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Dangerous Grammar

BY JASON FRIELING

After I decided to become a teacher, I found myself faced with having to pass a grammar entrance exam. I wasn't worried. The night before the test, I thought back to my elementary and middle school years. I remembered those "Mad-Libs" with great fondness and also being the "go-to" guy for a quick refresher about adjectives when a friend was stuck. Feeling very confident that this entrance exam would be little more than a serious Mad-Lib or two, I fell asleep dreaming of attaining an 80 percent or better the next day.

After writing my name in the appropriate blank, (It turns out that this was the *only* blank I filled confidently!) I soon discovered that my Mad-Lib training was woefully inadequate for a successful run at this test. The 13 percent I received as my grade confirmed my suspicion.

Because I was only allowed three tries at this particular entrance exam, I began to feel slightly unnerved. What was I to do? I decided that I needed to memorize the definitions of this grammar stuff. So, I cracked open one of my English books and started making flash cards of all the grammar terms I could find. I drilled and drilled and drilled until I had all the definitions down cold. Thirty four percent was the result of that strategy.

I desperately wanted to become a teacher! Teaching was my destiny, but this blasted grammar was getting in my way. With one chance left, and nowhere to turn, I turned to blame. Why wasn't I required to learn this stuff in school? How was I able to graduate with honors from high school and yet know little more about grammar than the definition of a noun? Why hadn't Mrs. Elberth, the toughest English teacher ever, tortured us with grammar until we learned it, like she did with everything else? Why did this college I attended demand knowledge of grammar that they had never taught me? Most of all, why were they demanding knowledge of something so BORING in order to teach English? It didn't seem that any of my former teachers thought I needed it anyway.

I delayed my third attempt at the grammar exam and signed up for a month-long, five-day-a-week grammar class. I understood that two professors who were also

responsible for the grammar entrance exam would teach the course. I also learned that they authored and edited the text we would use for that class. Could it get any worse? So, in the days leading up to the class, I did my best to prepare for 20 days of brutally boring and dry material. From the first day of class, however, grammar was not discussed, drilled, or dictated as I anticipated. Instead, stories were told, humorous headlines were passed around, sentences were toyed with, games were played, and a love for language was fostered. Sure, we also worked in a workbook the professors created. We had blanks to fill in, misplaced modifiers to fix, and dangling modifiers to correct, but I *liked* it.

Too often people have disagreeable experiences with grammar and end up uttering things like, "Grammar is my enemy." I think most of my middle school students would easily agree with those sentiments. Students, however, are not the only people who would use those bitter words. I have attended meetings, conferences, dinners, and parties where English teachers have expressed the same thoughts through clenched teeth.

I now know that the reason for this enjoyment of grammar was that these professors taught us a *philosophy* or way of life, not a set of rules. Seeing grammar as a way of life as opposed to a long list of rules with as many exceptions is the key to anyone's positive relationship with this subject.

I learned this recently when I accepted the charge of developing a middle school grammar curriculum. As I looked at other local districts for a model, I met an interesting display of responses. The grammar cur-

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riculum that I found from one district merely referred to sections and page numbers of worksheets in a few separate texts. A friend in another district researched his district's curriculum, only to discover that there was no mention of grammar. In my own district, the last two revisions of the language arts curriculum also omitted grammar. The last version that contained anything specific about grammar was crafted 7 years ago and was merely a K-8 chart outlining when a specific term was to be introduced or mastered. I found no direction from other curricula about how to proceed.

Originally, my idea for this grammar curriculum was to develop a series of grade level worksheets and activities that would cover all of the grammar outlined in the Grade Level Content Expectations of the state of Michigan. As I looked at books like *501 Grammar and Writing Questions* (Learning, Express, 2002) and *The Elements of Grammar* (Shertzer, 1996), however, I lost interest in the subject. These texts simply defined and offered examples of each of the grammar and usage terms and then gave quizzes to test what you remembered. Unfortunately, this type of program was exactly what my colleagues and I put our students through last year trying to meet Michigan's Grade Level Content Expectations.

