Middle school language arts teachers eventually discover that if they don’t pay attention to how they teach, then perhaps what they teach may not matter. This article documents part of an in-depth, ongoing conversation between the two authors—Christine Walsh, literacy coach, and Dan Rose, eighth-grade ELA teacher—regarding the motivating ways Mr. Rose connects language learning and life. In italics are Mr. Rose’s reflections on the careful, continuous planning that occurs before students enter his classroom.

The Show Begins

He turns off the classroom lights as students file in. The dark room tells us that all we need to see is on the interactive whiteboard, an effective focusing tool. He starts talking before the last student enters, announcing the agenda for the day.

Mr. Rose quickly focuses students’ attention on a list of terms displayed on the board:

- Point of View
- Precise
- Independent
- Comprehend
- Synonym

Figure 1. Mr. Rose introduced these five terms in his vocabulary “warm-up”.

“Who is able to explain at least one of these terms to someone else in your own words? Stand up.” All students stand. Wait time.

“Who is able to explain at least two of these terms to someone else in your own words?” A few sit down. Wait time. Smiles all around.

“How about three terms?” Wait time.

And so on until a handful of students who feel confident enough to explain all five terms remain standing.

“You can explain all five of these terms? You can? Really? Good for you.”

It doesn’t occur to me until the end of the lesson that Mr. Rose never asked students to tell what they knew about each term; his questioning simply served as a hook to physically and cognitively engage them in thinking about what they already know and are able to do. He also did not provide or ask them to rely on glossary definitions. Mr. Rose trusts that his middle-level learners are thinking about each word as they prepare to articulate its meaning. He knows that word learning is incremental (Nagy and Scott, 2004); it happens in steps, not all at once.

D.R.: When I “introduce” a new word or term in my classroom, it is not new. The word has already come up in conversation about reading and writing. I do not expect the students to know a word after exposures 1, 2, 3 or maybe even 10!

Point of View

For point of view, Mr. Rose shows an unidentifiable red image and asks if anyone knows what it is. I recognize the image from the wordless picturebook Zoom (Banyai, 1998) and can’t wait to see what he does with it. The class talks about what it could be and what we see happening
Learning new vocabulary (learning anything, really) is more about the students constructing meaning on their own. That’s where the learning happens.

Precise

For precise, Mr. Rose asks rhetorically, “What is precision? When is precision important?” Examples abound. Experienced athletes need to be precise: the football kicker aiming for the space between two field goals, the baseball pitcher with a small strike zone, the scientist who measures. Then we see a YouTube clip (OK GO, 2009) with four band members singing a high-powered, rhythmic song while performing outrageous aerobic activities on moving treadmills! One false move and . . .!!! Students are riveted.

D.R.: The band is called OK GO, and I use their videos to expose students to new terms and help my eighth graders construct meaning. The interactive whiteboard is an exceptional resource for meeting my students’ needs. With it, I am able to quickly embed high-quality photos, video, and audio within my presentation, link to any site, record my presentation to be played back later, and design any sort of image, game, or video I can creatively conceive. Whenever I find what I think is an interesting, creative, outrageous, eye-catching video, audio clip, commercial, article, picture or story, I copy it, scan it, save it, import it, download it into a file “to be used later.”

Independent

Independent is a term that Mr. Rose has already used today when he reviewed the agenda for the lesson: “How can we become more independent readers?” First he shows a few Google images of young people immersed in reading independently in a comfortable, quiet environment.

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

“My World of Words: Building Vocabulary Lists” from ReadWriteThink.org affords students the opportunity to select personalized vocabulary words based on their interests and facets of their daily lives. Through cooperative group discussion, students will generate their own vocabulary word lists and research the words’ meanings. Each student will create a “My World of Words Journal” that will include definitions and proper usage information. Students will then participate in an interactive journal share to elicit feedback from their classmates.

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Next he shows a Google search with a number of definitions that use the term independent. Mr. Rose now treats his students to a close reading task. A short Valerie Worth poem—“Crayons,” from her posthumous collection, Peacock (http://bit.ly/1KGUjgd)—pops up on the screen. The title is omitted and the phrase “dirty stubs” substitutes for the original “grubby stubs,” and the word “dirty” is circled.

“Guess what it is. Don’t shout it out. I hope no one from another class told you at lunch what this was!” (as he secretly hopes they have discussed it at their lunch table!)

Hmm. We must look for clues to make meaning with this poem, to even guess about what it might be. Several hands shoot up. No one hollers out the answer. I am momentarily stumped.

Mr. Rose scans the list and does a think-aloud with the third definition: “So, from reading about what independent reading is (Cullinan, 2000), I now know that it has two parts to it: It must be a personal choice, and the reader decides how much to read. Today we’re going to try it for fifteen minutes.”

