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The Directed Spelling Thinking Activity (DSTA): Providing an effective balance in word study instruction

The Directed Spelling Thinking Activity (DSTA) is a technique that applies basic concepts from a language-based literacy learning approach to word study.

The current enthusiasm for whole language philosophy and language/literature-based approaches has had important, positive effects on literacy instruction in many classrooms and school districts: Children learn to read from meaningful, enjoyable texts that follow more predictable and familiar language patterns; they are encouraged to write early and often, with a focus on the ideas they wish to express and the writing process; teachers recognize the value of integrating reading, writing, and content area subjects into thematic units of instruction; more holistic and naturalistic approaches to evaluation (e.g., portfolio assessment) are gaining wider acceptance.

Underlying these changes is a belief that children best learn to read and write naturally, in meaningful contexts, rather than from isolated, skill-and-drill activities. But as teachers have moved in this direction many have begun to realize that, while such conditions provide a *necessary* environment for literacy learning, such an environment may not be *sufficient* in itself. Most children also need more direct and explicit information about the forms and patterns of written words in order to acquire the full range of knowledge and strategies necessary for fluent reading and writing (Zutell, 1994).

As teachers move away from the use of traditional spelling books, materials, and activities, they must determine how to present information about words and their spellings in meaningful, appropriate, and effective ways. The Directed Spelling Thinking Activity (DSTA) is a technique that applies basic concepts from a language-based literacy learning approach to word study.

Overview

The name Directed Spelling Thinking Activity (DSTA) is directly borrowed from

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Russell Stauffer's Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA) (Stauffer, 1969). Stauffer coined this term to distinguish his instructional activity from the traditional approach to organizing basal reading lessons at that time, called the Directed Reading Activity (DRA). In the traditional DRA format the teacher dominates the lesson, setting purposes for students' reading, asking specific detailed questions to check comprehension, and controlling the lesson in ways that allow for little student input.

In contrast, the DRTA procedure encourages honest discussion, critical thinking, concept formation, and use of a problem-solving strategy (problem statement; hypothesis; data collection; acceptance, revision, or rejection of the initial hypothesis). The procedure involves students in predicting outcomes, reading to collect evidence about their predictions, revising predictions as more information becomes available through reading, and using evidence in the text and their own reasoning to defend their conclusions. The teacher guides and facilitates students' thinking, but the ultimate responsibility for making decisions and reaching conclusions lies with the group and its members. (Over the years, some of the innovative aspects of the DRTA have been incorporated into many basal reader presentations of the DRA.)

The DSTA was so named because it shares with the DRTA the spirit that students should be full participants in the lesson, actively engaged in discovering and thinking through the problem at hand. Although the content in the two activities is naturally quite different, the structure of the DSTA is similar to that of the DRTA in several significant ways.

The teacher initiates student predictions by giving the group a brief spelling test on words that represent patterns related to a given contrast. Before the correct spelling of each word is presented, members share their attempts and discuss the strategies and reasoning they used in generating their spellings. As they listen to others' reasoning and compare their attempts to the correct forms, students gather evidence about patterns, which they often use to spontaneously revise their predictions of upcoming words.

Word sorting and follow-up activities actively engage students in refining their concepts and extending applications to their own personal examples. Thus the heart of both the DRTA and the DSTA is a focus on active, thoughtful problem solving.

In the following sections a more extensive discussion of a conceptual framework supporting the DSTA is presented, followed by a detailed description of the specific steps involved in implementing the procedure.

Conceptual framework

The DSTA activity is modeled on Stauffer's format, but its concepts are grounded in recent work on the developmental and conceptual nature of learning to spell. A developmental approach to spelling was inspired by the seminal studies of Read (1971), then advanced and extended by Henderson and his colleagues (see, for example, Henderson, 1990; Henderson & Beers, 1980; *Reading Psychology*, Vol. 10, Nos. 2 & 3, 1989; Templeton & Bear, 1994). Several important principles have emerged from that work and related scholarship:

