

by Lee Ann Brown

Lee Ann Brown was born in Tokyo and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina. A graduate of Brown University, she is assistant professor of English at St. John's University and the founder and editor of Tender Buttons Press. Brown's publications include *Polyverse* and *The Voluptuary Lion Poems of Spring*. The following piece on "Personal Dictionaries" was excerpted from an article featured in the May-June 1999 issue of *Teachers & Writers* magazine.

## Personal Dictionaries:

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I titled a 10-week Teachers & Writers residency at an alternative high school in Manhattan "Personal Dictionaries," as we focused on the births, deaths, and politics of words. The students, my co-teacher Tony Consiglio, and I explored how words come into a language and wrote our own reference books of words not yet in any dictionary. I designed the course as a creative exploration of different aspects of linguistics and language use: we read from a variety of published dictionaries—*Webster's*, the *Oxford English*, etc.—as well as various slang and regional dictionaries covering African American slang, Panamanian English, and Southern English (written for Yankees). We continued with *Rhode Island Dictionary*, *The Joys of Yiddish*, and *The Totally Unofficial Rap Dictionary*, and then created our own dictionaries of favorite words or expressions, collected slang, school or neighborhood jargon, family or childhood words, taboo words, secret words, euphemisms, and coinages.

We also wrote poems using the dictionary as inspiration and sourcebook. As a poet, I've always enjoyed reading associationally through the dictionary. One day when looking at an unabridged dictionary I thought, "Everything I will ever write is in this book, only in a different order." Then I realized I was wrong because of all the made-up words, private vocabularies, and new and future words that weren't there. So I started writing my own dictionary, *Notes Towards My Own Peculiar Vocabulary*, and began thinking of ways to help other people write their own personal dictionaries. I like to tell the story of how my grandmother Obaa taught me how to sing "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" in "Big Words."

Stintilight, Stintilight O globular Vivific  
Fain may I fathom thy nature's Specific  
Loftily poised on either Capicious  
Greatly resembles a gem carbonicious  
Stintilight, Stintilight O globular Vivific  
Fain may I fathom thy nature's Specific

When she first sang it to me I remember asking, “Is that in English?” Upon learning that it was, I realized that parts of my own language were full of meaning and music. I didn’t know it at the time, but this helped start me on a lifelong love of language and “playing in the dictionary.”

I am very aware of what a revelation it is to many students when they learn that somebody actually writes the dictionary. The “Personal Dictionaries” residency explores how people with different experiences use different words. We asked questions such as: How does a word pass from the “underground” into the culture at large? Who decides what words are included and why? What new forms of dictionary could we invent to better collect our words? We also looked at forms usually not thought of as written—indices, for example—as new resources for creative writing. (This helped to eliminate any lingering fears of the reference section that the students may have had.) The fact that personal dictionaries include words that aren’t in the *Unabridged Oxford English Dictionary* helps students more fully realize that language is not handed down from on high, but bubbles up from below.

My students and I got to the act of actually writing our own dictionaries. We made dictionaries that collected family and childhood words, exploring the most micro of cultures: the family.

To get them started, we read some entries from several dictionaries of slang, as well as the hilarious *Family Words: The Dictionary for People Who Don’t Know a Frone from a Brinkle* by Paul Dickson. (I’ve found that when you acquire a new dictionary you want to introduce into the classroom, it’s a good idea to spend some time with it and select words that will intrigue the reader. Make your own set of flashcards or other system for having them at your fingertips.) I also introduced my students to some little-known words I had gathered from friends and from other dictionary classes I had taught. Some of these are known to only a select few: a small circle of friends, a family, a neighborhood. As an example of a “family word,” I told them a friend’s parents’ term for a sharp curve in the road: a “C.O.D. Curve.” The term describes how when you drive around the curve the person in the passenger seat is thrown against the driver’s side. C.O.D. is an abbreviation for “Come over, dear.”