The Teacher's Grammar Book (Williams, 1999) started with an excellent look at the origins and development of grammar instruction. It was illuminating to learn that basic grammar instruction hasn't changed much since the 6th century B.C. Through the ages, grammar has been used to separate the classes and to easily distinguish the educated from the less fortunate. It seems that every era has had groups who fastidiously defended the language from those who would "destroy" it by not following the established usage rules. I was even dismayed to find that during the Middle Ages

Scholars began comparing the natural language of speech to the artificial languages of math and logic and asserted that natural language should conform accordingly. We see the outcome of this effort in the argument that double negatives, such as *He don't do nothing*, are incorrect because two negatives make a positive (which certainly is true in math). (Williams, 1999, p. 3)

After reading this, I had to humbly ask my math teacher friends' forgiveness for not seeing the connection between traditional grammar and usage and math. I often teased them about their subject area. I disliked math because it was so rigid and exacting. Of course, with a little reflection, I now see that traditional grammar and usage is just as exacting as math.

Most of the remainder of Williams's book (1999) discusses and offers activities surrounding grammar and usage. As I attempted many of the examples, I became keenly aware of my own deficiencies in my use of language. This motivated me to learn more because I wanted to improve my writing. I am easily motivated in this manner, but unfortunately, I have found that this rarely works with my seventh graders. For this reason, *The Teacher's Grammar Book* didn't seem to meet my needs for creating a grammar curriculum that would be any different than what has been done after the 6th century.

Next, I perused *Lessons to Share* (Weaver, 1998) for helpful information. This book is a collection of articles detailing successful lessons or approaches teachers have created to teach grammar and usage. Constance Weaver, the editor of this volume, writes in her article "Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing":

Because some of us are convinced we benefited at least somewhat from the formal study of grammar, it can be difficult for community members and English teachers alike to believe what decades of grammar studies tell us; that *in general the teaching of grammar does not serve any practical purpose for most students. It does not improve reading, speaking, writing, or even editing for the majority of students ...* (p. 19).

Those are strong words! When I found them echoed in other articles, I decided to start from scratch with my grammar curriculum.

I believe Weaver's statement because I have felt what she wrote in my own life and classroom. Cramming grammar terms into one's head does not equal great prose. Weaver cites two different instances where students learned their grammar and usage much better through the context of their own writing than by studying the skills outside of their writing.

Understanding that teacher desires or state mandates require the teaching of grammar, however, Weaver calls for a "minimum of grammar for maximum benefits" (p. 21). Although I was definitely warming up to the idea of teaching grammar in the context of the students' writing, I still had a problem. Constance Weaver's list of suggested grammar does not even come close to covering what the state of Michigan requires of my students. So, how then would I proceed?

The next article I found helpful in *Lessons to Share* (Weaver, 1998) was "Teaching Writing and Grammar in Context" by Scott Peterson. Early in the article, the author quotes Lucy Calkins when she says that "students learn best when they are 'deeply involved in their self-sponsored work and they bring them (writing and grammar) together to learn what they need to know in order to do their work.'" (p. 68). I was beginning to see a recurring theme in many of these articles: *teach grammar in the context of writing*. Unfortunately, however, I still wanted to create or find a neat package to use and give to other language arts teachers to use for this. Mr. Peterson had this to say about that:

Teaching skills in context requires that teachers *design their own lessons* to meet the writing needs of their class. Instead of depending on a grammar text or English book to fill the room with meaningful activities, teachers will have to come up with lessons that actually tie directly into the writing process. The question is, why bother preparing your own material when there are so many wonderful textbooks and commercially prepared materials to fall back on? Why bother doing the troublesome and time-consuming dirty work of preparing your own lesson plans when you can simply use a textbook? After all, they are so attractively packaged, well organized, and just sitting on the shelf begging to be used. Why not take advantage of their services? ... The answer is that *teaching grammar and writing with the isolation of a textbook simply does not work* (Weaver, 1998, pp. 71-73).

