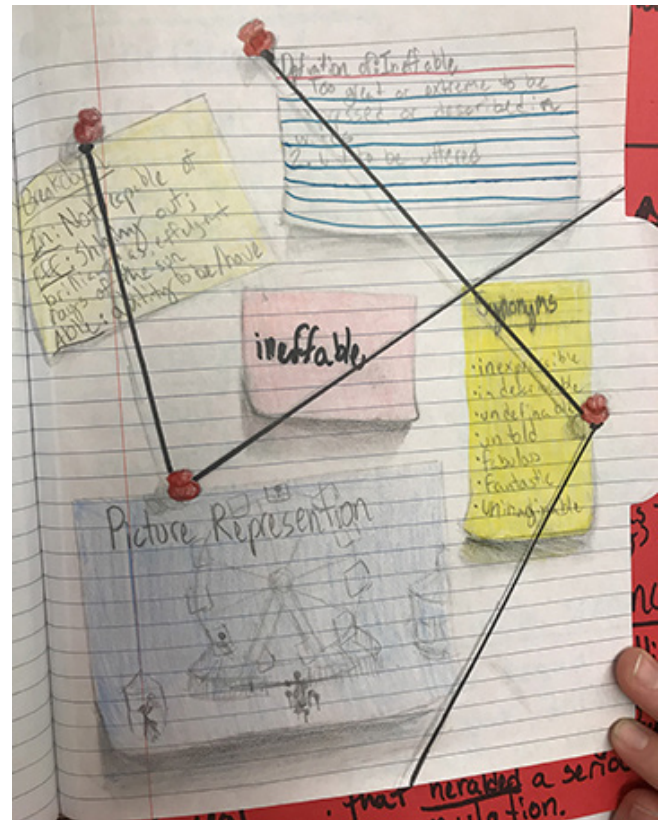


FIGURE 3. A field guide in progress.

students complete group entries is that I needed to dedicate more class time to field guide work.

At the end of the week, groups were charged with “telling the story” of their word—not merely reading the field guide by regurgitating dry definitions and

monotone sentences.

Groups spent time rehearsing how they would share their word so that it would be engaging and useful to others. Listening students added to a Language Log in the back of their notebooks, taking notes on the words presented by the other groups.

The Impact of Co-Creating a Vocabulary Practice through Inquiry

For this group of students this year, we landed on a

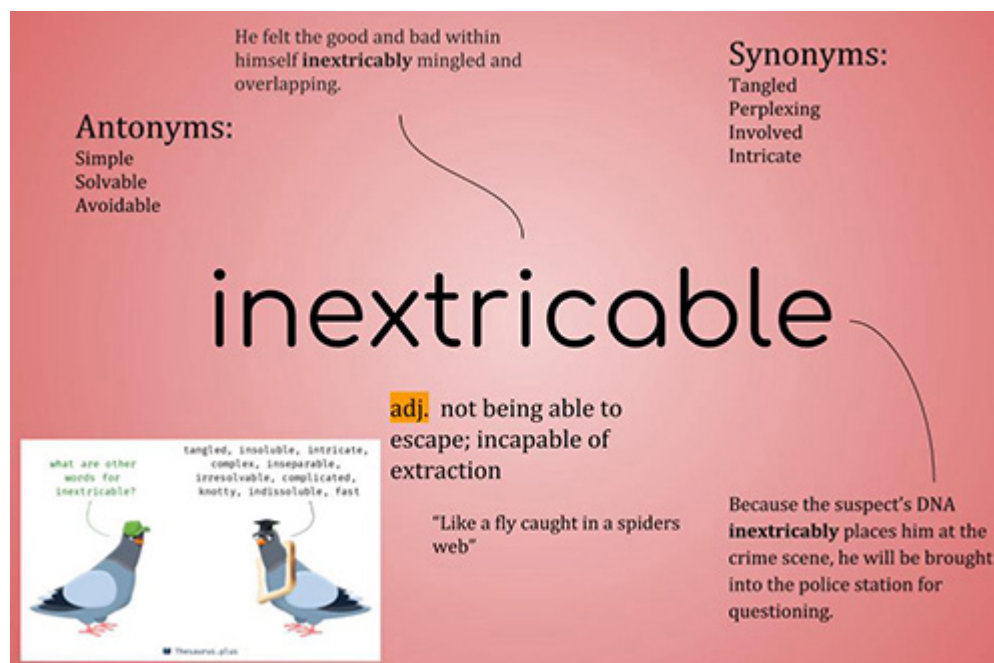


FIGURE 4. A digital entry.

routine and requirements that felt just-right. In the words of one student, our final product was “really thoughtful and thorough.” But, this isn’t a story about successful vocabulary instruction; it’s a story about what happens when we invite students into inquiry about their own curriculum.

Even at the end of this process, there were some holdouts who didn’t love field guide work and preferred the black-and-white simplicity of matching and fill-in-the-blank vocabulary work. However, every single student shared that participating in curriculum creation made them more invested in their own individual learning. Corbin reflected that the inquiry process “made [him] feel more in charge of [his] education and learning process.” Lindsey shared that field guides became more than just another homework assignment; she felt she understood the real purpose of the assignment because she had participated in its creation.

But did students learn words?

Some students said that they learned the words more thoroughly and would likely remember them in

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the future; others said they were not any more likely to remember their field guide words down the road than they would be had they used a more traditional method of vocabulary instruction. But many students shared that their biggest takeaway in this process was a new understanding of how to think about words. Amani said, “I learned the types of things that help me learn vocabulary,” and Grace wrote, “I will remember how to look at words in a bunch of different ways, choose how I want to learn them and what ways work for me.”

