THE POWER OF GRAMMAR

Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language

Mary Ehrenworth
Vicki Vinton

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Introduction: Teaching Grammar to Achieve Power, Beauty, and Voice

In this chapter we describe the theoretical and practical roots of this study, how our research began, and how it grew to encompass our current understanding of grammar's influence on power, beauty, and voice. We examine the relationship between grammar codes and a culture of power and the implications of this relationship for instruction.

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This chapter offers ways to plan grammar lessons and grammar curriculum. We introduce direct instruction, inquiry, and apprenticeship. We look at some individual lessons that model direct instruction and some case studies in inquiry and apprenticeship. We consider how grammar instruction fits in writing process and writing workshop, and we offer some yearlong plans.

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Here we study the understandings of usage (proper or common conventions) we consider most significant to teachers and student writers. We consider more deeply the ways that usage is linked to power. We explore more intimately the role of unsafe stories in our instruction and the significance of crafting our own examples as we come to understand usage. We offer a text-in-process as one in which we may investigate the implications of grammatical decisions on the development of the story and the writer.

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Love and Sedition: Getting Intimate with Grammar by Breaking the Rules

In this chapter we consider what happens when writers break the rules. We follow student writers as they encounter professional writers who abandon usage to achieve diverse purposes. We study closely the relationship between form and

content as these students conduct an inquiry, and we study the processes of classroom inquiry. We investigate the impact on student writing of this new knowledge and the implications for our understandings of grammar and for our teaching.

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Chapter 5 presents student writers apprenticing themselves to published authors at the sentence level. We study how to read a sentence closely and parse it for meaning. We consider the internal forms of sentence construction. We see students experimenting with style, and we see the impact on voice. And we describe how to organize apprenticeship in the classroom.

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Putting Conventions in Our In-Tray

Planning Grammar Curriculum

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The defense of language is too large a matter to be left to the properly qualified.

— Kingsley Amis

These are our goals for teaching grammar: to teach knowledge of conventional usage in order to increase power, opportunity, and voice; to teach habits of fluency, inquiry, and experimentation; and to engage students in such a way that this knowledge and these habits are sustaining and flexible. We plan for this kind of heady work, if only to ensure that we make space in the curriculum for it. We may be anxious. We may feel that our own grasp of grammar is too tenuous to really impart knowledge in empowering ways. We may worry that we will be too tentative or that we will be too didactic. We may worry that we will be boring. But we need to do it. We cannot deny student writers knowledge of practices that inform our own writing. If our execution falls short of our plans at times, if there is struggle, that simply means we are striving, and that is a good thing.

And so we come to planning. There is an art to planning. Dewey says, "A large part of the art of instruction lies in making the difficulty of new problems large enough to challenge thought, and small enough so that, in addition to the confusion naturally attending the novel elements, there shall be luminous familiar spots from which helpful suggestions may spring" ([1916] 1944, 157). Careful plans are strategic. Strategic plans link new curriculum to ongoing studies and familiar practices, so that students can fit new understandings into the

long-term development of fluency. Yet strategic plans also introduce some studies as unfamiliar or radical, so that students experience the classroom and language as provocative. We want to demonstrate that learning is the process of continually remaining open to new ways of looking.

And so we offer several ways to plan grammar instruction. The familiar spot from which we launch this work is writing workshop. We imagine all of the following lessons as embedded within beliefs and practices that empower student writers to achieve meaning, beauty, and knowledge through writing. Our plans for grammatical instruction, therefore, coincide with our curriculum calendar for writing workshop.

By a curriculum calendar for writing workshop, we mean that we teach writing as a subject, and we plan the year as several units of study, with each unit of study representing at least one opportunity for students to publish, as well as an opportunity to study genres, authors, or craft deeply. There are many useful guides to planning units of study in writing workshop, including Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* (1998), Lucy Calkins's *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1996), Katie Wood Ray's *What You Know by Heart* (2002), and Heather Lattimer's *Thinking Through Genre* (2003). We have often mapped a yearlong writing curriculum so that it looks like the table on page 17.

In general, we break up the year with units of study so that students write to publish and so that students learn a variety of purposes, structures, and craft techniques as writers. Within each unit of study, we plan to teach some writing lessons on finding meaningful subjects; making genre decisions and considering structure; crafting and revising; and getting ready to publish. We teach these lessons as students are moving at diverse paces through stages of collecting; drafting; revising; and working on presentation.

We particularly like the descriptions of writing process and its implications for teaching offered by Don Murray in *A Writer Teaches Writing* (1985). Murray writes:

> Writing is not superficial to the intellectual life but central to it; writing is one of the most disciplined ways of making meaning and one of the most effective methods we can use to monitor our own thinking.
>
> We write to think—to be surprised by what appears on the page; to explore our world with language; to discover meaning that teaches us and that

UNIT 1	(September–October):	*Memoir and narrative structures*
UNIT 2	(October–November):	*Essay and nonnarrative structures*
UNIT 3	(December):	*Writing about literature*
UNIT 4	(January–February):	*Short fiction*
UNIT 5	(March):	*Journalism*
UNIT 6	(April):	*Poetry*
UNIT 7	(May–June):	*Open genre or multigenre projects*

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> may be worth sharing with others. We do *not* know what we want to say before we say it; we write to know what we want to say. (3)

It is within this theory of teaching writing that we consider grammar instruction, and so we believe that learning grammar must be linked to the process of discovery, to intellectual thought. As a series of received ideas, grammar instruction has little impact—students must construct knowledge of grammar as they discover what it means to write. Murray adds:

