

**The Problem of Grammar:  
A Teacher's Journey**

By

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## Signature and Release

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A Teacher's Journey

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## Abstract

Over the years, many teachers have abandoned teaching grammar due to its inability to improve student writing. However, students are still being held responsible for the knowledge on state tests as well as in college. The problem of how to address the growing problem of grammar instruction in a more efficient and effective manner has been addressed by experts in the field, Constance Weaver, Jeff Anderson, and Harry Noden, who have been touting the benefits of in-context grammar instruction for years. In-context grammar instruction means to use student reading and writing to teach the conventions of grammar. This study investigates the effects of using this method of grammar instruction an inner-city charter school for 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade children with ADD, ADHD, and Asperger's Syndrome.

This study used primarily qualitative data to show that students were more motivated to write and their attitude toward the act of writing was improved by this manner of instruction over the course of a year. In conclusion, while students showed minimal improvement in regards to mechanics, their content showed great improvement and students were more willing to attempt the process of writing, specifically drafting and revision. More research needs to be done with this method of grammar instruction, especially taught by teachers experienced with in-context grammar and over a longer period of time, to provide a more definitive answer about its effectiveness in teaching grammar.

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## **CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM OF GRAMMAR**

In August of 2008, I took the first teaching job that was offered to me: the sole English teacher in a small, inner-city, middle and secondary charter school filled with ADHD and Asperger's Syndrome students. I was terrified. I was getting the students that couldn't make it in the nearby city school. I *knew* I wasn't prepared, but I didn't realize exactly *how* unprepared I was until I saw the first pieces of writing. I spent about a month working on drafting fractured fairytales with my 7<sup>th</sup> graders. They liked the unit, especially the parts where I read to them or we watched short movies based on original fairytales. They were engaged in the process and left my class talking about what they had seen and heard. I was excited to see what they would write when given the opportunity. After spending about a week talking about plot and teaching the students to use a storyline graphic organizer, I asked them to begin writing. The ideas that they had placed on their graphic organizers were wonderfully creative. The finished product was so awkward that I had a hard time reading even the legible ones. Subjects and verbs were disagreeing all over the place and sometimes they were missing completely! Adjectives and adverbs appeared in strange places if they appeared at all, and the spelling and handwriting were frequently so bad that I spent hours trying to decipher one-paragraph essays for 15 students. I immediately decided that they were in need of grammar instruction. I spent some time planning an all-intensive traditional drill-and-kill direct grammar and mechanics instruction, only to have the students still question what a noun was after nine weeks. Failure. During an 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade writing portfolio

project, I tried teaching grammar and mechanics as I saw the students making mistakes. I taught comma usage, dialogue rules and lessons on adjectives. Again, failure. They did not do well on state tests, only 30% of them passing the reading and writing portions. During my second year of teaching, I tried nothing, attempting the current favored method: if-they-read-and-write-enough-they-will-absorb-the-rules. FAILURE. While the content was slightly improved, the writing was still awful in regards to mechanics. Not only was it difficult to read, but the content was rarely worth fighting for through the jungle of sloppy hand-writing.

My difficulty didn't rear its ugly head in an *unavoidable* manner until test prep week arrived in March of my second year. Not only did I have a class of 10<sup>th</sup> graders who were depending on me to help them pass the Reading and Writing Ohio Graduation Tests, but this was the first year that we had enough 10<sup>th</sup> graders to qualify for state tracking. I had strategies. I taught them about understanding what was being asked and then answering completely. I talked about outlines and paragraph formatting, mostly stuff we'd covered already, but I told them, no rule breaking this time around. The OGT's don't like rule breakers. Then I got to the grammar and mechanics portion of the writing test. I tried to explain about commas: introductory phrases, appositives, series (that one they always get) and nonrestrictive clauses. Only I used identifiers like introduction words, renaming words, and unnecessary information. Half nodding and half looking forlorn, the kids watched me and waited for the light to dawn. So did I, fruitlessly. None of them understood in an authoritative way, not in a way that they

could point out these things with any consistency. I had hit a brick wall and I saw no way around, under or over it.

Nothing stuck and though for some the writing got a little more creative over time, it crashed before it took off, riddled with grammatical error, the kind that detracts from meaning and readability. The fact that my students were poor writers, both in content and grammar, was my fault. Worse, it was my responsibility to fix it, and I didn't know how. After the test prep fiasco, I just gave up.

I remember the grammar and mechanics instruction I had as a student: sentence diagramming and correct-all grammar exercises out of a book. Based on my own writing success, I had always assumed that these activities were effective, until recently, when I remembered that I was a fairly proficient writer before the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. My students are not me, though. They come from a background very different from mine. I alternated between a small country school and a middle-sized upper-middle class suburban school. They go to a poorly-funded city school with no textbooks, in a dangerous neighborhood where homeless people frequently wander. I grew up with both parents in a middle class neighborhood and many of my students live with grandparents. Some even live in institutions or in foster homes. I never wanted for anything. Many of my students wear the same clothes day after day, and some only get solid meals while at school. I never suffered a day in my life with any sort of learning or behavior issue. All of my students have ADD, ADHD or Asperger's Syndrome. The difference is astronomical. I had an easier time becoming a writer than they will. I had advantages.