As for slang, we wrote down all the slang words we could think of, and then wrote journal entries or short narratives using as many of the slang words as we could. We worked as word anthropologists, gathering words from our neighborhoods, from movies, or from overheard conversation. Some students then wrote glossaries to their slang journals. It was interesting to me which words they picked to gloss—leaving some words in the text out, I assume, because they thought everyone knew them already.

When I first introduced the concept of gathering slang or colloquial expressions, I encountered some resistance from the students. They argued that there was nothing to collect. So I asked them if they thought I spoke in a different way than they did (I am from North Carolina). They immediately said yes. Next I told them I was interested in references I’d heard them use, since I hadn’t known all of them. It took some drawing out of examples, but soon students began to see in concrete ways that we all are fluent in several jargons, lingos, and specialized languages, and that we “code switch” depending on what company we’re in. I wanted them to recognize that we often switch registers, and that this switching can be a bonus to us as thinkers, writers, and speakers. Knowing that the dominant “official language” culture is only kept alive and vibrant by the words entering from newly invented terms and situations that arise

from new cultural contexts, we can understand more about how culture forms. If we all talked alike, the world would be a boring place. We also discussed taboo words and euphemisms, and how certain words around “touchy subjects” such as love, sex, money, bodily excretions, or death are particularly rich areas for slang.

Next, we played a modified version of the popular game called “Dictionary,” trying to fool each other with obscure or new slang. Someone would pick a term and write it on the board. Then we all wrote down what we thought it meant, and went around the room and read our definitions. One student picked the term “be out,” which I guessed meant “to live openly as a gay person.” Almost everyone else knew that it meant “to leave.”

**Then I gave the students the following assignments to do:**

1. Childhood / Family Words. Include at least ten words that you used as a child, and/or your family uses, either because someone you know invented them, or because it’s your family’s jargon or it’s somehow related to the particular language history of your parents or grandparents.

Speculate and/or elaborate on the word origin. For example, if someone used the phonemic pair or made-up word “fa fa” for “french fries” as a child, could this have been because of the physical difficulty young children might have with the diphthong, “fr”?

2. Slang. “Slang is language that takes off its coat, spits on its hands, and goes to work,” said Carl Sandberg. Expand your vocabulary by direct observation, using sociolinguistic research. While on the bus, subway, ferry, or in a public place where you can observe people speaking around you, take notes on a particular conversation that catches your ear. Actually transcribe words that seem unusual to you or that you don’t use yourself, or ones that you do use but that are still considered slang. Are there are words or phrases that “do the job” better than a more normative type of expression?

**I had them use the following form to flesh out their dictionary entries:**

Word or Phrase (part of speech). Definition(s). Origin (speculate, if necessary). Example or Usage (use in a sentence).

Here is one example:

Brooknam: Brook / nam (noun). Place name for Brooklyn, emphasizing how some sections are like the battle zones of Vietnam. Brooklyn + Vietnam. Example: “My cousin wants to get out of Brooknam.”

Here are some other terms we came up with:

- Golden boy: stumbling fool. “My father is a golden boy because he is in love with the wrong woman.”

- Had my back: backed me up, was looking out for me. "When I was in a big fight I thought that my friend had my back."
- Krunk: phat, cool. "I think that the new cargo pants for girls are krunk."
- Mad: a lot. "The boy had mad candy in his pocket."
- Merk: leave, or get killed. "I told this girl to merk because she was getting on my nerves."
- Monet: looks good from afar but bad up close. "I thought this guy looked like a Monet from afar but when they introduced me to him up close I thought ACNE CITY." (Originally from an artist.)
- Off the hook: crazy, unusual. "I can admit my report was off the hook and that's why my teacher liked it so much."
- Ratchet: gun. "My friend went and got his ratchet after the fight."
- Scrap (verb): to fight. "I had to scrap three girls in one day and messed them up."
- The bomb: a trend that blew up, got hot, bigger, popular. "When the blue and grey Jordans first came out they were the bomb."
- What's the dillyo: "What's the deal you all?" (A short cut)