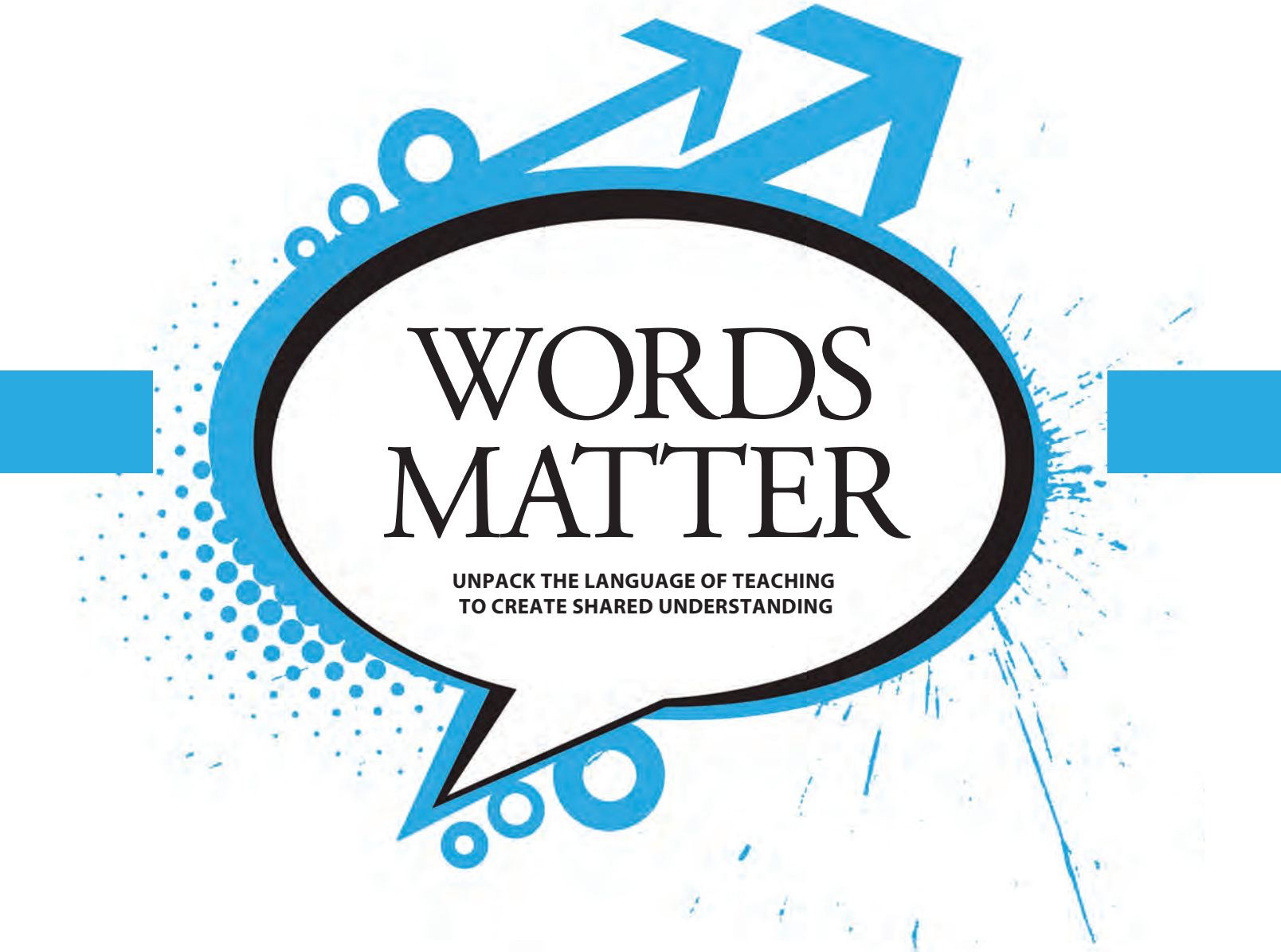

WORDS MATTER

UNPACK THE LANGUAGE OF TEACHING TO CREATE SHARED UNDERSTANDING

By Genevieve Graff-Ermeling, Bradley A. Ermeling, and Ronald Gallimore

Words matter. They are principal vehicles of classroom instruction and lesson planning. The more clearly teachers articulate what is to be learned and the instructional practices to be used, the better they teach and the more likely students develop knowledge and skills.

Words can be enigmatic. In education, many words have accumulated so many meanings that people interpret them differently. Sincere professionals might believe they are in agreement and engaged in complementary action for students' benefit. But closer examination reveals that the specific actions they take vary so much that they rarely achieve shared goals.