> Writing is a craft before it is an art; writing may appear magic, but it is our responsibility to take our students backstage to watch the pigeons being tucked up the magician's sleeve. The process of writing can be studied and understood. We can recreate most of what a student or professional writer does to produce effective writing.
>
> The process is not linear, but recursive. The writer passes through the process once, or many times, emphasizing different stages during each passage. (4)

And so we turn also to Murray for the notion that we can teach writing and its processes as a subject and that writing consists of different stages that the writer circles through. In the plans that follow we lift grammar instruction out of the editing phase and move it into earlier stages of the writing process. Teaching editing, we believe, means teaching students to review their writing using their knowledge of conventions. But they need to learn these conventions earlier in the writing process as strategies for making clarity and meaning. And, ideally, both they and we need to see how grammar can be not just a corrective tool but an inspiring, transformative one.

Teaching Toward Fluency

Planning grammar instruction, or any instruction, leads to consideration of methodology, as in *how* we will teach. We find it useful to think of our work as fitting into three categories: *direct instruction*; *inquiry*; and *apprenticeship*. By *direct instruction*, we mean lessons in which we tell students explicitly how to do something, based on our knowledge of language and how writers control it. So, for instance, we may explain and demonstrate that writers need consistent verb endings to maintain verb tense. *Inquiry* means lessons in which we facilitate investigations of language. An investigation into how some writers manipulate verb tense to create specific effects is an inquiry. *Apprenticeship* means teaching students to mentor themselves to published writers, to adapt their style as a way to explore form and voice. These categories are loose ones; individual lessons may cross these boundaries.

Much of our planning supports direct instruction, perhaps because this method feels the most efficient. Lisa Delpit describes the acquisition of linguistic powers thus: "Unless one has the leisure of a lifetime of 'immersion' to learn them, explicit presentation makes learning immeasurably easier." She goes on to say that, "in literacy instruction, explicitness might be equated with direct instruction" (1995, 26–27). When we plan direct instruction we plan in response to assessment and to our knowledge of conventions. For instance, let us imagine that we are launching writing workshop at the beginning of the year with a new class of students. Let us imagine that their demonstration of conventions is diverse and creative—what some might call faulty—and often this makes it hard to understand their writing. Once most of our students are committed to saying something they find meaningful in their writing, we want to teach them ways to write more effectively. The time and energy needed to get our students to the comma in the previous sentence, of course, may be intense. But if our students aren't invested in their subjects, it is unlikely they will invest in grammar. That is why our first writing unit will be full of many other lessons aimed at helping students discover their subjects, and the grammar lessons will come later, during revision.

To be clear, we are not separating out conventions from the writing process. Achieving power over conventions is essential to writing meaningfully, and these lessons merit attention within the writing process. And so we teach within writ-

ing workshop, offering minilessons on how writers control conventions. For instance, with direct instruction we can teach students to make meaningful choices about ending punctuation as a revision lesson. Then in our second unit, we teach students that writers don't wait for revision to make these choices about ending punctuation; we do this work while drafting. Then in our third writing unit, we show students how fluent writers make these choices even as we write for the first time. Thus we plan for, demonstrate, and coach the habits of fluency.

We can apply this kind of planning to any direct instruction in strategies writers use to make their writing more effective, including not just punctuation but also parts of a sentence, the use of paragraphs and other internal structures, and spelling. Thus, if we plan to teach some spelling strategies in our first unit during revision, we move in the next unit to teaching students to use these same strategies while drafting, then in our third unit we encourage students to use these spelling strategies as they freewrite and always as they write. This kind of planning gives us a way to deeply and strategically embed the many thoughtful lessons offered in texts such as Diane Snowball and Faye Bolton's *Spelling K–8* (1999), Janet Angelillo's *A Fresh Approach to Teaching Punctuation* (2002), and Constance Weaver's *Teaching Grammar in Context* (1996).

So we have now a method for long-term planning that is surprisingly easy and lets us build into our curriculum immediately any instruction that profitably starts as revision work. We follow Don Murray's (1997) and Georgia Heard's (2002) idea that revision is a way of reseeing in order to discover and create meaning. Revision is the opportunity to restructure, reword, play, plan, and imagine it differently. It is a fruitful time in the writing process to consider the impact of grammatical decisions and the opportunities they imply, which brings us to the lesson plan.

Before we look at an actual direct instruction lesson more closely, though, and how it changes as we move it up in the writing process, we want to insert two small cautions: First, some teaching of grammar shouldn't begin as revision work; it should begin someplace else in the writing process and the curriculum. Grammar is a large and beautiful subject. Sometimes it is about aesthetics, and the aesthetic is rarely served well by direct instruction. And so we will look at this kind of work separately when we consider inquiry and apprenticeship. Our second caution is this: we need to show students other meaningful ways to revise their writing, ways that fit the genres they have chosen and the meanings they

are striving for. Our favorite texts for teaching powerful, and liberating, revision strategies are Don Murray's *The Craft of Revision* (1997) and Georgia Heard's *The Revision Toolbox* (2002). Later in this book we look at the unexpected ways writers achieve voice and meaning through grammar—these strategies would qualify as artful revision. Here, though, we are starting with the comprehensibility and power achieved through controlling conventions, what Lisa Delpit calls "useful and usable knowledge which contributes to a student's ability to communicate effectively in standard, generally acceptable literary forms" (1995, 19).