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Implementing Vocabutoons in the English Language Arts Classroom: Drawing Their Way to Success

William C. Sewell

Abstract

Although vocabulary acquisition remains a critical to literacy development, teachers infrequently devote classroom time to vocabulary exercises. In this article, the author demonstrates the use of "vocabutoons" as an instructional activity which draws upon students' multiple literacies—in particular, visual literacy—in order to foster vocabulary development. Tooning is based upon the belief that "[p]roficient readers visualize what they read as they construct meaning from a text" (Onofrey & Leikam 682). Representative artwork created by English Education majors enrolled in a young adult literature course at a university in the Midwest will be featured to highlight the tooning process.

Keywords
vocabulary, middle and high school English language arts, art

Vocabulary comprehension and retention are critical components of academic achievement (Allen 3-4) since students acquire somewhere from 40,000 to 80,000 words by the time they graduate from high school (Graves 3). Studies consistently assert that vocabulary instruction increases decoding, fluency, and ultimately reading comprehension (Berne and Blachowicz). Nevertheless, vocabulary study itself consumes significant amounts of classroom time (Graves 5), and vocabulary activities bore students "to tears" (Otten 76). Perhaps for both reasons, this is why instruction has been neglected (Manzo et al. 812). Consequently, an alarming trend has emerged. Even though more and more students declare an interest in attending college and, thus, need to communicate at a college-level, their vocabulary range and depth has plummeted 50% since the 1940s. Students today know about 30% of words on standardized reading tests; statistically, this is like "random guessing" (Manzo et al. 811).

As a former Kansas English teacher, I often share Otten's frustrations, thinking: "[t]here's got to be a better way" (76) to motivate my students. Instead of taking the time to enrich their diction through careful study, students hastily "cram" mere minutes prior to the weekly vocabulary test. Fortunately, there are more effective instructional methods available. Chiefly, we can appropriate our students' out-of-school literacies (Sheridan-Thomas 121). These include a variety of literacy skills such as writing on social media applications; listening and discussing music; and reading graphic novels, web sites, and popular young adult books. Both quantitative, as well as qualitative scholarly studies, affirm that when students draw upon their personal literacies, they are much more engaged learners since they bring skills and knowledge to the English language arts classroom (Wilhelm 467; Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, & Vacca 305).

The key verb in the previous paragraph is "draw." For students, art is a significant and powerful out-of-school literacy. Nathan observes that employing artistic activities inspires students and instills confidence in them because they feel ownership over the material. Artwork creates an "emotional connection" which provides a "transfer to their academic learning" (para. 15). Art, in sum, can play an important role in English language arts classrooms.

Over the years, I have found that integrating students' artistic gifts into classroom instruction can rectify problems experienced during vocabulary instruction. An especially helpful strategy is the drawing assignment, "vocabutoons," or simply "toons." It is based on the belief that skilled readers visualize information as they decode the text (Onofrey and Leikam 682). In this

essay, I will demonstrate the "tooning" process using representative artwork (with one notable exception) created by my English Education majors. These students were enrolled in a young adult literature course at a university in the Midwest and allowed me to use their toons. I will also discuss implementation issues encountered in my secondary classes. To preserve their anonymity, secondary students have been given pseudonyms. Ultimately, "tooning" has proved an effective strategy in my classroom because it allows students to visually construct knowledge and employ their talents; tooning helps them draw their way to success.

Visualizing Vocabulary: What Studies Say

Several studies demonstrate a strong connection between nonlinguistical representations of information and word acquisition. Sheridan-Thomas points out that this practice dates back "from hieroglyphs scribed on pyramid walls to words printed on paper, to computer-based images and text" (123). Marzano popularized the strategy of creating nonlinguistic representations in the classroom. He contends that this process is "crucial" because the students are much more successful when they follow the strategy (34). The reason for increased achievement, according to Wilhelm, is that this process activates and creates schema, or mental structures that help us mentally organize new information with old. This strategy also gives students a "sense of agency, ownership, and authority" (470).

Carter et al.'s study of vocabulary acquisition and retention of 121 high school students in eight Latin I classes underscores the importance of schema-building. Group One memorized 21 words "chunked" in seven randomly assigned columns and then took an immediate and then a delayed posttest. Group Two received the same 21 words; however, vocabulary was chunked into seven columns based on their definitional similarity. Group Three was given the chunked list and a five-minute "imagery treatment" prior to the posttest. Control Group X was given no special intervention, just the list of 21 words (226). Chunking vocabulary as conducted in Group One and Two yielded much higher test scores on their immediate and delayed posttests than the control group. More importantaly, the combination of chunking and imagery in Group Three yielded significantly higher scores than all other participants on both posttests (227).

