

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## A Classroom Scenario

Mary E. Curtis, Ph.D. • January 2009

Topic: Adolescent Literacy

Practice: Vocabulary Instruction

### Highlights

- Research supports the use of explicit instruction and multiple opportunities to learn in varied contexts as effective strategies for teaching vocabulary words and meanings.
- This classroom scenario begins with a description of what can be considered a “typical” vocabulary lesson and moves on to explain how the lesson can be improved.
- Dr. Curtis presents the scenario and explains how a teacher can use research-based strategies to improve the vocabulary instruction. That is, a teacher should begin with explicit and direction instruction, repeat the number of occurrences of a word in multiple contexts, and use active and generative tasks.

### About the Interviewee

Mary E. Curtis is Professor of Education and founding director of the Center for Special Education at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA. Before coming to Lesley in 1999, she directed the Boys Town Reading Center, where she oversaw

research and development on Reading Is FAME®, a remedial reading curriculum shown to reverse reading failure in older adolescents.

Mary Beth is the lead author of the Tool Kit for the Student Achievement in Reading (STAR) project, a professional development initiative of the US Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Currently she oversees program evaluation and certification activities for the National STAR Training Network.

Mary Beth is the author of numerous articles on reading diagnosis and remediation, the role of vocabulary in comprehension, and the reading skills of at-risk teens and adults. She is a member of the Adult Literacy Research Working Group, and was Lesley’s principal investigator on a research project for improving the instruction of adult basic education intermediate readers, conducted in collaboration with Harvard University and Soliloquy Learning and funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education.

Mary Beth has been an advisor to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the National Institute for Literacy, the National Center for Family Literacy, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and the Massachusetts Department of Education. She is also a member of the Editorial Review Board for Reading Research Quarterly.

Mary Beth earned her Ph.D. in Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, and she has been an Associate Professor of Education at Harvard University, Associate Director of the Harvard Reading Laboratory, and a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Learning Research and Development Center (Pittsburgh, PA).

## Full Transcript

My name is Mary Beth Curtis. I’m a Professor of Education here at Lesley University where I also direct the Center for Special Education. Explicit vocabulary instruction is so important. We need to make sure that we explain to students what it is about the vocabulary that they need to know. We need to make sure that we give them guided practice in applying that knowledge, and we need to make sure that we give them independent opportunities then to apply that.

Very often what happens when we do vocabulary instruction is that we might introduce the words at the beginning of the week, might tell the students to look them up in the glossary, and at the end of the week we test them. Or we might introduce a skill and say, “This might be useful to you,” and then not refer to it again for quite a long time. And when students don’t have these multiple opportunities to learn, things just don’t stick for them. So, we want to make sure that they have a number of times in which they are encountering the new word meanings or the vocabulary skills. And the research tells us that we may need as many as 15 to 20 different encounters in order for students to remember what it is that they’re learning.

When we think about vocabulary might look like in a classroom lesson, I think it helps sometimes to start with what a typical vocabulary lesson might look like and then move on from there to see how maybe we could improve it. Very often, I walk into a classroom and the teacher will be teaching a word, let's say the word is "persist," and the teacher will write persist up on blackboard and then ask, "Does anybody in the class know what persist means?" And students will raise their hand and the teacher will call on one student, and the student will say, "Persist. Persist. That's when you try to get people to do what you want. You persist on them doing something." And the teacher will pause and say, "No, I think you mean insist. This is persist. Anybody else, what do you think persist means?" And the student might say, "Gee, does it have something to do with the weather?" And the teacher will stop and say, "Well, you probably have heard 'cold persisting for a while,' or 'the rain's going to persist for the rest of the week.' But no, no it doesn't have, that's not what it means. Maybe if I give you an example. Let me put it in context to see whether you know: When I couldn't get it done right away, I needed to persist. I persisted. Does that help? What do you think it means?" Another student will raise their hand and say, "When you couldn't get it done right away, you quit." And another student will say, "Maybe it means cry." And the student, who says it means getting people to do it your way says, "That's what I said it meant."

So, let's stop and see what's happened in this scenario. I mean, what's good about it is that the teacher has shown the word. The students have seen it. The teacher has tried to get students to think about what they already know about the word. What doesn't work in it is that the students didn't really know anything about the word, and so now we've spent quite a bit of instructional time, and we still haven't gotten the correct meaning of the word out, and the students have heard a lot of incorrect information.

So, let's think about how the teacher could have done it differently. Again, the teacher comes in, writes "persist" up on the board, and says to the students, "Persist means to keep on trying. It means to refuse to give up. This morning my internet service went out, and I really had to persist to get the internet service back. I had to call up on the telephone. I got a busy signal. I had to try again. I had to be persistent. Once I got through, I got put on hold. I had to keep trying and trying for them to connect me. And finally, because I persisted, I was able to get my internet service back because I refused to give up. We think about athletes sometimes having to persist. They really refuse to give up in order to be successful. Who can think of an athlete that might have had to be persistent in their career?" And then the students would answer, and you have a discussion about that. The teacher might say, "To be successful in school, some of you have had to persist. You have had to refuse to give up. Who can think of a time when they had to persist in school? When they refused to give up, they kept on trying?" So, that might be the first day of instruction.

The next day or the next time we talk about this particular vocabulary word, the teacher might say to the students, "We've been talking about persistence. We have been talking about persist, remember? That means to keep on trying, to refuse to give up. What I'd like you to do now in small groups is talk about when persist is a good thing and when it might be a bad thing. So, I want each group to come up with an example of when it's good and when it might not be to your benefit to persist, to keep on trying."

Another day, the teacher might come in and say, “You’ve all had a chance to think about this word persist, which means keep on trying, refusing to give up. What I would like you to do now is each write a little story about when you’ve had to persist, a situation that you’ve had to persist in.”

So, those are all ways in which the teacher can repeat the number of occurrences with persist, in multiple contexts, in varied contexts. They’re active and generative tasks, and the teacher started out with direct and explicit instruction in order to help them with the meaning.