8.4 Learning Vocabulary by Creating a Children’s Dictionary

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For years, students would ask me “what should I study for the test?” but when I told them “everything,” they weren’t too happy with me. Then I told them to focus on the key terms, but I found they weren’t really learning the key terms. They were passively reading the glossary definitions from the text. They needed to become more active in their study. However, when I told them to “rewrite the terms” they wound up copying the glossary. I realized they needed a better way to actively learn the terms, so I came up with this assignment in which they create a children’s dictionary of key terms from two early chapters of our text.

My philosophy is that if you know the key vocabulary you’ll have a much easier time understanding the concepts in the course. So, my idea was to have them re-define the key terms into simpler definitions, words that a child could understand. I encouraged the students to think about what the words meant by making personal connections, giving examples, drawing pictures, and simplifying the language. Here’s the basic assignment:

Purpose: To demonstrate a working knowledge of the key terms.

Assignment: Create a Children’s Dictionary of the key terms in Chapter 3 and 4.

- Make sure your definitions and explanations are at a child’s level of comprehension. (Do not just copy the definitions from the book!)
- Include a picture or diagram for each term.
- Give a real-life example of each term.
- Alphabetize all of the terms combined.
- Put it together in a “little book” with a cover page, too.
- Put your name on the cover since you are the author of the dictionary.

Example: STRESS - anything or any situation that makes you feel like you have to take actions or do something extra in order to get through it but you may not know what to do. It can be scary or really exciting; it’s all how you look at it. Like, when you have 3 tests on the same day and no time to study!

After giving the instructions and encouragement, I just turned them loose. I must admit that I was quite a cheerleader for this project, and I think that my enthusiasm and excitement helped. I was able to get their dictionaries displayed at the MiraCosta library at San Elijo, which was “the icing on the cake” for these students.

Focusing on vocabulary in this active way increased their engagement; the results were amazing. Plus, their scores on the chapter tests were significantly higher.

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