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ABSTRACT

A process-oriented freshman composition instructor who stresses invention, drafting, and revision can simultaneously integrate a form of grammatical instruction. Various methods and strategies, both from experience and research on grammar from the classical to the contemporary era, suggest such a creative integration. First, the teaching of grammatical structures should proceed with a minimum of terminology in order to minimize student confusion. Second, dictation is a good way to integrate production with proofreading. The instructor dictates a passage laden with troublesome forms, either having students write exactly what they hear and then correct it or having students consciously think and proofread as they write. Third, numerous creatively designed and grammatically oriented follow-ups to writing assignments also work well to bring production and editing together. A fourth strategy includes imitation, in which students match sentence types with their own original sentences. This encourages students to generate structure as well as an appropriate context. Finally, allowing students to discover their own grammatical problems and solutions is a valuable integration of grammar and writing. (KEH)

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A Marriage of Heaven and Hell:
A Successful Integration of Grammar and Writing

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22



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A Marriage of Heaven and Hell:
A Successful Integration of Grammar and Writing

Today I alarm the battle cry once again to stimulate what is probably one of the most worn and dog-eared controversies in freshman teaching: the use and effects of grammar instruction in a writing course. The conservative proponents of grammar instruction have been resoundingly outnumbered by their process-oriented opponents. Yet, today's composition teacher, faced with demands for normative evaluation and proof of literacy, must rethink this issue and avoid reductionist denial of any importance of grammar to what we know and define as "literate" writing. Speaking from experience, states like Georgia mandate a certain minimum of literacy by a statewide Regents examination: a test of reading and an sixty minute essay. Because of this very real requirement, English departments feel pressure to conduct normative evaluations for some knowledge of the basic errors that would make their otherwise content-ready essays fail. Thus we must become aware of successful and creative strategies for integrating grammar into the processes of writing and editing. There is a middle ground. First, the controversy should be situated in history. Then, I would like to suggest various methods, both from personal experience and research, for such a creative integration.

First, a word of caution is in order. I cannot pin down at each juncture the numerous and plurisignificant meanings of "grammar." Like the word "nature" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "grammar" means various

CSA12133

things according to its context. It may refer to a formal course, rote formal exercises, teaching the various theories of grammar (transformational, traditional, structural), integrated grammar and writing instruction, or the freewheeling delineation of error without any grammatical terminology (as in Elbow). When I use "grammar," I refer to ANY teacher-initiated guidance in the learning and mastery of grammatical and stylistic elements.

Risking absurdity, I would like to take a brief look at the evolution of the position of grammar in rhetoric from the classical to the contemporary era. Even though English is structurally quite different from Latin and Greek, English instruction is, nevertheless, modeled on classical traditions. As early as 100 B. C. Dionysius Thrax had compiled a grammar for written, not spoken, Greek. Certainly by the time of Quintilian (A.D. 35-56), grammar instruction had become crucial, with a child receiving his first lesson as soon as he learned to read and write. Nor did Quintilian education lack writing practice; students practiced writing (largely imitative) weekly. All of the grammatical concerns came before any concerns of rhetoric proper, such as audience, purpose, or persuasive stance. Thus is there a historical precedent for the belief that grammar must be taught and mastered before "writing" can be effective.

Another aspect of the recent grammar controversy has its basis firmly rooted in history: the idea that the English teacher's duty is to legislate correctness. We remember Mina Shaughnessy's delineation of this stage in the teaching

process known as "GUARDING THE TOWER" (63). In this step, one is "concentrating on protecting the academy, including himself, from the outsiders." (63). This psychological stage of the new teacher corresponds also to a historical reactionary epoch. During the Middle Ages, when the Church fostered education, language change was seen as a sin, a further degeneration from Hebrew and thus from man's ideal prelapsarian state. To prevent man's total loss of connection to this happy time, language study became error-oriented, and students were expected to avoid "deviant" constructions.

Both this reliance on classical models and the proclivity for static correctness were reemphasized in the eighteenth century when scientific rationalism was in vogue. Scholars sought to make language logical, even mathematical. For instance, writing two negatives in a sentence began to be "incorrect," given the logic of mathematics. And since "to be" was viewed as an equals sign, the nominative, not the objective, case became the appropriate form following "to be." Formal traditional grammar reflects this historical basis: it is rules-oriented and prescriptive.

But the process-centered writing approach (which largely disdains grammatical instruction) is not the work of the last thirty years; it too has a clear historical evolution. Even before Darwin's Origin of Species (1859) suggested progress to be beneficial, not harmful, arguments for acceptance of changes in language became more commonplace. Leading up to and during the age of revolution in the eighteenth

century, Priestley, Spence, John Horne Tooke and others argued for acceptance of vernacular language rather than a codified regimen based on classical models. Of course, these moves corresponded to a decided political initiative to empower the underclass, but they paved the way for discussion of actual needs of students and began a slow chipping away at the armor of prescriptive theorists.