For example, there is evidence that a little struggle helps students better learn scientific or mathematical concepts and transfer them to new problems. In joint planning, teachers might agree on incorporating "struggle" into their instruction, but if they observe how they implement their plans, sometimes they are surprised at how differently they interpret "struggle" (Ermeling & Graff-Ermeling, in press).

Lesson plans and curriculum resources are filled with other familiar terms that broadly describe teaching actions but leave substantial room for interpretation. Words such as *emphasize, model, explain, demonstrate,* and *discuss* are just a few examples. Subtle but pivotal nuances of teach-

Well-defined and specified language paves the way for purposeful classroom interaction, minimizes unproductive struggle, and creates opportunities to learn.

ing and learning lie beneath these words. When vaguely defined, the result is often less purposeful teaching, less clarity in key ideas or instructional procedures, and slower learning progress.

Here's an example. A group of elementary school teachers was working to improve reading fluency. The group elected to carve out weekly collaboration time to discuss challenges with student mastery of decodables. Each teacher was diligently working to teach well and assumed they had a common understanding of how to practice decodables, but further discussion revealed each had a different definition of decodables' purpose.

With some gentle nudging from a literacy coach, teachers discovered that some were making a subtle but critical mistake in the sequence of instruction. The purpose of decodables is to help students practice target sounds by emphasizing high-frequency words. By showing a word and asking students to repeat sounds, rather than allowing students to first pronounce each word themselves, teachers were short-circuiting the opportunity for learning.

Here's another example. A team of algebra teachers collaboratively planned a pivotal lesson on systems of equations to engage students in a rich conceptual problem. For the last segment of the lesson plan, the team added, "Share, discuss, and analyze with the whole class. Choose several groups as time permits. (About 15 minutes.)"

The teachers were prepared to finish and move on to other agenda items when the facilitator asked, "What does that discussion look like? How will we connect back to the core concept?" This prompted a discussion and a more specific set of teaching notes for the final lesson segment.

One member shared a critical addition: Deliberately circulate during student pair work and identify student pairs to present for each of the primary solution methods (table, graph, and equation). This idea set the stage for a culminating class discussion — providing students an opportunity to learn from a full range of examples and compare and discuss the advantages of each method.

COMPLEXITY BENEATH THE SURFACE

Words that have a strong history of use within a certain context can also mask the complexity that lies beneath. Consider the word "explain." Teachers might choose from a dozen different methods for explaining a new concept or idea for a given lesson topic, but an equally important qualifier of "*Who* is the explainer?" can dramatically alter a learning opportunity.

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Considering this central question can shift a lesson from a conventional teacher-sharing-knowledge explanation to one that enhances understanding by enlarging students' responsibility. Working as an external advisor for a Title II-funded project in Riverside, California, Genevieve Graff-Ermeling observed such a shift while coaching elementary teachers'

implementation of the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study 5E instructional model.

In her coaching notes, Graff-Ermeling recorded a third of the teachers she visited reverting to a teacher-centric use of the word "explain." This occurred despite training and take-home materials received during a summer workshop that emphasized students as the agents of this activity.

Follow-up conversations revisited the importance of creating opportunities for students to explain concepts to each other and back to the teacher before receiving answers from direct instruction. The expectation that everyone understood a common meaning for "explain" proved to be an unwarranted assumption.

Finally, the clarity of words determines whether assessment results get translated into detailed actions that impact classroom instruction. At one high school we work with, teachers periodically examine their school-based benchmark data to identify student strengths and continuing learning needs. A critical final step in the analysis protocol is to select a high-priority need and articulate, "What are we going to teach, and how are we going to teach it?"

Encourage teacher teams and individual teachers to add a deliberate step in their lesson planning process where they identify and unpack words with multiple meanings.

Teachers new to this process often record vague language for teaching, such as, "Give more time and examples," "Say it with more emphasis," or "We need to spend time working on this skill." Each of these phrases begs the question, "How?" For assessment findings to impact teaching, the "how" must be clearly articulated.

A group of high school chemistry teachers experienced this in their collaborative work around stoichiometry, specifically mole conversions. One of their continuing student needs was the correct use of the mole ratio to convert between given and wanted units of measurement. The teachers raised the possibility of creating a "mole troll bridge" activity and wrote in their notes: "Stress that it's a bridge between wanted and given ... cannot cross over without going over the bridge."