- English orthography is not as arbitrary or irregular as is often assumed. It is a complex system involving relationships among sound, visual patterns, meaning elements, and word origins (e.g., Cummings, 1988).
- Learning to spell is more than a matter of rote memorization; it includes a strong conceptual component. Students not only learn individual words, but acquire progressively more complex ideas about "how words work."
- This development follows a broadly defined set of stages marked by advances in correct spellings and more sophisticated misspellings. (Henderson's 1990 labels for these stages are Preliterate, Letter-Name, Within-Word Pattern, Syllable Juncture, and Derivational Constancy. See Morris, 1981, and Gentry & Gillet, 1993, for slight variations.)
- Word familiarity and concept formation are mutually supportive in that relationships or patterns are first recognized in familiar words, then extended to less familiar ones, which become more memorable as they are fitted into an overall scheme. Expanded sight and spelling vocabularies provide more examples for making sense out of more complex patterns.

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The findings from developmental spelling research support a conceptual approach to learning about words that focuses on the discovery of categories and relationships by building on previously acquired word knowledge. DSTA lessons provide opportunities to compare and contrast words in ways that clarify such relationships. Further, information about stages of development provides a rough guideline for the selection of lesson content in terms of order of difficulty and conceptual appropriateness.

The findings from developmental spelling research support a conceptual approach to learning about words that focuses on the discovery of categories and relationships by building on previously acquired word knowledge.

Principles from Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about learning have also influenced the development of the DSTA. In contrast to more individualistic views, Vygotsky focused on the power of social engagement to transform children's thinking, the collaborative nature of learning, and the role of language in shaping mental functioning. He developed the construct of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as the region where mental abilities are transferred from the shared environment to individual control. Movement through the ZPD proceeds from performance assisted by teachers, peers, or other "experts" to self-assistance to internalized, automatic control (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991).

The DSTA design reflects the application of these principles: The teacher aims for patterns and concepts within the students' ZPD (see the discussion of "using but confusing" that follows); students and teachers work collaboratively to discover patterns of relationships, both in a small group and in pairs; and word sorting activities, including teacher and student verbalizations of strategies and decisions, provide the scaffolding for internalizing concepts and developing individual, automatic control.

Planning

Planning a DSTA involves deciding upon three things: (a) which students will participate, (b) which contrast and patterns will be discussed and examined, and (c) which words will serve as examples.

Because the primary aim of the activity is to generate interaction, discussion, and concept formation, the DSTA functions best with a small group of students (6–10) at roughly the same level of spelling ability. The teacher applies her understanding of the spelling system and developmental patterns of student errors to samples of students' spellings (e.g., from developmentally based measures like the Qualitative Inventory of Word Knowledge, (Schlagal, 1989), or from classroom writing activities) in order to determine which students need and are ready for help with a particular contrast and related patterns.

In choosing a contrast, the teacher looks for patterns for which students have some knowledge but lack full control or application, patterns that students are "using but confusing" (Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994, p. 159). From these s/he chooses one from the earlier stages of word knowledge first. For example, a teacher may notice that some students are aware of long vowel markers (e.g., silent *e*), but are not always sure of when to use them in spelling single-syllable words. At the same time students are not yet doubling consonants when adding endings to appropriate single-syllable short vowel words (*hop -> hopping*), a more sophisticated concept than the long vowel markers. The teacher would choose to work with the long vowel marker pattern first. Depending on students' familiarity with the concept, s/he might also choose to begin with a DSTA that features a simple, single contrast (e.g., long *a* represented by the silent *e* pattern vs. short *a*) to reduce the complexity of the task. Later, possibly as part of a sequence of DSTAs, other patterns (e.g., vowel digraphs, the other long vowels) might be introduced or incorporated.

Next the teacher thinks through the relevant patterns and selects a set of words (16–20)

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to use in the activity. Some of the words will be direct examples of a pattern, others will provide contrast to see how patterns complement each other, and a few will be selected as exceptions. The words chosen should also be well within the students' speaking and reading vocabularies. (Teachers often find published word lists organized by patterns useful. See, for example, Appendix B in Henderson, 1990.)

As an illustration, suppose students are having difficulty with long vowel markers, and the teacher has chosen to work on the related contrast, limiting the activity to a single long vowel sound (long *a*) to reduce the complexity of the task. Next, s/he chooses some long *a* words with silent *e* markers (vowel digraphs as in *rain* might be presented in a later DSTA), some short *a* words, and a few that don't fit either sound-to-spelling pattern. The following words might be used:

brave, came, plane, bake, trade, page, tape, space

bag, plan, last, black, tap, mad, land, fast

have, they, eight, far

The teacher makes a list for testing and also prepares individual index cards or strips of paper. Half the words from each category are jotted down in a randomly ordered list to be used as a pretest to begin the activity.

