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ABSTRACT

For many students, grammar represents a baffling set of capricious rules wielded by "sadistic" English teachers for the sole purpose of making their lives miserable. To combat this misconception and to dispel the mystery and empower students with the ability to use the conventions of standard written English, a series of student projects, called "Mechanics Mini-Lessons," can be effective. In this process, students collaborate in groups of 2 to 4 to investigate and present to their peers an aspect of grammar. They fashion a 1-2 page handout that translates the language of handbooks into their own vernacular to be distributed and presented. Following the final Mechanics Mini-Lesson presentation, a title contest is held, a cover page is fashioned, and the handouts are bound to publish the students' own handbook. Several positive results are engendered. The process compels students to find the meaning behind the concepts. Further, students become self-educators because they learn that grammar is not under the sole jurisdiction of English teachers: this same information is available from their own investigation. Finally, because they internalize and master language conventions, students gain confidence that the presentation of their information will not interfere with what it is that they have to say.
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How to Teach Grammar / Whether to Teach Grammar
The Pendulum Rests:
The Effects of Student Investigation and Collaboration
on Formal Grammar Instruction in the Composition Classroom

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Does formal grammar instruction belong in the composition classroom? Absolutely. Why? Because our language is a social practice: it is a system of meanings that are agreed upon and uniformly applied by those who use it. Just as we cannot study chemistry without the Periodic Table, we cannot confidently produce or analyze good writing without the rules that govern it or the terms we use to discuss it.

And grammatical investigation can do more than provide a common denominator; it can also provide a map through the linguistic labyrinth of our own texts and literary classics. It can be the rainbow we follow to discover elements of a unique voice and style. The study of grammar can be the tool that allows writers to discover the dazzling kaleidoscope of syntactic possibility of our language and our writing.

These reasons are rather esoteric. There are also more practical concerns. An increasing number of my first-year composition students do not correctly employ, or even know, the finer tenets of standard written English. Now, we spend a good deal of time and energy helping our students to discover who they are and what they have to say in their writing. We share strategies and facilitate practice in discovering and developing a point; in drafting; and in revising for clarity, audience, and intent. This is the primary purpose in our composition classrooms, and it should be. But we also have a responsibility for ensuring that the ideas, perspectives, and voices our students have developed are well received and taken

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seriously. We have a responsibility for ensuring that the way our students present information does not undermine the information they present. We must ensure that distractions like erratic tense shifts or sloppy pronoun agreement do not sabotage their applications for jobs or graduate schools, their funding proposals, their bids for contracts or for public office.

But for many of my students, grammar represents an baffling set of capricious rules wielded by sadistic English teachers for the sole purpose of making their lives a living hell. In order to combat this misconception and in order to dispel the mystery and empower students with the ability to incorporate skillfully and knowledgeably into their own writing the conventions of standard written English, I invite them to teach grammar. Kenneth Bruffee contends that we know something when we can explain it to someone else. I agree. So I have fashioned a process that results in a series of student projects--I call them "Mechanics Mini-Lessons"--to help my students get grammar.

Much of the practical information about the Mechanics Mini-Lessons appears on your handout. In a nutshell, students collaborate in groups of two to four to investigate and present to their peers an aspect of grammar. These groups fashion a one to two-page handout that translates the often clinical language of handbooks into their own vernacular, and they distribute their handouts and present their information in such a way so as not to put their colleagues to sleep. My students have not only employed collages, flow charts, and quizzes, they have also enlightened and delighted each other with vehicles such as game shows, a TV news broadcast, a puppet show, an enlarged children's storybook (with soundtrack), a radio talk show, a police interrogation, and a visit to Dr. Grammar. Following the final Mechanics Mini-Lesson presentation, we hold a title contest, fashion a cover page, and bind the handouts to "publish" our own handbook. I'll make these available following this session.