I was beginning to see the "writing on the wall." (Every possible pun intended.) Unfortunately, I still needed to create some sort of grammar curriculum.

Peterson's answer for this was a sports metaphor he quoted from Donald Graves saying, "So much time is devoted to blocking and tackling drills that there is not time to play the game, writing" (Weaver, 1998, p. 75). This made perfect sense to me. If all I did was practice tackling in isolation during football practice, I would have no idea how to use it when it mattered the most. If all I did was identify the eight parts of speech or identify fragments, I still wouldn't necessarily be able to use that knowledge when it mattered—in my own writing. Peterson also describes some of the activities that he used with his students. His lessons and others in this book had three things in common that I believe are absolutely critical for teachers of grammar: 1) enthusiasm for the students, 2) enthusiasm for the writing, and 3) energy and time to meet each child where he or she is, either through conferences or writing in the margins.

"Image Grammar" by Harry Noden (Weaver, 1998), was the first article that I could apply to my teaching in a tangible way. I use student-created grammar flash cards in my classroom for grammar review. We begin with the eight parts of speech. I direct students to write the term on one side and decorate it and to define and give examples for that term on the other side. Noden's article gave me an idea of how to attribute more purpose for those cards. He offers numerous lesson examples that he designed to appeal to the "image consciousness" (Weaver, 1998, p. 157) among his students. Noden reminds me that some students learn and remember better if the material is accompanied by something visual. As a result, the visual on the front of the grammar cards will be more purposeful. I will ask students to render images that reflect the meaning of the term the next time I start grammar card collections.

Noden gives numerous examples of lessons that engage students. He uses particularly gripping or visual excerpts from novels and movies and asks students to study them first for the craft within the writing and then to turn to their own writing and compare and use that craft, if appropriate. He admits that the excerpts he uses often lead to unintended but worthwhile discussions that range far beyond their intended purpose. For example, while discussing a passage from the novel *Jaws* (Benchley, 1991) for its fantastic use of adjectives and verbs, the class turned to a "lesson on periodic sentences and periodic paragraphs, where an author holds the most important ideas as a dramatic downbeat until the end of the

sentence or paragraph" (Weaver, 1998, p. 165-166). It seemed to me that this type of teaching could be *dangerous*.

I was abandoning all hope that his grammar curriculum would be a nice neat and tidy package. Considering these new ideas about teaching grammar, I definitely felt out of my league attempting to create a curriculum for my district. Even the authors of a new publication, *The Power of Grammar* (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005), had felt uncertainty about the subjects of grammar and usage while gathering material for their book. Ehrenworth and Vinton, had taken an online grammar test that challenged their knowledge enough to shake their beliefs that they had a solid grasp on the subject. Of all the articles and books that I read to create my own grammar curriculum, however, their book was the most refreshing and inspiring. Ehrenworth and Vinton's approach to grammar and usage—and, I am assuming, the rest of the classroom experience—reflects the spirit of that class I attended so many years ago while frantically trying to pass an entrance exam: *engaging*.

Repeatedly, the authors strive to show that teaching grammar is an intensely *powerful* undertaking. What we as educators need to demonstrate and explain is "that grammar is intimately linked with power. Power inhabits the linguistic codes a culture accepts. And control of grammar confers access" (p. 4). They quote Lisa Delpit:

Students must be *taught* the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized sub skills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors: that they must be allowed the resource of the teacher's expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own "expert-ness" as well; and that even while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent. (Ehrenworth and Vinton, 2005, pp. 4-5)

In my own teaching, I have often tried to explain this relationship, but never could quite as well as Delpit.

The way in which these master teachers taught their material is most interesting and engaging. Stories are

the key. "Stories, the telling and the writing of them, are how students attach meaning to our lessons; they are where students see the impact of grammatical choices and where we ensconce this work in the luminous" (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005, p. 12). In my own classroom, I often use my personal stories as bribes to encourage students to labor through a state test or some other unpleasant task. Rarely have I used these stories as anything more than filler activities or rewards. Ehrenworth and Vinton use stories much differently.