The activity

Prediction and discussion. The DSTA itself begins with a brief spelling test on the list words. While a general introduction to the task may be given, the teacher does not point out that the words are related to a specific pattern or contrast. Such cuing might well alter students' current sense of how the words should be spelled, and mislead the teacher's sense of what they really understand.

If the teacher has chosen the examples well, there will be a fairly even mix of correct and incorrect spellings. These attempts serve as student predictions about word form and pattern and as the basis for discussion and examination.

The teacher initiates discussion by asking individual students how they spelled specific words, what they were thinking about as they generated those spellings, and why they thought the words would be spelled in that way. Students listen to one another's explanations and decide which spelling is likely to be correct. Only then does the teacher present the correct spelling to the group, complimenting students on the reasonableness (and sometimes ingenuity) of their guesses and pointing out parts of the word that caused particular difficulty. (In my experience, the presentation of the correct spelling before discussion inhibits children's willingness to volunteer and explain their own attempts.)

After two or three of the words are discussed in this way, students begin to make connections across words and to use these connections to revise or confirm their guesses about other words. The teacher may stimulate comparison by asking directly whether a word is more like one or the other of two examples that have already been examined. The discussion continues in this way with all the words.

Assisted word sorting. Next, usually the following day, the teacher assists students through a group word sorting activity to further clarify the nature of the contrast and the differences in patterns. (A pocket chart is a very helpful aid in doing these sorts.) First, one word is chosen from each category to serve as a key for each column or pile. The cards for the remaining words are then mixed together. The teacher begins the sort by selecting the first card from the deck, pronouncing the word, and showing it to the group.

Students listen to each other's explanations and decide which spelling is likely to be correct.

At this point the teacher can either solicit student ideas about the category in which to place the word and encourage students to explain their reasoning or place the word and verbalize her/his thinking as to why it belongs there. Teacher choices throughout this activity depend upon assessment of how much scaffolding is needed to assist students in discovering and understanding the relationships captured by the sort. As a general guideline, the

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aim is to maximize student input and control, so s/he continues through the deck, turning decisions over to the group or to individual students as appropriate.

A second deck of word cards, made up of the examples not used in the test, is presented as well (see Figure 1). Students are then encouraged to add their own examples to the sort, as the group (with teacher prompting only as necessary) provides feedback about the appropriateness of their choices.

In ending the activity, the teacher may decide to elicit from the group an explicit statement of the orthographic principle they have been examining. On succeeding days students engage in more individualized activities.

Figure 1
Word sort for simple long *a* vs. short *a* contrast

BAKE	*BLACK*	?
plane	bag	they
brave	last	have
came	plan	far
space	mad	eight
page	fast	
tape	land	
trade	tap	

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These reinforce and extend the understandings presented in the first two parts of the activity.

Word hunting. Scanning through familiar books, class lists, magazines, newspapers, and other regularly used sources of print is a way to build individual and group word banks. Students can also proofread or check their recent writings for examples of the patterns, noting their own control with words in context and adding found words to individual collections. Word hunting does more than simply provide additional words for the lesson. Hunting through their own writing and reading gives children a sense of connection between their everyday experiences with words and more focused contexts in which they are examined and studied. Furthermore, by observing the ease and accuracy with which an individual child locates and selects appropriate words, the teacher can get a clearer sense of how well that child understands the patterns being studied. Adjustments in instruction and activities can be made accordingly.

Personalized spelling lists can then be constructed from the two sources of teacher-selected and student-located words. The teacher might also choose one or two additional words that are not related to the patterns being studied but that deserve attention because of their high frequency, common misspellings, or special relevance to current classroom topics.

Cooperative and individual word sorting. In order to extend and solidify their understandings of the patterns and contrasts under study, students work in pairs and then individually, sorting a combination of teacher-supplied words and their own examples.