This process engenders several positive results. First, because it insists that student writers decode, translate, and then reformulate the conventions that govern the language, this process compels them to find the meaning behind the concepts, to discover, for instance, why dangling modifiers are a problem. Second, students become self-educators because they learn that grammar is not under the sole jurisdiction of fiendish English teachers: this same information is available from their own investigation. And, finally, because they internalize and master language conventions, students gain confidence that the presentation of their information will not interfere with what it is that they have to say.

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How to Teach Grammar / Whether to Teach Grammar
Mechanics Mini-Lessons: A Method for Promoting
Student-Powered Grammar Instruction in the First-Year Composition Classroom

The method outlined below invites composition students into an intimate investigation of the English language. Students collaborate to investigate and present to their peers some aspect of grammar or mechanics, and the handouts they produce culminate in the publication of their own "handbook."

1. **Model the process.** Present your own Mechanics Mini-Lesson to your students. I tackle general punctuation--colons, semicolons, commas, and dashes--because my students need considerable help in this area and because this topic requires more than the ten minutes I allot for student presentations. Plan one full class session.
 - ▶ Distribute a handout that outlines your topic's definitions, rules, and examples.
 - ▶ Present the information in a lively manner.
 - ▶ Invite the students to join you in some activity that allows them to apply and practice the information you have presented. I use The Wheel of Punctuation (based very loosely on The Wheel of Fortune), and we play the game until we have covered most of the rules and until the frowns of consternation and confusion lift from the students' faces.
2. **Brainstorm for grammar/mechanics topics.**
 - ▶ Ask students to come prepared to a subsequent class session with aspects of grammar and mechanics they would like addressed. I remind them of the valuable resource they have in the corrections other instructors have made on papers they have written for other classes (including high school), and I encourage them to peruse their handbooks.
 - ▶ On the board, list all the topics your students offer. Divide larger topics (pronoun agreement, pronoun reference, pronoun case) and join smaller topics (dangling modifiers and misplaced modifiers).
 - ▶ I find it helpful to come prepared with a list of topics that I have generated based upon their in-class writings and first formal paper. These lists have included the punctuation of dialogue, verb tense and aspect, subject/verb agreement, apostrophes, pronoun agreement, pronoun reference, pronoun case, modification, run-ons, fragments, major spelling rules, capitalization, hyphens, abbreviations, passive voice, prepositional phrases, transitions, and parallel structure.
 - ▶ As a group, decide what topics to cover.
3. **Design a Mechanics Mini-Lesson Calendar.** Plan one full class session for brainstorming and designing the calendar. If time remains, I encourage students to schedule group meeting times and places.
 - ▶ Decide upon the number (I have used as few as six and as many as eleven), frequency (I find one a week most effective), and order of the Mechanics Mini-Lessons.
 - ▶ Ask the students to volunteer for one of the topics. This should culminate in several groups of two to four students who will not only collaborate to present their topic to their peers but also act as expert resource for their peers during the semester.
 - ▶ Distribute copies of the resulting calendar.
4. **Distribute your guidelines.** See sample on reverse.
5. **"Publish" the handbook.** Ask students to retain their copies of the various Mechanics Mini-Lessons in a small folder or binder. Following the final presentation, begin work on the cover and title. Each student offers a title for the Mechanics Mini-Lesson handbook (which grows out of work we do concerning fashioning powerful and lively titles), and those students who profess interest offer artwork. We then conduct a title and illustration contest (complete with prizes). Reproduce the cover page and distribute.
6. **Encourage accountability.** Remind students, as frequently as necessary, of their responsibility for correctly reflecting in their papers the conventions the Mechanics Mini-Lessons have covered to date.

I have experimented with several approaches to the Mechanics Mini-Lessons. The process has been most successful when students met outside of class to research and produce their own handouts; when I provided class time for research and drafting, too few students invested out-of-class time to perfect their handouts and their presentations. I plan to modify the submission procedure outlined in the sample guidelines (see reverse) next: I will set a single due date, require a draft submission prior to the appointment, and require a précis of the presentation.