In fact, Ehrenworth and Vinton use many of the same strategies in *The Power of Grammar* (2005) that they might use in the classroom. They crafted their book all within and around stories. In fact, I found myself entranced in sample lessons about ending punctuation and paragraphing because they crafted them within a story. One story they use concerns a desperate attempt to fit in (a high-interest topic for my students) and as the lesson continues, little glimpses of the story keep emerging so that readers are hooked. Who would think that a lesson in punctuation and paragraphing could be a page-turner? It can be, if it is crafted in a story.

The following quote sums the heart of the book:

The stories we tell and write integrate the urgent social issues that shape the lives of adolescents. Some of these stories tell of moments of confusion, desire, or danger. Some reveal glimpses of beauty. Some disclose moments of loss or the foretaste of sudden, new understanding. We write from the hearts of the children we were and the students we see every day. We cull our past, we consider the stories we have read, heard, and observed, looking for those that feel familiar. We recall, we dream, we fictionalize, we do the work writers do as they struggle to concoct a story that others want to hear. In some ways, this is the most important part of our work, for it is in the encounter with story that all the rest falls into place. It is in the heart of a story that students accompany us as we struggle with form and with meaning and they see the paths that lie before them in their own work.

And because curriculum is a complicated and multilayered thing, it is also in story that students envision possibilities

aside from, or intimately conjoined with, the force of language. For adolescents learn about identity, they learn about choice, they learn about possibility and impossibility through the stories they encounter in school. We know this. We know it from the stories we have inhabited and the ones we cannot find. *And so we try to tell our stories bravely, so that the placement of the comma matters, so that an apostrophe marks the possession of the heart as well as the mind.* (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005, p. 13)

The last line is especially powerful for me. When my students see that the placement of the comma in my writing isn't a thoughtless stroke of the keyboard, but a conscious decision to communicate precisely what I want, and when they see that I hold a certain type of affection for that comma, perhaps they will look at their own writing a bit differently.

To this end and to serve all of their students, Ehrenworth and Vinton (2005) present numerous examples of the same lesson in three levels: instruction, inquiry, and apprenticeship. An instruction lesson "connects the lesson to the students' prior work, then makes a *teaching point* that includes a demonstration, then gives an opportunity to process the lesson through some *active involvement*, and then *links* the lesson to their ongoing work ..." (p. 22). An inquiry lesson involves the following steps: "inquiry; thinking; the forming and testing of hypotheses; the development of responsibility; the ability to reflect on and articulate what was learned; and the ability to transfer knowledge and understanding from one situation to another" (p. 31). An apprenticeship lesson involves students exploring various texts and then "emulate the styles and forms of writers who manipulate language in powerful ways" (p. 37). The authors suggest that by the third writing assignment, all three types of lessons could be used at different times. For instance, the lesson about end punctuation could move from instruction in the first lesson, to inquiry in the second, and finally apprenticeship in the third.

At this point in my research and reading, I completely abandoned the thought that I would be able to create and present a nice, neat grammar curriculum for the teachers. I believed in Mary Ehrenworth's and Vicki Vinton's approach, but realized, "It is so messy!" It seemed that I moved from creating a grammar curricu-

lum to creating instructions for story-telling to teach grammar. If these authors devote such a great deal of space in their book to explaining and showing a handful of grammar and usage lesson examples, how could I possibly create a succinct grammar curriculum in a few pages? As I pondered my questions, I compared *The Power of Grammar* and other articles mentioned above to that college grammar class I took years ago. I easily identify that class as one of my most enjoyable educational experiences.

I realized that perhaps a traditional grammar curriculum was not needed in my district, for the state has already decided and defined what to teach. Instead, a grammar *philosophy* was needed—a fresh view of how to teach grammar, usage, and really anything else in a language arts classroom. (The philosophy that introduces our new grammar curriculum is the appendix of this article.) That college grammar class taught me more than grammar and usage. It gave me a model for how to teach my students. Those two professors, whom I fondly refer to as my "grammar gurus," instilled that feeling in me, not because of their text, but because of *their approach to loving language*. This approach is echoed and captured in *The Power of Grammar: Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language* (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005) and *Lessons to Share On Teaching Grammar in Context* (Weaver, 1998). These authors reminded me to continue to tend to my love affair with language, so that my students will want to start or continue their own relationship. As a result, while applying this grammar philosophy, one goal for my own teaching is that my future students will have every chance to take a grammar entrance exam and score a 96 percent the first time.