Wilhelm contends that while "the use of mental imagery has powerful positive effects for readers," teachers and materials infrequently employ imagery as a strategy for "experiencing the text" (470). Having established strong scholarly support for non-linguistic representations and vocabulary development, the next section models the tooning process.

Vocabutoons in the Classroom

Marzano asserts that a key to long-term concept retention is student interactivity (84); this is the driving element of tooning. A vocabutoon (see fig. 1), is a graphical-textual representation of a vocabulary term and it addresses a number of Common Core State Standards. For example, as a vocabulary exercise, tooning meets the following standards: 9-10.RL.4 (determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text) and 9-10.L.4 (determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple meaning words and phrases).

Each week, I generate 10 vocabulary words based upon course readings and literary concepts used during that period. To give them a sense of power over the assignment, students choose the word for their toons. On a blank sheet of paper, they write the concept and provide a short definition. With markers, crayons, or colored pencils, students create a drawing which symbolizes, depicts, or highlights an aspect of the term. Finally, they use the word in a complete sentence. Once finished, students present their toons to the class.
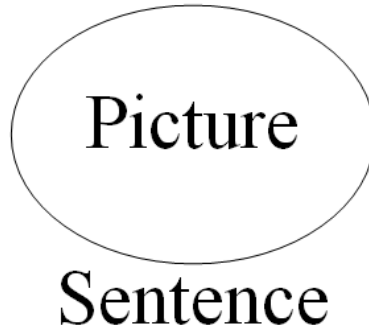
Vocab Word and Definition

Picture

Sentence

Fig. 1. The basic components of a "Toon."

Student exhibitions mark an important component of tooning as it provides an opportunity to pronounce and hear vocabulary, integrate their conceptualizations with peer drawings, and gain immediate feedback from teacher and peers about the accuracy and quality of their work.

A former eleventh-grade student, Jack (a pseudonym), exemplified the kind of success one may achieve when tooning. Jack was one of my many struggling learners in a "Class within a Class" (CWC) high school English course. These courses blend special education with regular education students. Jack, whose life goal was to become a tattoo artist, constantly doodled in class. He struggled as a reader because of learning disabilities, but he amazed students with his wonderful artwork. By melding reading instruction with his artistic gifts, he took more pride in his work and (perhaps for the first time) felt successful in an English class. Furthermore, he gained a following amongst his peers as they eagerly awaited his next vocabutoon.

I created toons to be a low-stakes formative assessment that prepared students for summative assessments such as weekly vocabulary tests and state reading assessments. The assignment is worth 20 points: 10 points for defining the term and using it correctly in a sentence; 10 points for presenting it to class. The only way for students to fail the activity is if they chose to not do it. If they have any errors such as incorrectly using the words, students are allowed to revise the toon.

As a formative assessment tooning can provide helpful data regarding student learning. Researchers have identified three components of effective formative assessments: informing practice, affecting instructional decisions, and giving students instructional support for improvement (Clark 341). Voni's drawing exemplifies how toons showcase student learning. Her drawing, "Climax" (fig. 2), demonstrates an understanding of the assigned literary concept and renders a visual and text summary of a scene from *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton.
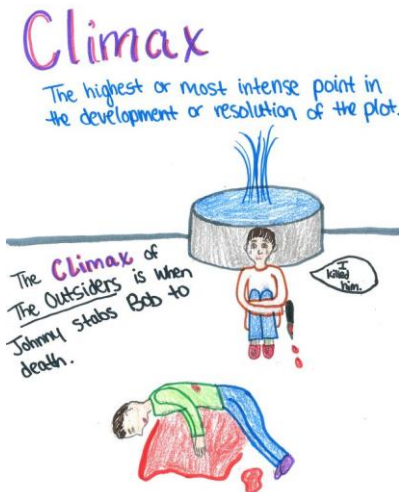
Fig. 2. Climax

Since Voni is literally illustrating her knowledge, any problems understanding the material would be immediately evident. Therefore, I could quickly give her assistance while she drew her toons.

