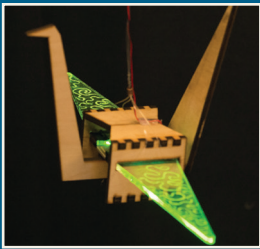


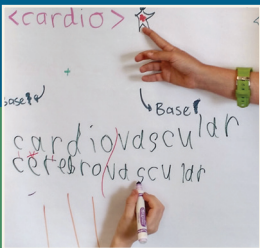
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DESIGN THINKING & ENGINEERING
STRUCTURED WORD INQUIRY

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COMING HOME: STRUCTURED WORD INQUIRY AT NUEVA

EMILY KOLATCH, HEAD OF LOWER SCHOOL

“I believe that work we’ve begun doing with Structured Word Inquiry is profound and revolutionary. I believe that it is relevant to educators who work in every discipline and with all age groups. I believe that it represents most accurately what we know about teaching and learning and enacts the core values held in our community.”

— EMILY KOLATCH, NUEVA HEAD OF LOWER SCHOOL

Learning by doing and beginning intellectual explorations by asking, “How might we...?” are hallmarks of a Nueva education. Traditional literacy instruction, with its emphasis on repetitive practice of phonics rules and rote memorization of spelling lists, had long felt at odds with our constructivist pedagogical approach. Each year, we reviewed reading and spelling programs in search of a more satisfying solution to our question, “How might we teach literacy skills in a more meaningful, engaging, and authentic way?” Year after year, our searches left us feeling inadequately equipped to provide our students with the kind of rich curriculum for which they hunger. Discovering Structured Word Inquiry felt like coming home.

Fundamentally, Structured Word Inquiry revealed that we held a deeply seated misunderstanding about the English language. Most educators, and in fact most English speakers, hold this misunderstanding, as so many of us were taught that English is a phonetic language, that the job of English spelling is to represent sound, and that English is highly irregular with lots of confusing exceptions to the rules. In fact, English spelling is a carefully ordered system for representing meaning that can be investigated and understood through a process of inquiry. Structured Word Inquiry is a scholarly approach to understanding English orthography. The process and its tools are authentic. They are the process of scientific inquiry and the tools of linguistics.

Structured Word Inquiry gives us a means for understanding how our language actually works. Previously, we presented children with a false system for understanding the structure of the English language (i.e., the primary reliance on sound-symbol correspondence). In doing so, English spelling



was rendered opaque, unreliable, and not very interesting. Structured Word Inquiry has allowed us to unlock a sophisticated understanding of our language that tells the rich and engaging history of human experience and thought. The structure of our language is both precise and complex, and exploring it allows us to make deeply satisfying discoveries.

As we develop our own understanding of English orthography, we are better able to help children develop theirs. Embarking on this journey of learning together at Nueva has highlighted our community’s commitment to lifelong learning. Teachers and parents have joined with students in taking risks in learning by sharing their thinking. Just as in sharing strategies for solving math problems, explaining hypotheses about the component parts of words asks us to practice exposing wrong answers and mistakes as opportunities to ask more questions and to learn more deeply. Rather than being a source of shame, reflecting on and persisting in working through errors, dead ends, and miscalculations is essential to learning. This process is the ultimate reward.