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Brenda M. Power

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## **SMARMY VOLUPTUOUS WONDERS: IN PRAISE OF WORDS**

by

**Brenda Miller Power**

In the most famous vocabulary lesson of all time, Helen Keller learned that water could be symbolized by letters gestured into her hand. She writes of the experience:

We [Teacher Ann Sullivan and Helen Keller] walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten -- a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand . . . I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought (Keller, 1902/1990, p. 16).

A reader can smell, taste and touch the vivid experience of Keller learning the word "water."

In my more mundane history, I can remember learning a new word that involved some waterworks. Some years ago I received my first rejection of a journal article I'd written. The review was quite nasty. To add insult to injury, I didn't know the definition of one of the words the reviewer used to denigrate the ending of my piece. He described it as "smarmy." I grimly looked the word up in the dictionary, and discovered that "smarmy" meant "gushingly, unctuously flattering." Even though I was in tears as I held the dictionary and that review of my paper, I became instantly fascinated by "smarmy." What a great word! It sounds like a too sweet jam that's being ladled onto something you don't want to eat by your favorite aunt. I put the article away, and I didn't send it out for another attempt at publication for two years. But I held onto "smarmy." It was a word I would want to try and use myself someday, but not in the context I learned it in.

For a long time I avoided discussing vocabulary instruction with the teachers who are my students. The moments when Helen Keller learned the word "water" or I began to carry "smarmy" around as part of the bag of words in my head are vivid to me. These experiences of learning words are far removed from abstract lists of words with definitions most students have to memorize and spit back on a regular basis in schools. I didn't know how to begin

to make a bridge between learning a new word through a powerful personal experience and traditional vocabulary instruction.

Writing workshops still exist in many classrooms in what Tom Newkirk would call the "writing ghetto." There's a kind of bubble around this time in the school when students do have choice and time to explore topics they care about while collaborating with peers. But as the clock ticks each day, the bubble eventually bursts. Students and teachers move back into traditional literacy learning routines. Often these normal routines include vocabulary drills based on rote memorization, with lists of words and definitions assigned to students and tested each week or month.

I knew vocabulary drills in no way fit into the theoretical frames developed over the last few years of how language is acquired. Constance Weaver (1988) examines the research base on vocabulary instruction and concludes, "Vocabulary, taught directly, out of context, and unrelated to students' prior knowledge and experience remains largely unlearned" (p. 297).

When presenting modern methods for literacy instruction, I blithely told my students to abandon vocabulary drills, avoiding the contradiction between teaching and learning, the new and the old, altogether. This is never a good solution for a teacher of teachers. I knew it left the gap between theory and practice so wide that these young teachers were even more likely to use vocabulary drills, since most schools would require some sort of vocabulary teaching.

After teaching a short time, I was exposed to the concept of "word studies." Many whole language teachers are advocating these as an alternative to vocabulary teaching. With word studies, students learn new vocabulary through concentrated study of certain roots and affixes. But as David Freeman (1991) notes, there are a host of problems in this newly popular vocabulary instruction method. He writes:

In order to use word parts to determine meaning, you have to decide which parts are prefixes, roots, and suffixes, and which meaning of a root or an affix applies. For example, is *cognate* made up of *co* + *gnatus* or *cogn* + *aten*? Which meaning of *re* should you use to determine the meaning of *retire*, "back" or "again"? These problems are not apparent to someone who **knows** both the meaning of the word and the meanings of the parts (Freeman, 1991, p. 110).

Freeman argues that the value of word studies is limited in terms of serving as a replacement for vocabulary drills. Word studies still present language as an abstraction, parts leading to a whole.



It wasn't until I read Ralph Fletcher's work that I began to see the heart of the problem. Fletcher, an accomplished writer, has always enjoyed learning new words. He believes this love of language may be the most important quality any good writer possesses:

Writers obsess over words, their origins, their sounds. Writers have pet words, favorite and worst words, words imbued with other associations and personal meanings . . . (Fletcher, 1992, p. 3).

Learning words for Fletcher is deeply rooted in life experiences. He describes one such experience from his youth:

In the early 1960s, my siblings and I roamed through the thick pine woods around our house in Marshfield, Massachusetts. My brother Jim was a born naturalist with vacuum eyes that sucked up all sorts of treasures during his long solitary treks through the woods. Before Jimmy was ten years old he was skinning small animals and curing their hides. He was forever bringing home unusual insects, snakes, and turtles he had found.