Tooning also helps me support the entire class. If many of them had incorrectly defined "climax," it would indicate that I would need to do a whole class lesson. For instance, the first time I taught Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," the words "catacombs" and "niche" confused students because they had insufficient background knowledge with the terms. Shanahan et al. find that background knowledge is key to helping students grasp "the explicit and inferential qualities of a text" (61). Instead of orally explaining the concepts to build background knowledge, I showed pictures of Italian catacombs and noted the indentations in the walls used. This helped students create mental pictures and strengthen their schema so they could better comprehend key the story.

Numerous studies demonstrate that the more students activate and build background knowledge, organize, restate, visualize, and clarify concepts, the more successful they are at comprehending difficult texts (Swanson et al. 4). Voni applied a literary concept to a significant scene from *The Outsiders*, paying special attention to character development, mood, setting, and plot. Tooning, thus, extends beyond vocabulary instruction and addresses reading comprehension standards such as 9-10.RL.3 (analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

It should be noted that tooning can be intimidating to some students. One of the single greatest obstacles of this assignment is that some students believe that they cannot draw; hence, they are reluctant to try and even more reluctant to share. Consequently, when evaluating their toons, I emphasize the vocabulary aspects of the assignment—defining the term correctly and using it properly in a sentence—which all students can meet regardless of their artistic skill level. As demonstrated in Keagen's "Paradox" (fig. 3), students may draw simple images or even stick figures as long as they make the attempt to tell a story or communicate concept knowledge.
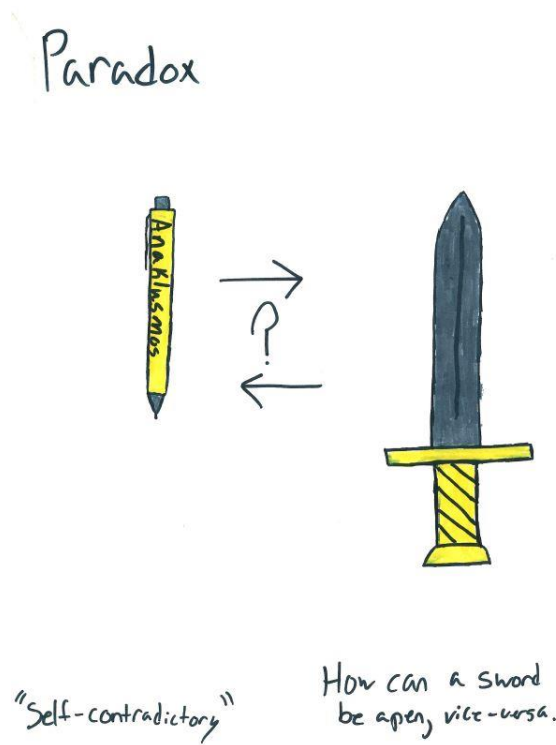
Fig. 3. Paradox

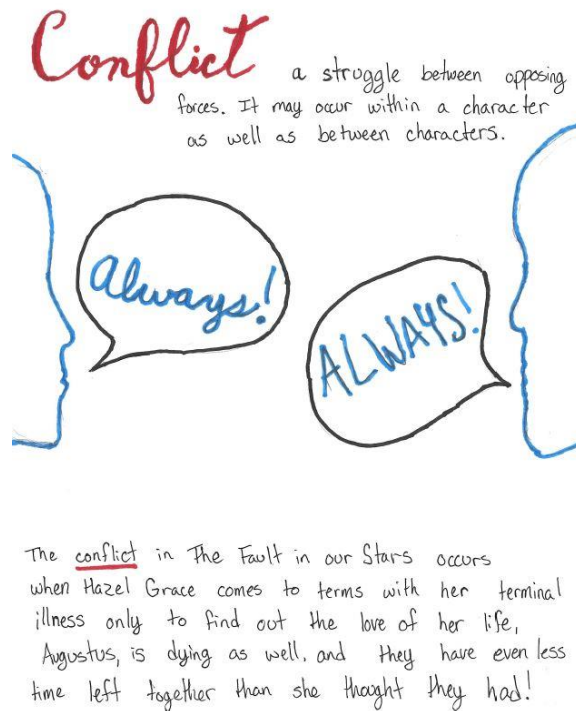Kali's toon (fig. 4) demonstrates how simple shapes may strikingly tell a story.

Fig. 4. Conflict

The use of color and cursive in the design of "conflict" attracts our attention, but did not necessarily take a "Michelangelo-level" artistic ability. Kali's drawing also affords an opportunity to integrate grammar instruction: she forgot to underline the book title. After praising her work, teaches can simply note the grammar rule and move on to the next vocabutoon. Through tooning, thus, we can address language standards such as 9-10.L.1 (demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking).

