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Students at Harlem Academy participating in the vocabulary game

GAMIFYING
VOCABULARY

How one Harlem-based school leverages shared message boards to make vocabulary stick

By **Chris Cunningham**, **Vanessa Scanfeld**, **Leah Weintraub**, & **Vincent Dotoli**

*i*n his essay, "A Wealth of Words," E.D. Hirsch Jr. put it bluntly: "The key to increasing upward mobility is expanding vocabulary."

It's well known that engagement with vocabulary words is central to students' ability to remember their meanings, understand their nuances, and come to use them fluently. Yet vocabulary exercises are often the most rote of classroom tasks, too often landing on last-minute memorization rather than in the realm of deep engagement.

To change that, Harlem Academy, an independent day school in New York, created a vocabulary game that not only teaches students how to think about words, but also is fast-paced, engaging, and fun.

Yes, *fun*.

How to play

Using a shared message board projected on a screen, each student is given two minutes to type a sentence using the first of the week's five words. The sentences must be grammatically correct, use the word appropriately, and demonstrate the word's meaning precisely.

When there is an error, the teacher offers a hint regarding what is wrong and deletes the sentence for the student to correct and repost. Students can continue to post corrections until the timer goes off. The class then reads through the list of sentences, and each student selects two to write in his or her notebook. The class repeats this for each of the five words.

Why does this work? Because engagement, practice, motivation, and challenge lead to vocabulary growth.

Engagement

This is a chance for students to be silly and tap into shared jokes and experiences, writing sentences that have the class laughing for much of the time. For students to be both funny and correct (so that their sentence stays up on the screen), they must substantively engage with a word. For almost every word, one or two of the crowdsourced sentences is a gem that the class can't forget.

Students often create characters that reemerge with each new vocabulary word. In this example, Antwuan, a seventh-grade student, returned to a character named Brady, creating classwide laughs as they anticipated and read his sentences.

- *Delusional*: Brady rushed to the police station and told them that a leprechaun was following him; the cops deemed him *delusional*.
- *Distorted*: The cops took Brady to a doctor, who gave him medicine, and his view of the world quickly became *distorted*.
- *Squalid*: Brady woke up in a *squalid* pen at the local farm,

and he was covered in mud and something else that definitely didn't smell like mud.

Practice

This exercise not only allows students to practice using the word in context, but also provides multiple exposures to a word, including hearing it out loud. These are necessary conditions for moving a new word into working memory, as described in Doug Lemov, Colleen Driggs, and Erica Woolway's *Reading Reconsidered: A Practical Guide to Rigorous Literacy Instruction* (Jossey-Bass).

Motivation

Sharing with classmates provides motivation to go beyond the standard sentence a student would write independently, such as "The squalid home wasn't kept clean."

The game pushes students to instead opt for textured, evocative sentences, which are much more memorable. Also, the opportunity to read peers' responses to the same assignment models a range of responses and stokes motivation to improve.

Challenge

Although the game is fun, standards are kept high. The teacher removes sentences with incorrect grammar, improper usage, or lack of precision. Students can continue to submit new versions but receive credit only for a sentence that is 100% correct.

This means students have a chance to make mistakes, get feedback, and make revisions in a low-stakes, fast-paced setting—while keeping expectations high.

The proof

Over the last three years, the median eighth grader at Harlem Academy has scored in the 96th percentile nationally, on average gaining 14

percentile points from fourth grade. Of course, the game is just a piece of the puzzle. We use high-leverage academic words, focus on vocabulary a little bit each day, test early and often, and interact with words in a variety of other ways. The game is a powerful tool within this larger context.

Don't take it from us, though. In a recent game, one of our seventh graders, Tolu, wrote the following sentence for the word *innate*: "Ben was an *innate* fighter and lifted weights every day. Gerald was on the football team. Who would win the fight: Ben or Gerald? Find out in the next episode of sentences!"

Yes. Find out in the next episode of sentences. We look forward to it! ■

OUR GAMIFYING TIPS

- **Keep it moving fast:** Set a timer for two minutes for each word.

- **Prioritize classroom management:** Even though they are having fun, students must hear your corrections, so the classroom needs to remain quiet. Students' names are attached to their work, so although they may be less serious than usual, they keep it kind and clean.

- **Have students keep a backup:** Have students type their sentences into a separate document and copy and paste into the message board. That way, they can return to the original if their sentence is deleted.

- **Complicate the instructions:** Keep pushing student learning by adding criteria, such as "incorporate a prepositional phrase."