One day, after a bad wind storm, Jim and I were walking through a swampy part of the woods. A tree had fallen in the storm; a shallow pool had formed in the crater left by the huge mass of uplifted roots. At the edge of the water we spotted a kind of lizard we had never seen before. We got just the briefest glimpse of the creature before it slithered away.

"Didya see that?"

"It looked like some kind of newt," I said. "A salamander."

"That was no salamander," Jim said. "Didn't you see the red on its gills?"

Jim went home and proceeded to pull out several volumes of the World Book Encyclopaedia. For two hours he sat poring through volumes A (amphibians), L (lizard), and R (reptiles).

"I found it," he said, showing me a picture. "A mud puppy, that's definitely it. We saw a mud puppy. They're common around here, found in the swamps, rivers, and lakes of northeastern America. Their external gills are bright red."

Mud puppy! I fell in love with the odd name, the internal rhyme, the funny image it forced into my head. The name clicked. By the end of that week all the kids in the neighborhood were calling the swampy area near that uprooted tree Mud Puppy Place (Fletcher, 1992, p. 7).

Fletcher's ideas and stories challenged me. Accomplished writing and delight in literacy begins with delight in words. And that delight begins in awareness born of experience. People learn new words as they become aware of them and seek definitions.

I tell my students, all practicing or future teachers, about how I learned "smarmy" when we begin to talk about vocabulary instruction. They enjoy my story and my

embellishments. They learn what "smarmy" means, and in a broader context, I hope they learn some more important lessons. Fletcher's story isn't just about the word "mud puppy." It's also the story of being wide awake in the nature world, aware of small wonders.

In revealing how I learned the word "smarmy," my undergraduates may learn other lessons, too. It repeats in a new way what I've told them so many times -- we don't teach writing, we teach writers. Harsh criticism with little regard for the feelings of the writer only injures students and stunts their development. My graduate students, all teachers, learn that few teacher researchers can go through the review process repeatedly without dealing with some rejection. Literacy reviewers, who ought to be the most sympathetic to writers, sometimes aren't.

The story involves a lot of wandering around that word "smarmy." But my experience often strikes the word in my students' memories. Then they tell me their stories of learning new words.

Lorraine shares her word, "transient." She remembers when she was a new waitress in a restaurant, and she noticed a group of people who always came in and sat together. She didn't know the people were homeless, and the restaurant was providing free food to them. Another waitress told her these people were "the transients." After two weeks Lorraine remarked to that waitress, "Those Transients may be the closest knit family I've ever seen -- they always eat together. But you know, not a one of them looks a bit alike!"

Robin, a full-figured student, talks about how she loves the word "voluptuous." She says, "I love it because the whole time I was growing up, I thought it was 'voluptuous.' It sounded like it meant 'in praise of lumpy women.'"

Suzanne tells of her friend who went in to get her first mammogram. The woman said she was proud of finally taking the time to get her "mammygram." When Suzanne tried to correct her pronunciation, the friend said, "Well, I think I'll stick with mammygram, because you really feel like a 'mammy' when it's happening." On and on the stories come. We laugh or nod in agreement as I write, the chalkboard filling up with favorite words. Some are ones students enjoy. An arty student likes "eclectic." She says, "I liked that word the first time I heard it. I knew if I was a word, I could be that word."

A funny thing happens after hearing all those stories about words. Most of us learn some new words or different definitions and it binds us as a community. At the same time, we ascribe ownership of the word to the person sharing the story. For weeks after talking about words, different students will enter the classroom in delight and say, "Hey Brenda, I heard your word 'smarmy' last night on television," or "I tried to use your word 'smarmy' in one of my papers last week." And I can't hear or see "mammogram" or "voluptuous" without thinking of specific students who own those words.



Fletcher is on to something. We need to stop talking about vocabulary instruction, and start talking about delight in language. Or, as English professor Peter Biedler writes, "We need to get our students to stop asking, 'Will it be on the test?' and start asking, 'Will it be like falling in love?'" The challenge in helping students name their world is to get them to see the pleasure and power in words encountered in experience.

