Using RA Framework to Help Teach Vocabulary

Word meaning and word structure play key roles in all of our learning.

Either we know a term and are considered an “insider” into the language or we do not know the terminology, and we remain an “outsider”, and our ability to understand and apply the term is limited. Being an “outsider” impedes our learning in so many ways: personally, socially, and cognitively.

The knowledge-building dimension of the Reading Apprenticeship® (RA) framework includes the present and developing knowledge that readers bring to a text. Vocabulary building and word construction are two aspects of this dimension that should not be ignored as we strive to create a community of stronger and more efficient readers.

Faculty sometimes sidestep teaching vocabulary as a part of reading, assuming that if needed, students can, will, and do resort to using their dictionaries and glossaries.

Students often do not have the schema to realize the discipline-specific context and application of a term to take the dictionary definition and then apply it to the textual use wherein the term exists. For example, dictionaries define assessment as a tax imposed on a person or company or to judge the worth of importance of something. In nursing, assessment is the first step in the nursing process, and it includes the collection, organization, and validation of the subjective and objective data. On the other hand, expert readers make this extrapolation naturally and their apprenticing students in interpreting terms in their fields is an ideal way to help students become more “field” articulate.

Thus, we need to model what terms we must understand, how we understand them, and their role in meaning making. This habit of modeling helps fill the gap in the students’ ability to make sense of and to engage a text. As faculty, we must look at our assigned texts and consider which terms must be learned in order to understand the passage completely. Partial understanding of the vocabulary of the field often leads to errors on exams as students do not fully understand the technical or specific terms or their application.
Faculty should do this by asking themselves about the structure and meaning of language from the text’s chapter or passage that the student must know in order to make meaning and use the language of the field. For example, are there specific terms or symbols (like math symbols) that function in the text to create specific and/or unique meaning?

Faculty can model this for students by creating a chapter language/term overview that can begin to teach vocabulary and increase the awareness about the ways of making meaning of vocabulary.

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<th>Key Terms</th>
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<td><strong>Mark +</strong> if you know the term, can provide a discipline-specific definition, are able to use it in a unique sentence, and can provide the other forms of the term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mark –</strong> if you don’t know the term, cannot provide a discipline-specific definition, are unable to use it in a unique sentence, or cannot provide other forms of the term.</td>
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<th>+ or –</th>
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Teachers should assist students in clarifying meaning and chunking comprehension. Faculty help students learn how to deal with unknown words and long and/or complex sentences by modeling and clarifying word meaning. Ways of creating vocabulary learning opportunities include:

- reading difficult or complex text passages out loud and modeling a Think-Aloud for the students to see an expert reader clarifying, questioning, and dissecting the term(s).
- using discipline-specific vocabulary and creating a semantic web of the relationship of the term to the key concepts it applies to within the discipline
- asking students to provide explanations of specific terms
- teaching the application and word forms of those terms that are key to the topic of instruction
- building an awareness of and an interest in learning strategies to dissect and apply new words
- revisiting passages using the critical terms.

As experts in the field, faculty members play a key role in helping students learning how to approach new terms or new uses of terms in a metacognitive way. They help students to determine how well they need to know a word and all its forms, the application of the term in the field, utilizing knowledge of word parts to help define a term and how to reconcile the dictionary definition with the discipline-specific application of the term.

**For More Information**

For more information on this topic, visit the RTC Library’s LibGuide about Reading Apprenticeship® and RATs at [http://libguides.rtc.edu/rats](http://libguides.rtc.edu/rats). At the LibGuide, click on the Reading Apprenticeship Routines drop down menu, and then on the Word Meaning & Structure option. There you will find ready-to-use templates, links to websites and a sampling of a few helpful RTC Library materials on the topic.

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