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DESIGN THINKING & ENGINEERING
STRUCTURED WORD INQUIRY
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In August 2014, Nueva hosted its first Structured Word Inquiry Institute. Guided by Dr. Peter Bowers, teachers, reading and writing specialists, administrators, and parents from all around the greater San Francisco Bay Area convened at Nueva’s Hillsborough campus to further refine their understanding of Structured Word Inquiry (SWI). The week was divided into two workshops: an introductory session Monday and Tuesday, and an advanced session that met Wednesday through Friday.

Peter opened the first workshop by introducing the concept that a primary function of English spelling is to preserve the meaning of a word through its structure. Attendees were challenged to find examples of words where this was not the case. The words they came up with were then used as the raw material for learning the process of SWI: identifying bases, creating word sums, and finding related word-families. Later, Peter shared activities and conventions that teachers could use to help introduce SWI to their classes, and attendees asked clarifying questions to gain the perspective needed to guide their students.

In the advanced workshop, most attendees arrived already familiar with the connection between structure and meaning, as well as the SWI process in general. The variation in participants’ experience with SWI was not dissimilar to an early elementary classroom, where intellectual curiosity and literacy competency can vary so much between students. As such, it provided the perfect setting to learn by doing.

The connection to a wider community was a huge benefit of the advanced workshop. Educators who had tried out individual lessons could compare and contrast their experiences, affirming proficiency and inspiring new ideas. “It was extremely catalyzing and generative,” says Luke Stone, a Nueva first-grade teacher. “Sharing lessons and obstacles that we had all encountered in the classroom trying out Structured Word Inquiry, I got to see where it might be possible to go next. For me, those unknown next steps are what is exciting, and the students see that.”

A perfect example of the kind of community collaboration that took place at the Institute is the investigation of the word vacate. A team of educators ranging from PreK through first grade huddled around a piece of paper, trying to make sense of the word sum:

\[
\text{vac + ate } \rightarrow \text{ vacate}
\]

Laraine Ray, a Nueva Kindergarten teacher, explained that \(<\text{vac}>\) could not be the base, because the \(<\text{c}>\) would have to double. Therefore, the word sum had to be:

\[
\text{vace/ + ate } \rightarrow \text{ vacate}
\]

When Carolee Fucigna, the PreK teacher in the group, wondered how \(<\text{vace}>\) could be the base (pronounced vase), Pete jumped in to remind the group that “a base doesn’t have a pronunciation until it is in a word.”
Carolee and first-grade teacher Emily Mitchell repeated the convention, but having now arrived at the conclusion organically, repeated it as epiphany. Emily later reflected on the moment. “After so much exposure to Structured Word Inquiry throughout the year, culminating in the Institute, my understanding of this method is bigger and I can see where to go with it in class. I have a base, a foundation, that I can now stand on to take Structured Word Inquiry to the next level.”

The collaborative nature of the Institute provided the exposure and guidance needed to start or refine a classroom practice. However, SWI is ultimately a process guided by questions raised in class by students and teachers, and the Institute cannot possibly provide answers to these yet-unasked questions. Luke Stone summed it up best. “No one left with answers, but everyone left with their own opinions and ideas on where to go next.”