

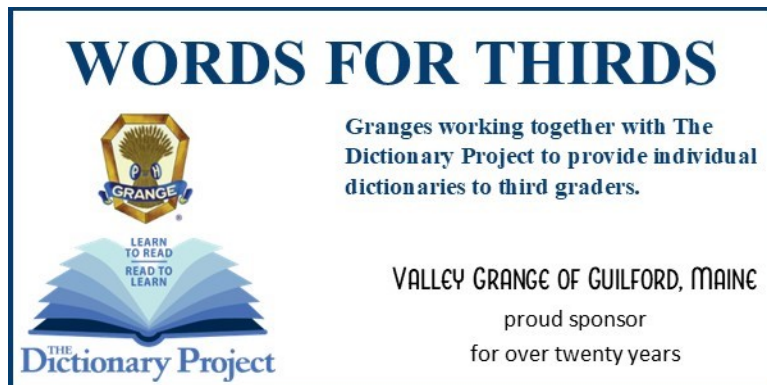
Valley Grange Talks With Kids

By Walter Boomsma, Valley Grange Program Director

One thing we can probably say with some confidence—in the Grange we probably aren't having enough conversation with kids! They are our future members and we should be talking with them! As I've worked with kids through Valley Grange's programs like Words for Thirds, Bookworming, and Newspapers in Education, I've learned that most kids are hungry for adult interest. I've also discovered that we often have communication gaps simply because we do speak and think differently. If "men are from Mars" and "women are from Venus," there may be a "children are from..." version.

Simplifying this just means we need to be aware that kids are constantly learning and developing their communication skills and vocabulary. You may need to adjust depending on the age of the child(ren) who are listening to you.

The Words for Thirds dictionary program is an area where many Granges can talk with kids. At Valley Grange, we've been doing this for over twenty years, and I've had the distinct honor of being the presenter. As a result, we've developed an approach and program that I'll outline briefly and point out that it certainly can be tailored to your situation. I have the basics in a PowerPoint presentation and would be happy to share them with anyone interested.



We actually have two different programs: one we do when the kids visit the Grange Hall and another when we visit the school. Frankly, field trips to the hall have diminished due to COVID and budget restraints. Since field trips to the Grange Hall will not be the norm for most, the outline on the last page is based on a visit to a classroom.

You will need the four staves from your Grange and, of course, the dictionaries! You may also want to use a marker and whiteboard or flip chart—these are usually available in the classroom.

The teacher will likely introduce you after giving the kids a short "lecture" on "good listening skills" and audience behaviors.

I tend to write my name on the board because it's a one fun for the kids to learn. The important thing about starting is to get the kids engaged as quickly as possible because they will tune you out if you don't. I do this by saying, "Good Morning, Third Graders," and getting them to respond, "Good Morning, Mr. Boomsma."

Expect to be interrupted, and the kids will want to go off on tangents and tell you stories that may have nothing to do with your presentation. Don't fear this—the teacher will likely help you manage it.

Using simple terms and avoiding "Grange Speak" you can explain what the Grange is and why you are there—so they can learn a little bit about the Grange. I emphasize the importance of agriculture and farming. That leads naturally to the farmers' tools we have brought. How you do this will depend on

your comfort level with the kids. I tend to dialog with them and demonstrate how each one would have been used. The emphasis is that farming is about taking care of things: the land, the animals, the crops. Each of these tools is helpful. “While the ones we brought today aren’t real, we have them at our meetings to remind us of farming and how we should act.”

Our approach includes an RFD mailbox with some letters in it, but a simpler version would perhaps involve explaining that farmers, like Grangers, are good stewards—a word that most third graders won’t recognize or be able to define. This leads to a discussion of what we do when we don’t know what a word means. “Look it up!” Write the word “STEWARD” (letter it; do not use cursive) on the board or flipchart so the kids can look it up.

Expect bedlam when you pass out dictionaries. When most of the students have found the word (if you have Grangers with you, they should wander around the room helping the kids by showing guidewords, etc.), try to regain their attention, and bring them back together. Eventually, you can pick one child to read the definition. He or she may need help with some of the words in the definition and you’ll want to be prepared to explain the definition. It should go without saying that you’ll want to avoid embarrassing a child. I sometimes ask the teacher to select the child who will read the definition.



