

For What It's Worth: The Value of Working with Word Matrices

by Gina Cooke, Director, Children's Dyslexia Center of Peoria

For the past three years, the Children's Dyslexia Center of Peoria has been incorporating a Real Spelling understanding into our multisensory structured language intervention work with children who are dyslexic. The students and their tutors alike have responded with enthusiasm and amazement at their new-found clarity with how words work. They have a better understanding of how graphemes spell phonemes, how words are built, and how words are related to each other.

Central to this understanding is working with word sums and matrices. Studying simple matrices, like one built around the base <do>, helps them understand and be able to spell common words like *does*, *doing*, and *do*, and considering the data in word lists helps them to build their own matrices. Students at the Center have learned about assimilated prefixes, connector vowels, and stress by working with word sums and matrices.

As the end of the academic year approached, I got a request from one of our wonderful students, Xian. He loved working with word matrices and word sums, and spelling words out in this way helped him not only to improve his skills, but also to engage deeply and willingly with written language. Xian asked me to help him pull together the information he would need to build a word matrix as a final gift for his tutor, Tonja. It's not uncommon for kids to give their tutors gifts at the end of the year, and some of these gifts are *really nice*. I myself have received gift certificates, candles, a cashmere scarf, a bracelet, and lots of other thoughtful things. What's always the most meaningful gift, however, is a note from the child himself. Xian was ready to take the handwritten note up a notch.



I suggested to Xian that he come up with a few words that he thought described his experience at the Center, working with Tonja. Among the words he brought me were *thank*, *learn*, and *value*; we decided to go with <value>. Our next step was to consider the structure of <value> — in which the <ue> is, technically speaking, two French suffixes. We generated a word bank, and considered not only <evaluate> and <valuable>, but also <valid>, <valor>, and <valiant>! Xian took the list home and set about to work.

During the last week of tutoring, Xian brought his finished product, which

you see in these photos. We were so proud of him, and he was proud of himself. Xian wrote in his farewell card, "When I first started coming [to the Center], I couldn't even read the T.V. menu. Now I am a word expert." *Now I am a word expert.* Let that sink in. This is a child who could barely read or write two years ago, and now has redefined himself in his world. He has explained the schwa and bound bases to his teachers and his peers; he has put fellow dyslexics at ease by volunteering his own story of triumph. No matter what academic challenges he may face in the future, Xian now has something that no one can ever take away from him: *Now I am a word expert.*

Xian's matrix gift to Tonja has a lot to teach us. This is a kid who's leaving his mark. He has one parting salvo to fire, one token to offer to capture what was meaningful for him about his learning experience. And this is what he offers. *Now I am a word expert.* And that's worth everything.