In paired word sorting each student's set of words is collected into a deck placed face down on a desk or table. The key words from the group sort are put in a row to represent the various patterns. One student begins by picking the top word from his/her partner's deck and reading the word out loud. The partner indicates the key word under which the card should be placed. The student holding the card puts it there, and they both check to see if that choice makes sense. They continue in this manner, taking turns, until the words from both decks are sorted. Then they review their sort, making changes as they think appropriate. A final check is made either by the teacher or against a master list. On subsequent days students can sort with different partners to get a greater range of words and perspectives, or they might work together over several days before moving on to sorting their own words independently.

Word sorting is a particularly powerful form of learning as students working together discuss the reasons for their decisions and support or question each other's choices. Depending on their control of the contrasting patterns, some students do this easily, while others must initially work carefully and diligently. The teacher provides support by checking student attempts, demonstrating the sort as necessary, and providing intermediate feedback for managing corrections. ("Two words in the third column seem to be different from the others. Find them and consider where else they might go.") Only when students can sort quickly, as well as accurately, have they developed perceptual and conceptual fluency with the contrast and relevant patterns.

Practice activities. Once individual students and the teacher have agreed upon specific sets of words for the lesson cycle, each student may choose from a variety of activities to practice and measure his/her control over those words. The best practice activities are those that not only give students many opportunities to write the words, but also help them to locate and develop strategies for remembering the difficult parts. These might include Have-A-Go sheets, the Look-Say-Cover, See-Write-Check procedure, games in which success or advancement depends upon correct spelling of personal words, and intermediate practice tests.

One successful variation of practice is structured peer testing. In this activity two students give each other their own individual sets of words. Key words head columns on a sheet of paper. Rather than write the words in random order, the student first matches the spelling word with the key word that shares the same pattern. Then the key word provides a cue to the appropriate spelling. The result is a spelling sheet that looks much like the earlier word sort.

Measuring and recording student success. The ultimate aim of any spelling instruction is for students to develop fluent control over the words in their own writing. Weekly spelling tests have been heavily criticized for the anxi-

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Figure 2
Steps in a Directed Spelling Thinking Activity

1. Pretest for prediction and discussion
2. Assisted word sorting
3. Word hunting
4. Cooperative and individual word sorting
5. Practice activities
6. Measuring and recording student success

ety they cause and the lack of transfer from such tests to writing. Still, an individualized spelling review at the end of the lesson cycle can help students determine what they have learned. Given the individualized character of student spelling lists, reviews are often done in a peer-checking format.

Students then plot their own growth by keeping an ongoing list of new words learned. They might also assemble individual word study pattern books with key words (e.g., *bake*) or brief pattern descriptions (e.g., long *a* words) at the top of each page or column. Individual pages can be placed in a binder or folder, so that students can rearrange the pages to reflect the current contrast under consideration. For instance, the short *i* pattern might initially be contrasted with short *e* words, but later with long *i* words. A word might also be listed under two or three different patterns, depending on its features. For example, *trip* could be found under both beginning *tr* blends and short *i*. Lists can thus be reviewed and expanded at various times during the school year.

Figure 3
Spelling by meaning contrast: *-ion* vs. *-ian*

NAT*ION*	DEFINIT*ION*	MAGIC*IAN*
session	composition	musician
fashion	illustration	physician
lotion	competition	politician
mission	explanation	electrician

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A contrast for older students

The example used above, based on a single long vs. short vowel contrast, is simple, appropriate for students in an early phase of the Within-Word-Pattern stage of spelling development. For more advanced students, more complex or less familiar contrasts are appropriate. For example, DSTA lessons work well when students are using but confusing past tense marker *-ed* with related homophones (e.g., *guessed* vs. *guest*), and patterns related to consonant doubling (e.g., *hoping* vs. *hopping*).

For an example of a lesson dealing with the spelling-meaning connection, consider the sets of words in Figure 3. For all words, the final syllable is pronounced /shun/. But in the first two sets, the spelling is *-ion*, while in the third it is *-ian*. This difference is predictable by meaning: words spelled with *-ion* are typically noun forms built from Latin roots or related verbs. In the second set this connection to a verb form is more apparent: *define—definition.*) In the third set, *-ian* combines with words ending in *-ic* or *-ics* to form a specific kind of noun—one that labels a person engaged in a related activity or profession: *music—musician.* This lesson thus combines making sense of a spelling contrast with vocabulary and word formation concepts.