D.R.: I have two aims for every student to achieve by the end of eighth grade: Every student will become a more independent reader, and every student will become a more independent writer. Through all of the daily objectives, targets, weekly and monthly goals, these two overriding goals prevail.

Comprehend

I have two aims for every student to achieve by the end of eighth grade: Every student will become a more independent reader, and every student will become a more independent writer.
“Without telling the answer, tell one clue that led you to the answer.”

“‘Their paper torn’ is a good clue,” one student responds.

“Yes, good! How did that help you figure out the answer?”

“I can picture torn paper on them.”

“Give me another clue.” Students think aloud about how specific words and phrases help them comprehend the author’s purpose and make personal meaning with the text. I notice that the students with special needs are also focusing, hands raised.

“Of course, it’s crayons!”

“Now, what did we just do?” Students refer to the list and respond correctly.

“Yes, we just comprehended the poem.”

D.R.: When young adolescents learn something in my room, I want it to be like they just belched in the middle of class. They might look around, sometimes with their hand to their mouth, or cock their chins a little toward the ceiling and discover that they know something new. I like knowledge to arrive unexpectedly and at any moment. That’s what keeps my classes breathing and alive.

Why is “dirty” circled in the display poem? Mr. Rose has changed one word of the poem and now asks us to GUESS what the poet’s original word is! He holds the poetry book up close to his face, hiding the original text as he mysteriously re-reads his version of the poem aloud.

“Who thinks they know what word Valerie Worth uses that means the same or close to the same thing as dirty?”

One student shouts, “Is it filthy?” It’s Mike, the student who may lack motivation to read independently but obviously loves to be challenged by fast-paced literacy games like this one.

D.R.: I try whenever possible to incorporate challenges into my lessons. When I do, students sit up straighter, turn toward me a bit more, the extraneous conversation ceases. Concepts that used to take me one or two whole class periods to teach can now be taught and retaught in 5 to 8 minutes with all students actively engaged.

Readers continue generating a list of possible words as Mr. Rose secretly peeks into his book of poems to see which word the poet has chosen to convey this meaning to her readers.

“It’s grubby!” a few students share at the same time. “Yes! Grubby stubs.”

D.R.: I have found poems to be one of the most efficient ways to invite students to practice and use reading and writing skills. Great poets like Valerie Worth layer their poems, giving teachers room to lead students in the direction of their choosing. Poetry allows for many different avenues of thought, many different directions for teaching.

Synonym

How does Mr. Rose teach the meaning of synonym? He just did. Whether or not students realize it, they just offered up several different meanings of the word dirty.

Flashback to the vocabulary list that now includes definitions for the five terms. The definitions are stated in words understandable to students, not the typical English teacher definitions (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). Let’s read them silently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Point of View</td>
<td>The position or angle (perspective) from which somebody observes an event or scene.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precise</td>
<td>Exact, accurate, detailed, and specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Able to operate alone, with no help from anyone else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehend</td>
<td>To fully understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synonym</td>
<td>A word that means the same</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Mr. Rose supplies these student-generated definitions for the five vocabulary words.
D.R.: *The definitions have already been created by the students at this point. This slide is just a summary slide of what the students told me. I try hard not to give students answers. The best answers to any of the questions that I ask are always the answers thought about and given by them.*

**Why This Lesson Works**

This minilesson focuses on only *five* terms. In many classrooms, vocabulary lists contain ten, fifteen, and even twenty terms at a time, far too many for readers to concentrate on and still love their books (Miller, 2009).

Mr. Rose’s word list contains some typical language arts terms—*point of view* and *synonym*—but also includes academic vocabulary or Tier II words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013) we don’t usually see on lists of literary terms: *precise, comprehend, and independent*. These words are ones readers will see frequently during free reading; they span disciplines and change meaning depending on the context in which they are used. Rather than teaching narrow, isolated definitions, he teaches related concepts, connotation, and webs of meaning (Coleman, 2012).

Did we mention that the instruction described here occurred in about ten minutes, intended only as a segue for the “real” lesson? These middle-level learners are now not only ready but willing to read independently for 15 minutes, then write about and share what they read. The connection between learning word meaning and real reading is clear.

Mr. Rose’s “show, don’t tell” approach.

**Final Thoughts**

This brief but powerful vocabulary lesson convinces us to examine our own chosen methods and reasons for teaching academic vocabulary in light of the level of student engagement we witness. It illustrates how thoughtful planning allows learners to construct their own meaning within high-interest, relevant social situations. By the way, Mr. Rose’s hundred-plus eighth graders read an average of 850 books each year independently, a testimony to the success of his approach.

**References**


**Christine Walsh**, NCTE member since 1999, is a visiting assistant professor in the School of Education at the State University of New York, Oswego. She also consults as a literacy coach in the Oswego City Schools. **Dan Rose** has been teaching middle level readers and writers for fourteen years at Oswego Middle School, Oswego, NY. He has been an NCTE member since 2015.