Leonard Bloomfield and the rise of structural grammar in the 1930's allowed students to see syntactical relationships without recourse to grammatical rules. A major classroom resource for the structural grammarian might be Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," in which students must rely on morphological and syntactic evidence as there are few words with clear meanings. Finally, the generative - transformational apologists, believing that grammatical competence is intuitive, that we have within our brains a finite set of phrase - structure patterns and a set of transformations which allow us to generate an infinite number of sentences, help us to see language as a series of options. Recent scholars like John Mellon and Frank O'Hare see sentence combining as a major tool with which students can tap their intuitive store of resources. Once students understand the mental system under which we all work, they can write with a more conscious awareness of their linguistic options. Even the presence of a word like "options" signifies a major revolution in theories of grammar and rhetoric.

The research of Mellon and O'Hare brings us up to the 1960's, where the pendulum continued to swing toward the easing

of standards of grammatical correctness, the elimination of what Barris Miller in 1953 called the "police force of usage" (Connors 61). The seminal study which is the origin of contemporary rhetorical practice with regard to grammar is Braddock and Lloyd-Jones' NCTE Research in Written Composition conducted over a two-year period, which compared students' knowledge of grammar rules on short-answer tests with actual frequency of errors in writing samples. The study dramatically concluded that "the study of English grammatical terminology had a negligible or even a relatively harmful effect" (37) upon writing. Braddock asserts that this truth must be stated in "strong and unqualified terms" (37).

Furthermore, in the 1974 NCTE "Position Statement", we see grammar recommended as a "useful field of study" not as a "substitute for composition and not with the pretense that it is taught only to improve writing" (220); the implication is that writing and grammar should remain separate though close to equal in importance. From these studies then do the "writing begets writing" theorists get their ammunition.

The controversy continues to rage; in almost absurd verbal contests, opposing scholars state, restate, modify, and most especially pervert these 1963 findings. Jaime Hylton, in a 1985 edition of *College English*, takes Robert DeBeaugrand to task for his insistence that some grammatical instruction is useful and may be quite successful. Hylton implies that the critic is backward for making a defense of grammar with "fifty years of research to the contrary" (340).

How can we take a stance on this issue in the light of such heated debate? Hylton quotes Russell Tabert as pointing out that "a wide and uncritical public acceptance of the need for grammar instruction should not make the question 'why' a moot one" (340). And yet, today's teachers may face more pushes toward normative evaluations. If the "Learning in America" PBS series taught us anything, it is perhaps that disciplined standards may be enforced by states to try to recover learning in problem high schools. Thus we have states like Georgia which demand a minimum of literacy on a statewide Regents test. There are problems with this system, and teachers curse at it every quarter as they make time in syllabi for preparation for an exam. Yet teachers must learn to work within the system. Furthermore, I admit unashamedly that I believe in grammar's having some role in a writing course. (Let me say that again - in a writing course, not a separate grammar course). Next, I believe that to teach "grammar" one does not have to resort to formal rules or rote, vacuous exercises. I consider myself a largely process-centered instructor who stresses invention, drafting, and revision while simultaneously integrating a form of grammatical instruction. I do not concede the two are mutually exclusive (as the 1974 NCTE position seems to imply)-- We have only to look back carefully at the actual Braddock, Lloyd-Jones report to see that reports of this study's conclusions have been greatly exaggerated. One might miss for instance the fact that the Harris study was only concerned with students who had a formal grammar course separate from their writing course. With

this knowledge, I can join the contemporary rhetoricians like Patrick Hartwell who decree that formal grammatical instruction has no usefulness in freshmen writing courses. But this says nothing about grammatical elements being taught of or about the writing process. It is this tactic that a few scholars are writing about and that I find most useful.

In a 1986 article, Eleanor Kutz sets out a theoretical plan that forges a middle ground between the poles of "everything goes" and pedagogical academic discourse. The middle ground she suggests is a kind of middle language called "interlanguage", a term derived from ESL studies to describe the position between one's present language system and the target language to be learned. While error analysis would look at writing compared to the target language skill, interlanguage is interested in relationships between present and past knowledge - progress and development.

Kutz theorizes that all language learners will learn by communication need when a real context is presented. Of course, establishing those real contexts is a matter of pedagogy. And here is where I believe "no content" writing workshops fail--in not trying to establish any context in which to work, a teacher falls prey to the "anything goes" syndrome. Kutz suggests several strategies in order to allow for learning elementals of language in context: writing across the curriculum and using a reader that requires nightly written responses to essays. I would

caution against putting too much hope in reading alone. Kutz argues, mistakenly for a 10 week course I believe, that "To the extent that the patterns of conventional usage are logical and meaning based, they will be acquired as other language . . . unconsciously and intuitively from exposure to examples" (390). But the use of a reader and written responses may be helpful.