Our students have many examples of how they have learned individual words. If we take the time to share these stories with each other, students will learn new words through each others' experiences. And they'll even begin to look for new words to learn, and new contexts to use them in.

This is what people do naturally as they test out uses of language. Students will pull and place new words into their experience, whether these contexts "fit" conventional definitions or not. Many teachers who do vocabulary drills end up with incorrect answers rooted in the experiences of their students.

For example, college professor Ruth Hubbard (1990) had her student teaching intern collect examples of incorrect answers from a weekly tenth grade vocabulary drill. The students were given words and definitions, and asked to use them in a sentence. Here are some of the contexts the high schoolers used for the assigned words:

1. *Revise: to change, fix, improve*

I need to *revise* my motorcycle.

2. *Redundant: repeated, boring, over and over again*

Mr. Donaldson is a very *redundant* science teacher.

3. *Essence: the feeling, the voice, atmosphere, or flavor*

There is a good *essence* at the house we rent at the beach.

4. *Embolden: to empower, to make strong, gain strength*

I am going to *embolden* my body this summer.

5. *Celestial: heavenly seasons*

My dad should put *celestial* in his pasta.

These students' incorrect answers make comical sense. All the word usages are easily traced back to student experience which doesn't line up with dictionary definitions.

But where does this leave us when it comes to vocabulary instruction? Abandoning weekly drills? Working instead toward this mushy-sounding love of language? Telling stories instead of drills of memorized definitions?

From somewhere deep in my memory, a ghost of an old English teacher thirty years gone rises. Her gray hair is in a heavy and severe bun high on her head. Her glasses rest on a silver chain near her belly, and a Kleenex is stuffed in the V of her blouse. Was she ever really my teacher? Or is she someone born recently in a dark brain cell who haunts me when I stray too far from the "real world" of classes today, with their sheaths of worksheets designed for vocabulary instruction?

"It's all well and good to talk about love of language," she says kindly. "But we expect standards. What you present is too idiosyncratic, vague, immeasurable. All those stories! It takes so much time. How do you know what you have in the end? In the end, I have these sheets. I know what I've tried to teach, even if my students haven't learned it."

She is always my harshest critic. I listen to her, shrinking a bit, as I argue back, "But those are the same arguments that were made about changing writing instruction. For years, five paragraph themes were the writing program. Finally, some researchers began to pull their chairs up to students and watched them write. They learned that students' processes are idiosyncratic, progress is complex and hard to measure, and writing takes time. Some professional writers began to talk about their processes. Donald Murray may have been the first, saying he never did five paragraph themes or used traditional outlines. Change has been slow and difficult, because the researchers and writers showed us how much needs to be changed." The lady, with the slight smile ever-present on her face (is it kindly or cynical?) begins to fade.

She represents for me the "real world" so many in education cite when dismissing calls for change. But in a strange way, vocabulary instruction will only evolve into love of words when we do acknowledge the real world that *matters* -- how language is used or acquired outside classrooms. The revolution in vocabulary instruction that is needed is a microcosm of the revolution that is taking place in writing instruction. A choice between the five paragraph theme or no writing instruction at all isn't much of a choice. The alternative of writing workshops -- time-consuming, messy, idiosyncratic, demanding that the teacher remain a writer and learner -- is still overwhelming for many.

A choice between vocabulary drills or word studies isn't much of a choice either. The alternative of learning to love words -- time-consuming, messy, idiosyncratic, demanding that the teacher also love words and look closely at how she learned them -- may also be overwhelming. But this is what people who love language do.

Our world is a bit like those small snowy globes you turn over and shake. Our day-to-day experience is at the center, with words, new and old, fluttering around us all the time. It's hard to acknowledge and examine all those words. But every so often, the process is inverted. A new word, like "smarmy" or "voluptuous" or "mammogram," is at the center. Experience flutters around it, and the word becomes rooted in our memory, a part of our history. The critical link between individual words and experience is what vocabulary drills

in school lack. Through stories linked to words, teachers can begin to foster a love of language.

The little globe with snow fluttering -- I'm not sure that image works. But then again, maybe it's the perfect closing for this piece. I think I want an ending that some might consider a wee bit smarmy.

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