After prompting from a coach, they further discussed and elaborated, "Create a sidewalk chalk stoichiometry map with wooden box as mole ratio bridge. Have teacher be mole troll. (Require ratio as password.)" In spring 2015, sidewalk chalk on the ground outside the building marked that two new teachers implemented this learning activity with fidelity, bringing the total to five teachers over the past few years.

STRATEGIES FOR UNPACKING LANGUAGE

Principals, coaches, and mentors can help teachers recognize and address the multiple meanings of words in their planning and reflection process. Here are four ways to facilitate these discussions.

Engage grade-level or subject-area team leaders in identifying and unpacking common and familiar terms used in lesson planning.

Engage grade-level or subject-area team leaders in identifying and unpacking common and familiar terms used in lesson planning. Introduce a word such as "explain." Ask participants to describe their personal interpretation of that word's meaning and implication in the context of a typical lesson. Compare their descriptions, drawing attention to inconsistencies, ambiguities, and the limitations these place on effective teaching and learning.

Encourage teacher teams and individual teachers to add a deliberate step in their lesson planning process where they identify and unpack words with multiple meanings. Present sample lessons or invite participants to study their own lessons to identify examples of words where the intended teaching or learning activity is not specific enough. Assist team leaders or instructional coaches by practicing specific facilitation moves and language to initiate further elaboration during upcoming team meetings (e.g. "I'm not sure I understand what we mean by 'explain.' Can someone unpack that a little more for me?").

Foster a habit of asking probing questions when discussing instructional practices with colleagues. Whether in formal or informal settings, teachers often exchange ideas about classroom activities and teaching methods, which are typically expressed in general terms and implemented with varying degrees of fidelity to the intended design and purpose.

For example, imagine two high school English teachers discussing obstacles they experienced with improving student writing through peer revision. One teacher mentions positive results she has observed from modeling levels of revision commentary with example student papers. The conversation often ends here with, "That's an interesting idea. I'll have to try that."

Educational leaders can help foster a new pattern of professional discourse by modeling and practicing these types of exchanges with detailed follow-up questions and requests for further elaboration. In the teacher exchange about peer revision, the second teacher might ask, "How exactly do you model that?"

This could lead to an explanation about providing students with specific rating criteria for revision commentary (level 0, level 1, level 2), selecting anonymous papers, and engaging students in groups of three where they rotate specific revision roles (reader, commentator, recorder).

Become the novice and ask teachers to explain their ideas to you. Instructional coaches and administrators often approach their roles as purveyors of advice and miss the opportunity to facilitate clarity and depth of thinking by asking questions.

During planning or data analysis sessions, listen with inter-

est and curiosity to validate and encourage. Then ask teachers to describe ideas in more detail so you can picture how it would transpire in the classroom. When time permits, have teachers use you as a mock audience to teach the content or skill. This short trial run can help uncover vague language or plans that lack specifics. In many cases, it will also reveal critical sequences in the teaching process that were missing altogether.

RICHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING

Diligently and consistently modeled and implemented, practical unpacking strategies can help an educator community develop shared understanding of underlying ideas, uncover gaps in grasp of instructional practices, and prepare lessons with improved clarity and richer opportunities for student learning.

A central goal of communication is to cohere — "to coalesce fragments of information back together into a single understanding" (Atkinson, 2003). This definition describes well one of the most difficult tasks of teaching. And it's actually the origin of the word communication: to "make common" or "bring together."

Vague words produce underdeveloped conceptions, limiting teacher growth and understanding of practice and leaving students with ambiguous ideas. Well-defined and specified language paves the way for purposeful classroom interaction, minimizes unproductive struggle, and creates opportunities to learn.

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Continued from p. 18

afternoons of rich conversations with their peers.

Leadership matters. The final, most important lesson from the project was how principals took over the leadership and facilitation. From writing the protocol and implementation to planning for the districtwide assessment, leadership team members were vocal advocates for the power of a thoughtful, reflective, conversational process.

NEXT STEPS

As the district moves closer toward rater agreement among all principals, it plans to take other approaches.

First, the district will work with teachers to understand the definitions and use them with precision in their collaboration to design curriculum maps, units of study, assessments, and lessons to match the descriptors in the first two domains.

The district will also work to develop inter-rater agreement among those who evaluate principals and program directors.

Finally, the district will work to ensure that the conversations principals are having around quality instruction continue through ongoing professional learning and district leadership meetings.

One principal sums up the impact of the professional learning on his work: "I learned today that I need to pay more attention to the rubric and the definitions when I do my observations," said Chad Hasong, principal of North Side High School. "I had begun to make assumptions about what this rubric says, and this work is going to reshape the way I observe teachers and give them feedback."

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