My favorite reflection came from Audrey who said that the vocabulary instruction inquiry process made her “feel like a teacher”. Perhaps this experience will give students a little more empathy for their teachers next year—allowing them to consider the learning objectives and teacher’s perspective when they receive an assignment. And maybe it could inspire some future educators—students who wouldn’t have otherwise considered education as a career but who can now envision themselves in the role of a teacher.

What Now?

In terms of field guide work, there is still plenty of room for evolution. Since we know that vocabulary instruction is more effective when it is school-wide (Sweeny & Mason, 2011), language field guide work should be brought into other content areas. (My social studies colleague has already committed to giving it a shot!) While we can achieve cross-curricular field guides by bringing in specific terminology from other classes, we might also consider intentionally studying roots, prefixes, and suffixes in addition to discrete words. We also know that students retain word knowledge longer over multiple exposures to the word (Marzano, 2004), so we need to develop more strategies for students to encounter the words they study over time, returning to the words again and again in new ways.

What does this mean for curricular inquiry in our classrooms? Since inquiry and collaboration played key roles in the power and efficacy of the language field guides last year, I can’t just pick it up and transplant it as-is to a new group of students next year. The inquiry and spirit of co-creation must carry forward. With a bit more knowledge and the experiences of other students under my belt, I will do this again—co-creating language field guides (or something new!) with next year’s students to meet their specific learning needs.

But what about writing? And reading? And math?

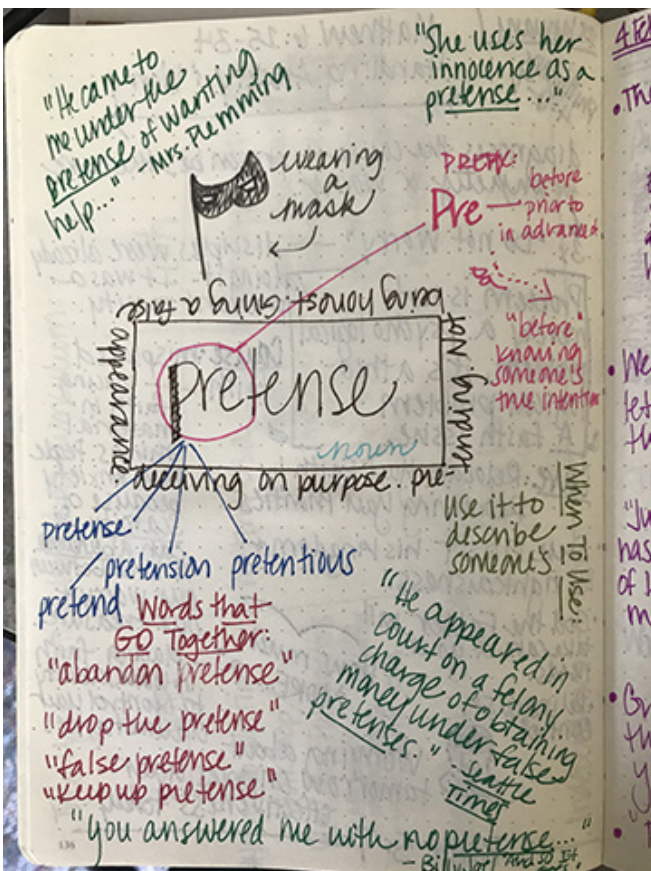


FIGURE 5. A completed entry.

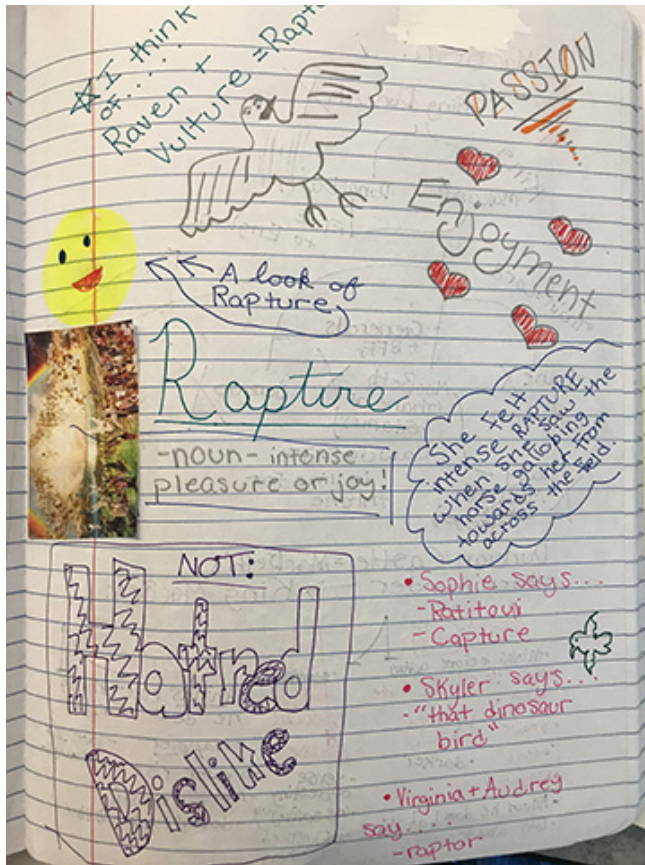


FIGURE 4. Another completed entry.

And music? The inquiry protocol *can* be transferred to any content and used to bring students into the conversation. Regardless of the content we are working with, teachers should ask, “What can we do better in order to meet our learning objective?” and then follow up with “What’s not working right now?”, “What do we need or want to do more of?”, “What could we try?” Challenging students to ask questions about their curriculum leads to richer thinking, more meaningful products, and lasting learning.

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