Visual Thesaurus

1. What is being learned? What are the underlying assumptions (explicit and implicit) about the nature of knowledge?

Visual Thesaurus software was available without cost, until early this year. It is an excellent way to make thesaurus use and vocabulary a more interactive event. Students are able to find synonyms and antonyms (and a variety of other types of information about the words that are entered). They are learning about commonly used choices and also able to see those that are used less often (signified by size as related to the original word). Parts of speech and other grammatical information can also be reviewed, since it is denoted by the software in a visual or text format. This software is assuming that students understand what a thesaurus is for and also that the student will be actively pursuing the content delivered. All of this is considering knowledge to be implicit since there is little instruction explaining how to enter words or what the colors of the results indicate. The user gains knowledge by finding results and using those results, but the software does offer explicit knowledge acquisition to the user. Each of the results includes sample uses for the words supplied so that the user can pursue examples before inserting the words into their documents or projects.

2. How does learning take place? What are the underlying assumptions (explicit or implicit) about the nature of learning?

The learning takes place in the instruction given before the tool is used. The teacher must use grammar and reference book lessons to prepare the students so that they have the information base necessary to take full advantage of the software. The lessons develop the knowledge base the students need to utilize the most powerful features of the software, because as implicit as the knowledge is assumed to be (by the program), the explicit
nature of the extra features means that the teacher must address the concepts before giving the students the software (if the power of the software is going to become accessible to the students). Therefore the nature of learning is both implicit and explicit. The software can be used to cater to the implicit nature of discovery, while the extensive grammatical information and real examples offer opportunity to gain knowledge from an explicit format.

3. What role does technology play? What advantages or disadvantages does the technology hold for this role? What unique contribution does the technology in facilitating learning?

Technology is a way to bring together many different concepts and tools, in a way that allows them to be useful. The student doesn't need access to a grammar book, a dictionary, a thesaurus, and master full of examples; they simply need an Internet connection on a computer. The disadvantage is simply the $10 subscription fee that was recently added to the software. Learning is facilitated by the fact that all these pieces come together and can be used simultaneously to practice, learn, and produce. If I don’t understand the concept of parts of speech, the software offers a visual, interactive, medium to show what words fit into each (of the parts of speech) categories.

4. How does it fit within existing school curriculum? (e.g., is it intended to supplement or supplant existing curriculum? Is it intended to enhance the learning of something already central to the curriculum or some new set of understandings or competencies?)

This technology is certainly a support feature to the existing curriculum. It is a way to organize and demonstrate concepts, not create curriculum. The tool is not intended to replace the grammar instruction or the paper reference material/skills, but it is intended to increase accessibility.

5. How does the technology fit or interact with the social context of learning? (e.g., Are computers used by individuals or groups? Does the
technology/activity support collaboration or individual work? What sorts of interaction does the technology facilitate or hinder?)

Virtual Thesaurus can be implemented as a very social tool or as an independent device. The teacher can decide how to focus the use and whether socialization skills will be part of the goal for the lesson. The design of the software offers a visually interesting and interactive input and output format. This means that it engages a variety of students and can be used for many types of lessons.

6. How are important differences among learners taken into account?

The software does a great job of offering information that is accessible from a variety of points. The input of the search word is the only static part of the program. When the information is returned from the search it can be seen in the center of the window but it is also listed on the right side in a panel. These features (and other, similar multiple outputs) allow various types of learners to access the information.

7. What do teachers and learners need to know? What demands are placed on teachers and other "users"? What knowledge is needed? What knowledge supports does the innovation provide? (e.g., skills in using particular kinds of technology)

There are two demands that must be met by users. First, the user must have a word to use for the search. Second, the user must understand why we use a thesaurus and the difference between synonyms and antonyms. Deeper understanding of grammar and reference materials can extend the depth (usefulness) of information being returned by the search, but it is unnecessary for basic use.