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Teaching Grammar in WAC Courses

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(This piece was originally circulated as part of a WAC Workshop for English language faculty in the Laurentian program. Dr. Dobra's argument here is developed historically and theoretically in her chapter "Grammar, Rhetoric, and 'Good Writing,'" earlier in this volume.)

Standard English is the customary use of a community when it is recognized and accepted as the customary use of the community. Beyond this [...] is the larger field of good English, any English that justifies itself by accomplishing its end, by hitting the mark. (George Philip Krapp, 1909)

Grammar indeed originated as a pedagogical and literary genre, and has been revitalized as a logical one; neither its traditional nor its mathematical pedigree is much warrant for taking it for granted that it is the form in which speech comes organized for use. [...] Classical antiquity did not stop with grammar, but went on to rhetoric. [...] So should we, but without the normative, exclusionary bias that has dogged the genre of grammar throughout its history. (Dell Hymes, 1974)

Basic writers have been found to follow an orderly procedure as they write, [...] but lose their train of

thought because they spend so much of their energy during composing attending to mechanical concerns. (Freedman, *et al*, 1987)

It is an unfortunate truth that part of the job of teaching writing is to address problems of grammar. When we encounter students in our courses who have not acquired the forms and conventions of Standard English, we may balk at this task, become indignant that the student has passed out of high school English, or start searching frantically for the phone number of the Language Centre; but the bottom line responsibility is ours. No student should pass out of a Laurentian WAC course with serious deficiencies in the mechanics of written English. But what is the best way to ensure this? Should we address each student's problems individually? And if so, how can we do that without overtaxing ourselves to the detriment of the class as a whole? Are grammatical problems a widespread enough problem that we need to develop a formal policy for dealing with them?

The answers to these questions depend largely on our priorities as a programme. Many have held for a long time that as students learn to think more clearly, their grammar will naturally improve. And there seems to be some evidence for this—often, a student's linguistic permutations are the result of not being sure of exactly what she is saying. In this case, instruction in more disciplined thinking and reasoning processes results in clearer, more error-free prose.

But there are certain types of errors that are not traceable to cognitive difficulties. They persist in even the most tightly reasoned argument. These are more often than not the result of a failure on some level by the student to have assimilated the code of standard English conventions: sentence boundaries, subordination, predication, punctuation. And they need to be addressed, in all their nakedness, as grammar problems.

In addition to these readily apparent deficiencies in the use of written language, there is a more hidden class of grammatical concerns that may deserve our attention. This is the species of inadequacy that does not manifest itself in the student's writing *per se*, but becomes apparent when any discussion of grammatical terms becomes necessary. For example, when describing the appropriate use of the semi-colon, we

may toss about terms like «subject,» «verb,» and «clause» on the assumption that these are commonly held concepts. But for many, this is not the case. Especially if a student's writing is fairly competent and for the most part error-free, he may never have encountered the necessity for learning these terms; having assimilated the code without formal study of its components, he may be at a loss to identify the parts of the sentences he produces instinctively. So when a more complex construction like subordination requires attention to such forms, communication breaks down. For without a common vocabulary with which to teach him, we too are at a loss.

For these reasons, many of us have begun to consider what might be a responsible and appropriate way to address the acknowledged need for some kind of standard, some assurance of common ground with our students in the realm of grammatical conventions and terminology. Yet we are acutely aware of the pitfalls of such an undertaking. One of the most obvious of these is time. The short span of one term already taxes our students' abilities to assimilate the content material of our courses at the same time as focusing on their writing. Can we afford to spend time exclusively on instruction in grammar? Another problem is the wide variation, among the students in any given class, in level of competence. Is it fair to waste better prepared students' time to attend to the lesser prepared? Yet another—and perhaps the most ponderous—concern is the effect that a stated focus on grammar may have on students' attitudes towards their writing. We would surely not be serving our highest goals as a programme if we were to sacrifice the intellectual growth that comes from risk-taking to a perceived prioritizing of «correctness» in writing.

Research in the field of composition and error analysis has repeatedly corroborated the need for caution in this area. Although acknowledging the necessity for addressing grammatical deficiencies and enforcing a standard for college writing, many researchers have found that the time-honoured circling of errors, assigning of worksheets, and teaching of grammar in class may not have any discernable transference to students' actual writing (Rose, 1985; Krashen, 1982). And, even more disturbingly, many have found that such attention to the mechanics of form is actually detrimental to the student's development as a writer (Stiff, 1967; Shaughnessy, 1977; Pianko, 1979; Perl, 1979). A recent report from the Center for the Study of Writing at the University of California, Berkeley, states, «Basic writers have been found to follow an

orderly procedure as they write, [...] but lose their train of thought because they spend so much of their energy during composing attending to mechanical concerns» (Freedman, *et al*, 1987).

What all this suggests is that in matters of teaching grammar in the WAC programme, we should proceed with care. Addressing matters of correctness to the whole class early in the term may tend to skew the focus of our courses and stifle our students' exploration of ideas and writing styles not fully under their control for fear of making errors. On the other hand, too little emphasis on correcting egregious errors on students' papers may be a disservice to those who will need the full term to work on these problems. So where is the middle ground?

One very important clue comes from studies of the effects of our written responses to student writing (Sommers, 1992). If the only writing we see from our students is what they hand in as «final» papers, we force ourselves into the position of justifying the grade and feel obliged to circle errors, giving them the same apparent weight as marginal comments about content, organization, and other more global, «higher order» features of their essays. But if we allow for some process of revision of each paper, we can prioritize our responses—addressing only higher order concerns in earlier drafts and encouraging editing and proofreading as a final, «polishing» stage in the writing process. This reinforces the view of «correctness» as a necessary consideration, but places more weight on the content of the students' writing. It also frees the student from potentially restrictive attention to mechanics in the more creative stages of her writing process.

Another indication of how to proceed in addressing grammatical problems in the programme as a whole may come from the Language Centre. Writing Assistants there are trained to diagnose and address mechanical writing problems with students on a one-to-one basis. Instructors could administer a non-graded, non-threatening writing assignment at some point early in the term designed to identify students with problems that would be best worked on at the Language Centre. Instructors would thereby have a tool for assessing the needs of each individual class and could adapt their courses accordingly. Such a writing assignment could be the basis of an early WAC Workshop for faculty and could serve as a way of establishing a common vocabulary and body of grammatical conventions among instructors, as well.

A resource shelf in the Language Centre includes a number of tools for individual instruction in the various fine points of grammar and usage that may not be suitable for addressing an entire class but may be given to students to work on their own. If you have any resources that have worked well with students in helping them overcome mechanical difficulties in their writing, please pass them along to us. You are also invited to come and take a look at what is there for your own use. It is essential, in considering whatever policies, procedures, and guidelines are appropriate to our programme in these matters, that we weight the implications and possible side-effects of the messages we send to student writers. We need to articulate a standard for good writing. And we also need to continue to encourage quality of thought, creativity, and exploration of ideas. With care, we can harmonize these goals wisely.