Ultimately, the key to encouraging reluctant artists is coaching and praising their efforts so they feel more comfortable about their efforts. The late Bob Ross serves as a perfect role model for motivating my artists. He always believed in having fun in our artwork. He argued that it was important to "show people that anybody can paint a picture that they're proud of." Ross added that, "It may never hang in the Smithsonian, but it will certainly be something that they'll hang in their home and be proud of. And that's what it's all about" (qtd. in Shrieves para. 6). When tooning, hence, I emphasize enjoying the activity regardless of skill.

To model and support students' artistic efforts, I share my own (not so great) artwork. For instance, "Foreshadow" (fig. 5), is based upon my reading of *Squashed* by Joan Bauer.

Fig. 5. Foreshadow

The drawing of Cyril Pool's pumpkin, "Big Daddy," contains a tiny clue as to what will happen to this antagonist's gourd. I created this toon on my Galaxy Note S3 using Sketchbook for Galaxy software to show preservice students how they might toon with school-issued notebooks, tablets, or

even phones. By showing our own work, we encourage our students to have fun while applying their knowledge in a deeper setting.

Modifications for Students with Special Needs

There are times when I had to adapt student presentations to meet the needs of some of my shy students. Carrie (a pseudonym), a very nice, but highly-introverted student in special education, represented an extreme example of students who would resort to being absent to avoid giving oral presentations. To assist her with this phobia, I stood beside her and presented the toon. Fortunately, her peers were sensitive to this problem. Casually, the class and I would chat with her about her artwork. They overlooked her phobia and offered her genuine praise. While we never got Carrie to fully overcome her fear, she incrementally gained confidence. By the end of the school year, we could get her to say one or two things about her toons.

Actively coaching students to perform at higher levels and publicly praising their efforts are critical components of vocabutooning. Consequently, I maintain a policy of displaying exemplary efforts of all my students on a designated bulletin board. One of my sophomores, Julie (pseudonym), comically demonstrated the value of displaying at least one toon from each student. During the first quarter of the year, my bulletin board was full. I told her class that toons were now being posted on the classroom door so people could view student artwork as they walked by the classroom. Evidently, she was not paying close attention. She angrily asked why I had not posted any of her toons yet. I asked her to check the new postings on the door. When realized that her most recent toon was there, she gave me a sheepish grin that melted into distinct pride. Later in the day, she brought her friends by to see her toon.

Classroom Management Issues

Generally, my students have been very well-behaved when tooning. I can only point to two instances of inappropriate behavior. The first case involved a student who constantly incorporated the Confederate battle flag in his artwork. This incident led to a class discussion about symbols and how they can be hurtful to classmates; he grumblingly stopped drawing flags. The other incident involved a student who drew a series of toons depicting another student getting "splattered" on the football field. In this case, I did not have to say much as the whole class asked him why he kept doing it. Evidently, he bore no malice to the student; he just thought it was funny. This incident led to a discussion about decorum.

Variations on the Toon: Other Applications for the Assignment

For the most part, students draw toons based upon our weekly vocabulary words; tooning, however, might be applied in other areas. One popular application is the book cover revision activity. At the end of a reading, we examine the themes, conflicts, and important characters of the text. We then look at the novel's book cover to determine how well the artwork represented these aspects. The revision activity has students combine some of the elements we have discussed and create a new cover. Finally, students talk about their artistic choices and contrast their pictures with the original cover.

There are a range of possibilities for using artwork as a literacy tool. For during-reading activities, students create a drawing that predicts how the story might end. Additionally, they could select and draw a character or characters using text-based details. Seglem and Witte touted a similar tooning variation, creating character tattoos based upon students' reading of *Romeo and Juliet.* Finally, another option is to have students create "dialogic toons" where students team up and create drawings that connect to one another. For example, two students picked the terms "protagonist"

and "antogonist." One student drew a picture of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz,* the other countered with the antagonist and drew a picture of the Wicked Witch of the West.

Concluding Thoughts

Not all toons are created equal: some students, such as Voni, draw spectacular renderings which amazed the class; other students such as Keagen and Kali draw simple images to brilliantly convey their ideas. Some of us (like me) just draw pumpkins. As we do in writing, it is important to help students see the value of the process in addition to the product. Instead of cramming before the vocabulary test, they are thinking, speaking, and seeing new vocabulary words. When students seem disconsolate about their artistic capabilities, I remind them of Bob Ross' exhortation: create "happy little trees." Then, students can draw their way to success.

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