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Appendix Middle School Grammar Philosophy

June 2005

Overview:

What was initially going to be a detailed curriculum map, tracing the best ways to instruct our students in grammar and usage has turned instead to a philosophy. As the background work was underway, it quickly became evident that the structure, the ever changing and liquid aspects of language, and the opinions on usage, were as easy to capture on a document of this size as it is to nail water to a wall.

The "curriculum/philosophy map" that follows is the result of much research into the "best practices" of grammar instruction. All the wisdom, suggestions, advice, ideas, and material contained in this curriculum comes from actual teachers with actual classrooms. This curriculum also attempts to meld "best practices" and "state standards and expectations." Lastly, this curriculum map attempts to facilitate the teaching of grammar, not by adding extra units of study and teaching, but by augmenting what is already being done in the Language Arts classroom, especially where reading and writing is concerned.

Teacher Mindset/Philosophy:

As Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton (2005) write, "We cannot teach grammar in lasting ways if we teach it as a way to *fix* student writing, especially writing they view as already complete" (p. 10). Instead, we as educators must attempt to teach grammar in ways that we weren't necessarily taught.

We may invite them by demonstrating how knowledge of grammar grants access to power. We may tempt them by showing how grammar is an art or excite them by

demonstrating how, to us, *teaching is a love affair with words*. And we may seduce them with story. (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005, p. 12)

So, the teacher mindset for the teaching of grammar, and really anything in this curriculum needs to be that of a love affair. True, it may not be love at first sight, or it may be a love lost, but the potential for a beautiful relationship is possible. But only if pursued. (Yes, the fragment is purposeful.)

Materials:

1. *The Power of Grammar: Unconventional Approaches to the Conventions of Language* (2005) by Ehrenworth & Vinton. Required/ Highly Recommended Reading.
2. **Stories:** "Storytelling may be the function that made language worth acquiring." (p. 12)
3. **Stories:** "It is in the act of disentangling the meanings that reside in the stories we read, and limning meaning in the stories we write, that we demonstrate that it is worth contending with language." (p. 12)
4. **Stories:** "It is in the heart of a story that students accompany us as we struggle with form and with meaning and they see the paths that lie before them in their own work." (p.13)
5. **Stories:** "And so we tell our stories bravely, so the placement of a comma matters, so that an apostrophe marks the possession of the heart as well as the mind." (p. 13)
6. Some knowledge of grammar: For help on grammar or usage: Grammar Slammer <http://englishplus.com/grammar/>

Form:

The lessons that are contained within the grammar curriculum are merely sample lessons. These examples should not be seen as the decisive method to teach grammar, but instead, they should give you guidelines on how to conduct grammar lessons within the context of reading and writing.

There are three types of lessons that should be used throughout the year: instruction, inquiry, and apprenticeship (Ehrenworth & Vinton, 2005):

- An **instruction** lesson "*connects* the lesson to the students' prior work, then makes a *teach-*

ing point that includes a demonstration, then gives an opportunity to process the lesson through some *active involvement*, and then *links* the lesson to their ongoing work..." (p. 22).

- An **inquiry** lesson involves the following steps: "inquiry; thinking; the forming and testing of hypotheses; the development of responsibility; the ability to reflect on and articulate what was learned; and the ability to transfer knowledge and understanding from one situation to another" (p. 31).

- An **apprenticeship** lesson involves students exploring various texts and then "emulate the styles and forms of writers who manipulate language in powerful ways" (p. 37).

Take them, mold them, shape them, and make them your own. Let your voice come through loud and clear. Above all, make sure that you are writing alongside your students, so they can see the process you go through, too.

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