The best method for initiating context for grammar is the integration of grammatical instruction in the writing course. Sarah D'Eloia's "The Uses--and Limits--of Grammar" insists that a teacher has absolute authority about how much or in what manner grammar is to be integrated. The teacher alone knows the intricacies of her individual classes and what will work most effectively given a particular time and series of actions. A few of these strategies for integration include teaching with a minimum of terminology, dictation, grammatical follow-ups to writing assignments, and imitation.

The teaching of grammatical structures should proceed with a minimum of terminology. There is no need to confuse a student by discussing "gerund phrases" if all you need is for him to discover the subject (gerund phrase or not). This is where I join in the arguments against formal grammar instruction -- the kind where the teacher walks in with a frown and says "O.K. Open your handbook to Chapter 1, Chapter 2, now let's write an essay." However I make a distinction between "minimum terminology" and the kind of freewheeling approach to grammar of a Peter Elbow: "It doesn't matter whether it's a modifier or

conjunction acting up. Just grab yourself and insist that you mean business" (Elbow 300). I just urge that we use our own discretion; if we need to mention grammatical terms, fine, but we shouldn't feel compelled to do so when, an honest, "human" discussion about the problem may work much better. In the introduction to freshman writing course I teach, we have a department mandated and created usage test for students. I get students to learn patterns, to learn successful "real" strategies for determining "who - whom" constructions with minimum of discussion on the complexities of subjective, objective cases.

Another strategy to integrate grammar and writing is dictation. Although it sounds old-fashioned and reeks of classical rhetoric, dictation is a good way to integrate production with proofreading (this is most applicable to basic writing courses). The instructor dictates a passage laden with troublesome forms, either having the student write exactly what he hears and then correcting it or having the student consciously think and proofread as he writes each word down. In either event, the writer gets practice overcoming perceptual resistance to error in his own writing by concentrating on writing correctly in a rhetorical situation involving both speech, writing, and revision.

Grammatically oriented follow-ups to writing assignments also work well to bring production and proofreading closer together. The student is given a clear paper topic and is then told to actuate some type of grammatical exercise upon



his own essay as a part of his grade for that paper. This is also an element of revision we can work upon the in-class essay as a follow-up out of class process. One can assign exercises like these according to the needs of the class: having them underline subjects-verbs for remedial students, underlining modifiers, editing diction for more precision. My favorite and most successful follow-up assignment is sentence variety patterns. Instead of having my students do rote handbook exercises, I integrate this skill into a fairly structured essay assignment. After doing some in-class student-initiated verbal sentence construction, I pass out a hand-out with ten sentence variety patterns with examples (affectionately known to me and my class as S-V's). Students are told to incorporate eight S-V's into their finished essays and note in the margin which pattern they are using. 90% did this exercise very carefully, and it certainly made their essays of higher quality simply due to sentence structure. Nor were these patterns totally isolated events. I advised students to use these patterns again and again, without really believing that any of them would. Several students consciously worked these patterns into later papers; one student told me in conference that she could see a big difference in her writing and that she had heretofore been unable to break her "simple sentence" habit. Once they see in their own writing the difference that avoidance of a monotonous structure can make, they feel that progress in other areas is possible too.

A final strategy is imitation in which students match

11

sentence "types" with their own original sentences. This encourages students to generate structure as well as an appropriate context (content) and is thus much more effective than "canned" sentence exercises. In my class, I have used imitation of a sort to generate sentence length and variety within paragraphs. I have had students revise a paragraph in their rough drafts or from one of their graded in-class essays to follow a recent essay from our class rhetoric textbook. The imitation--at least--allowed them opportunity to write in a way that they weren't used to with conscious awareness of sentence construction. It made them think about modifiers - to be able to imitate an ing-word phrase in a certain place, they first had to understand the purpose of that word in the sentence, what it added to the meaning. This turns out to be much more helpful than learning/relearning from a textbook what a gerund phrase is.

Finally, I think allowing students to discover their own grammatical problems and solutions is a valuable integration of grammar and writing. Carroll Vierra has suggested a collaborative learning technique that insists students take responsibility for their own mistakes. Vierra suggests having a student list his three most prevalent errors; the teacher then assigns students with like problems to groups in which members alternate as leader. This member has the responsibility of assigning and checking written grammatical exercises for the group. Vierra notes that students afterwards rarely repeat these errors, thus proving the beneficiality of "peer instruction" (Vierra 95).

In summary, I believe that writing must retain some grammatical conventions which students can learn best by assimilating correct patterns into their own texts. Thus, while my position may appear to be no more than one more conventional seizing of the moderate position, there is a time when good sense must allow for a modified, student-oriented approach to grammar instruction.

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