An example from student writing

DSTA procedures and techniques can be modified to meet the needs of individuals and small groups; they work best when directly connected to patterns in a student's own reading and writing. In the following example a tutor applied the using-but-confusing principle to the journal writing of Steve, a third-grade student struggling with spelling.

An early selection from Steve's journal (see Figure 4) indicates confusion with long vowel marking and the use of silent *e* across

Figure 4
An early sample from Steve's journal writing

4-8-94

yesterday I went to the **mol** with my dad. he got me two **pars** of shorts and two **pars** of *jeans*. Then we went to a **Woch stor**. and behind it was a book **stor**. I got two **Goesbumps** books. then we went **two** a sports *store* and **bote** *some* **rollerblad laesis**.

Figure 5
A tabulation of Steve's relevant spellings

Correct spellings	Misspellings	
sleep	pars	(pairs)
play	stor	(store)
stay	goesbumps	(Goosebumps)
jeans	rollerblad	(rollerblade)
store	laesis	(laces)
some	ester	(Easter)
came	nams	(names)
liked	shar	(share)
base	gran	(drain)
glove	becaus	(because)
improve		
stone		
feel		
name		
read		
hide		
code		

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Figure 6
One of Steve's word sorts for vowel markers

came	sleep	glove
liked	jeans	some
hide	pair	store
laces	drain	because
code	fool	

Figure 7
Two later samples from Steve's journal

(Undated, late May)

What I *Like* to Do with My Grandparents

golf
swim
bike ride
surf at the *beach*

6-1-94

one **evning** *three* campers by the *name* of Chris Rick and rob went camping in Jellystone park. they went to bed *early* so they could get up *early.* Ro(d) played a **litel** trick on Chris. He **turnd** the clock forward so that Chris **wold** get up at 12:00 a.m. and he did

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several high-frequency words. The tutor tabulated a more complete list of Steve's attempts with such words, both correct and incorrect, across several journal entries (see Figure 5). Prediction, word hunting, and word sorting activities were used over several weeks (see Figure 6). Later samples from his journal (see Figure 7) provided some evidence that Steve had gained greater control over long vowel/silent *e*. Moreover, his tutor reported greater attention to visual detail and success with word forms across reading and writing activities.

Conclusion

An effective word study program provides students with many formal and informal opportunities to examine words carefully, explore their orthographic forms in relation to their meanings and uses, and develop reliable and efficient strategies for independent word learning. The regular use of Directed Spelling Thinking Activities should be an important component of such a program.

Although DSTA research is not yet extensive, initial feedback has been encouraging. Teachers using the technique have been very positive about the value of modeling, manipulation, and peer discussion for enhancing student learning (Compton, 1994; Wheaton, 1995). Students report that their spelling ability has improved, they have become more attentive to the details of print in their writing, and that they have more strategies for generating spellings of unknown words (Compton, 1994). More systematic classroom studies of student interactions and long-range effectiveness are currently underway.

The DSTA procedure has many advantages over more traditional, drill-and-skill-based spelling lesson formats: It is based on findings from current research on word knowledge and spelling development; it treats learning about words as a conceptual process rather than as rote memorization; and students are actively engaged in problem solving, constructing knowledge as they discover complex relationships within and between words, and taking greater responsibility for their own learning. For these reasons the DSTA concept and format are compatible with child-centered, language-and-literature-oriented approaches to instruction. The DSTA can be used as one kind of minilesson in a whole language classroom. At the same time, the ideas and procedures involved in the DSTA can be incorporated into formal, sequenced plans for spelling instruction as presented in basal spelling series.

As with any instructional technique or procedural description, there is always the danger that the DSTA will be applied in a formulaic, rigid, step-by-step way. No worthwhile instructional innovation is meant to be "teacher proof," nor should it be our aim to make it so. As the extensive description in this article indicates, the successful use of the DSTA depends in large part upon the understanding, insight, and judgment of teachers knowledgeable about the nature of the spelling system and sensitive to the needs and abilities of their students. The format of the Directed Spelling Thinking Activity encourages teachers and students to work together in a spirit of genuine discovery in unraveling the complex relationships that govern English spelling.

Author notes

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