The dictionary Valley Grange uses defines stewardship as the “wise management of resources.” This requires explaining what management and a resource is... a good third-grade definition/explanation might be “resources are things we can use... like tools... the tools (stuffs) we looked at today are resources... and your dictionary is going to be a tool you can use for a long time. Management is about using those tools.” You can also talk about how a good steward takes good care of tools and they should take good care of their dictionaries.

You can “wrap up” by letting the kids ask questions about the Grange or their dictionaries. Some of the questions I hear about the Grange are, “How many of you are there? Do you have animals? Can I join? Do you live at the Grange? What do you do there?” Sometimes the kids will brag that they’ve been to the hall for a dinner. Relax and enjoy the conversation. If you get stumped, just admit it. The kids will accept “I don’t know.” You might add, however, “I’m going to look that up later!”

One caution: You’ll want to avoid asking the kids any questions that might elicit personal information or create an embarrassing situation. It’s easy to do this without intending. I remember once we had sixth-graders attend to talk about how they still have and use their dictionaries. I asked one of them, “Do you have any brothers or sisters?” (My follow-up question was going to be whether or not they got to use his dictionary.) I knew immediately I’d made an error. The sixth-grader put his hand on his chin and said, “I’m going to have to think about how to answer that.” He recovered gracefully explaining a somewhat complicated blended family situation, but I should have avoided the topic.

Don’t overstay your welcome. I usually close by reminding the kids to raise their hands and ask, “Who can tell me one thing you learned today?” If you call on somebody who doesn’t have an answer, let it go... give him or her a few seconds, then just call on somebody else. Be patient and smile a lot.

End by thanking the kids for being such a good audience and for letting you come to visit with them. The teacher will take over and likely instruct the kids to thank you. You'll leave a little tired but with the assurance that you've done a very good thing. The presentation I'm describing can be completed in less than 45 minutes if you keep things moving.

Because I love the Dictionary Project and working with kids, I'm always willing to assist any Grange who wants to get a program started. There's a lot to like about this program. In addition to helping the kids, teachers, and schools, we are also helping ourselves. Valley Grange has found community support for fundraisers has increased dramatically because we hear people say, "Oh you are the ones who give kids dictionaries. What a great program!" Many of our Grange members look forward to "Dictionary Day" every year—for some, it's one program they won't miss!

There are so many ways to make this fun and meaningful. When the kids visit the Grange Hall, we usually arrange for Civil War Re-enactors to come and talk with the kids. We often teach a game called "the dictionary race." For several years now we've had a few older kids (fifth/sixth grade) come and talk about how much they have used their dictionaries.

Somewhere between just dropping off a box of dictionaries at the school and having the kids make a field trip to the Grange Hall, there is a program that will work for you and your schools and teachers. The one minimum requirement is that you get started! Please let me know if you're interested and would like some help.

Outline of a Basic Presentation

Introductions (quickly introduce all Grangers and Guests present... the safe method is to use proper last names such as “Mr. Boomsma...)

Expectations (review your expectations of the students... raise your hand before speaking, etc.)

Explain the Grange (Avoid “Grange Speak” and offer a simple explanation of the Grange as a “farmers’ club... how old it is, started because farmers wanted to get together to learn from each other, have a better life, etc.)

Introduce the staffs as “not real” but examples of farmers' tools. Go over each individually, explaining why we have them at our meetings.

- **Spud** is used to pluck weeds out of the garden... we use it to remind us to get rid of things that are not helpful. I use kid examples... if we see the spud it reminds us to pick up trash off the floor.
- **Pruning hook** is used to cut dead branches off of trees... we use it to remind us to cut out any inappropriate things like bullying or being mean.
- **Shepherd’s Crook** is used to lead sheep, like a leash... we use it to remind us that we all can be leaders at different times, helping each other and keeping each other safe.
- **Owl** keeps an eye on things and scares away pests. We use it to remind us to be observant and watchful.

Farmers and Grangers must be good stewards (letter the word on the board). That’s probably a word that most of you don’t know yet... what do we do? We could look it up if we had a dictionary! Explain that the Grange has a dictionary for each student—it will be theirs to keep forever.