Mechanics Mini-Lesson Guidelines

Your Handout:

1. Your *typed* handout should include:
 - a. a header on the first page, including:
 1. the course number
 2. the semester and year
 3. the full name of all group members
 4. the date of your presentation
 5. a title, including:
 - a) the Mechanics Mini-Lesson number
 - b) the Mechanics Mini-Lesson subject
 - c) a descriptive subtitle

English 100
Mary Jones
John Smith

Spring 1996
March 11, 1996

Mechanics Mini-Lesson #47

Run-Ons

(Or: All Good Things Must Come to an End)

- b. pertinent information:
 - 1) definitions
 - 2) rules
 - 3) examples
 - 4) a brief explanation of why the subject is important and why we should learn about it
 - 5) tips to help us remember the rules (whenever applicable)
 - 6) exceptions to the rules (if applicable)
 - 7) some things to consider (if applicable)
2. Please use a laser printer or a deskjet for your handout; if your group doesn't have access to either of these, notify me and I'll assist with other arrangements. Remember, these handouts will culminate in our own "published" document, so they should be professional and clean.
3. Please try to limit your handout to two typed pages.
4. Please use at least three different handbooks--one of which *must* be *The Bedford Handbook*--when doing the research for your handout.
5. Please paraphrase or refashion the information from these handbooks: *do not directly quote from them*. Remember, we aim for a kinder, gentler handbook, one that proves more accessible and comprehensible than the sources from which you'll gather information. At the same time, however, do not sacrifice the vocabulary necessary for an

informed discussion of the English language: do not, for instance, translate *coordinating conjunction* into *joining words*.

6. Please cite your sources on a separate sheet of paper attached to your final draft. Include the full names of all authors and editors, the handbook's full title, the edition, the place of publication, the publisher, and the date of publication. I will fashion from this information a Works Cited page for our MML handbook.
7. Copies:
 - a. You will be responsible for making copies of your handout for your classmates.
 - b. Please submit the original and one copy of your handout to me by the final draft due date.
 - c. Please be prepared to distribute (23) copies of your handout to your colleagues on the class session prior to your presentation.
8. Due Dates:
 - a. Rough Draft from all groups due: Wednesday, February 14
 - b. Final Draft from all groups (original plus one copy) due: Wednesday, February 21
 - c. Copies (23) from individual groups due: the class session prior to your presentation

Your Presentation:

1. Your presentation should last no more than ten minutes.
2. Please plan a lively presentation; do not merely read your handout to your colleagues. Any of the following could result in a lively and informative presentation: audio tape recording, ballad, brochure, bullet chart, bulletin, board, charade, collage, comic strip, conference, critique, cross-section, debate, demonstration, description, dictionary, diorama, discussion, display, documentary, dramatization, experiment, expose, filmstrip, flow chart, game, graph, hot seat, information table, jingle/song/rap, journal, learning center, learning log, lecture, letter to the editor, magazine/newspaper article, map, mobile, mock interview, model, mural, oral report, outline, pamphlet, poem, poster, profile, radio/television commentary, reader's theatre, relief map, review, sequel, simulation, speech, story board, tableau, test, timeline, travel guide, tree chart, Venn diagram, or videotape. I am happy to assist with the making of overheads or the securing of video or audio recording equipment.
3. When you submit the rough draft of your handout, please also submit a précis of the presentation you plan. This one-page explanation of the presentation method should include:
 1. the full name of all group members
 2. your Mechanics Mini-Lesson number
 3. your Mechanics Mini-Lesson subject
 4. a full explanation of the presentation you plan
 5. the role each group member will play in the presentation and/or in the preparation of the presentation
 6. the specific goals and objectives of the presentation
 7. the methods for achieving those goals and objectives
 8. the methods for ensuring that your audience will remain attentive, engaged, and digesting

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