Distribute Dictionaries, everyone look up “steward”... expect things to get loud and lots of excitement. Give the kids some time to find the word... walk around, offer help, encourage them to help each other.

Call them back together... one student reads the definition (be prepared to help and explain—there are some tips in the preceding article.)

Ask them what they learned... this is certainly optional and should be done very quickly with no comments or corrections. It will likely get repetitious quickly, signaling it’s time to be finished.

Thank the kids for letting you come and remind them it’s important to be good stewards and take good care of their dictionaries.

The most important “rule” is to have fun with the kids and make sure they enjoy your visit.

When I Was Their Age...

You won't do too many dictionary presentations before you realize an important part of the program involves dealing with expectations. Those expectations come in many forms from many people. I remember my first time presenting dictionaries. I expected the kids to be bored and uninterested. Boy, did I get an education! They were so excited and appreciative that I got hooked on the program and on working with kids.

Over the years, as the Valley Grange Project developed, we learned a lot about expectations. Expanding into new schools provided us with opportunities to anticipate and, therefore, manage the process. Some of our experience may be helpful to others who are starting or continuing their programs.

Very early on, a school administrator advised me that "teachers like predictability." As I've become more involved with the schools I've come to appreciate that—it's more about the kids than it is the teachers. The kids need structure, routines, and discipline. Without that structure, the balance between "student" and "kid" can shift very quickly. It's important to remember that a dictionary presentation is a departure from their routines.

The teachers do, however, have their expectations as well. They expect their students to be "a good audience." Many of our teachers will work with their classes before presentations on "good audience behaviors." Teachers understand how quickly their disciplined students will turn into "wild kids" when they get excited. A dictionary presentation (even if it's at the school) creates a different environment in which the kids will not act the same as they do in class. The kids are going to get "wound up."

Speaking of visitors, they have expectations, too. Take a few of your group's members with you, and somebody will say, "I wasn't allowed to act like that when I was their age."

I usually reply light-heartedly, "Gee, that's too bad. You mean you weren't allowed to get excited?"

I've also had the opposite problem. I remember one presentation at an unnamed school where the kids were like little statues and seemed almost uninterested. Later in the hall, I commented to a television reporter that there was an unusual lack of enthusiasm that I couldn't seem to break through. Since he'd been in the room setting up before me, he explained that the teachers had "really read the kids the riot act and issued serious threats of serious punishments if they weren't good."

In this case, they weren't allowed to get excited, and I learned that it's important to manage the expectations of all participants: teachers, guests, kids, and myself. There is a delicate balance in all this.

I once had a parent rush up to me on the street and apologize for her child's "rude behavior" during a Dictionary Day presentation. I honestly didn't know what she meant and admitted so. (I know both the child and the parent personally.) She explained that the teacher had reported the child's behavior and required her to write a note of apology to her mother.

My instincts were, of course, to defend the child. I know her as a really good kid. But in our position working with schools, teachers, and children we need to maintain the balance and, in this case, not undermine the teacher and her credibility with the parent and the child. (I also do not know what happened on the bus or back at school.) I accepted the mom's apology and asked her to assure her daughter that I was not upset with her. We will, I'm sure, all live happily ever after.

We tend to overuse the word “communication,” but that’s what we need to rely on when dealing with expectations. Ultimately, we all want the same things: kids with dictionaries and an enthusiasm for using them.

Additional Resources

A number of resources like a presentation outline, samples of a “take home” letter for parents, boilerplate for a media advisory, etc. are available on the Maine State Grange Website. The MSG Communications Handbook deals with the questions of photograph during school events such as Dictionary Days.

For information about the program and purchasing dictionaries:

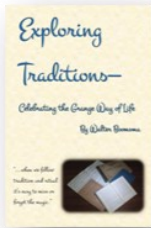
The Dictionary Project
P. O. Box 1845
Charleston, SC 29402
(843) 388-8375
<http://dictionaryproject.org>

Contact Walter Boomsma:

Walter@Boomsmaonline.com
207 343-1842
<http://wboomsma.com>

Valley Grange Website:

<http://valleygrange.com>



Walter’s Book, *Exploring Traditions—Celebrating the Grange Way of Life* is available from Amazon, the National Grange Supply Store, and Abbot Village Press.