I also want things for my students. Besides wanting them to pass standardized tests (which reflects well on me, helps me keep my job and helps my school stay open), I want them to be able to make it if they choose to go to college. I want them to have an outlet for all of the horror that goes on in their lives, from the everyday teenage drama that can *seem* life-altering, to the truly terrible reality that some of them have to live in. Lastly, and most importantly, I want my students to become critical thinkers, which I believe goes hand in hand with being a writer: observation, reflection, drafting or composing, revision or ownership of self, self-editing, and publishing or self-actualization. I want to prepare them to live life after high school.

Even after my obvious failures, I blamed grammar for all of its abstract concepts that made no sense in the world of my students. I blamed the difficulty of my specific student population. I brushed it off. I had every confidence that teaching writing would be my strong point. My inability to successfully instruct them in writing effectively, especially in grammar, was the dirty little secret that I shoved so deeply into my subconscious that I forgot it was there. These were the embarrassing limits of my teaching world.

## CHAPTER 2 : A TEACHER'S JOURNEY

### **My Call to Action**

I was teaching in a world where my lack of knowledge and experience was leading to my own complacency and complete acceptance of the notion that grammar instruction was useless. It was the way it was, and there was no way to fix it. I worried about other things. I was still interested in teaching writing effectively and focused on Joseph Campbell's hero cycle. I tried to use the cycle to teach the aspects of story writing to my students. I was still trying to be a great writing teacher. But in the midst of teaching my students about a hero's call to adventure, the crossing of the first threshold and the return journey, my very own call to action appeared to keep me from avoiding the problem of grammar for what may have been the rest of my teaching career. It swept me out of my complacent approach to grammar instruction and gave me focus.

The impetus of my journey for effective grammar instruction came during a graduate class, "The Teaching of Writing." Everyone had been assigned a different topic from our textbook and was expected to present to the class. My topic? Grammar instruction.

Grammar was the topic that I didn't want to talk about in a professional manner, because I had no right answer. I had already given up. I assumed everyone else had, too. The possibility that they were better than me and I was just an embarrassment of an English teacher was also a factor. But now, I had to come up with something about

teaching it. I didn't know what to focus on. I struggled for weeks to come up with something that sounded intelligent. I was still trying to avoid facing my problem. I was trying to cover it up so that no one, including myself, would see. I was in a class of other English teachers and graduate assistants, not a good place to embarrass myself with the truth of my biggest inability as a teacher.

After a few half-hearted attempts at a serious, scholarly presentation, I contemplated the outcome of laying all of my cards on the table. It would be an embarrassment, to be sure, but perhaps I could appeal to a roomful of professionals, most of whom I had come to respect, for help. I weighed this option against the probable chance of appearing a pitiful fake through a presentation on successful grammar instruction and set my mind to the task. I began with handing out one of my student's pieces of writing. I asked my peers to pretend that it was a submitted assignment for one of their own classes. I asked them to grade for grammar. There was an extended period of silence while red pens flicked over pages and my peers struggled through the content. After about five minutes, I stopped them and presented the following story:

As a ninth grader, one of my students (we'll call him Nathan<sup>1</sup>) handed this in, a made-for-comic-book short story, *GothPig*. I spent a whole year gaining enough trust to get him to just *write* for me. The product: a modernistic Joseph Campbell-esque adventure story about a




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<sup>1</sup> Note: All students are referenced by a pseudonym to protect student identities.

Figure 1: Nathan's Gothpig Illustration

pierced, black-clad, porcine superhero with his best friend/side kick, Sergeant RedFace. I was amazed. Nathan had never written anything so creative. The storyline was wonderful and the action was dramatic. The characters were franchise worthy. The grammar was awful. It was almost unreadable. I had to have him read it out loud to me just so that I could actually grasp the nuances of the story.

I continued to explain my understanding of my student. If I marked all over his paper, I was going to undo a good majority of the trust-building I had done over the course of the year. Nathan would see his slaughtered paper as a confirmation of all that he suspected was true: he was a terrible writer. He wouldn't try anymore, and he wouldn't improve. I asked for suggestions.

The silence astounded me. A tentative hand went up in the back. "I always choose one or two frequent errors to mark."

I sighed. "Which ones would you choose in this case?" Silence. Nathan had sentence level errors like subject-verb disagreement, his spelling was atrocious, and never mind about more refined techniques, like dialogue or comma usage.

I tried a different approach. "How do you approach grammar instruction in your classrooms?" A debate began. It was intense and even got loud at one point. Some were proponents of direct drill-and-kill instruction, out of a text and onto paper. Some taught a mini-lesson here and there, according to their text books. A few others, like me, had reached the defeatist point of hopeless faith in the osmosis strategy: if they saw it enough, they would magically get it. Complacency.

Afterward, I was amazed by how well the discussion had gone, but what had an impact on me was the silence. It was the silence in our teaching stories. It was the thing we were afraid to talk about, the thing we had no answer for. It was exactly the thing we *should* be talking about. It was my call to action. The following semester, I signed up for a grammar class.

## **Supernatural Aid**

I began the grammar class with hopes that it would address *how* to teach grammar. It did not. I learned a lot about the fine intricacies of grammar, but I learned nothing about how to teach it. When the time came for the required end-of-semester paper, I took advantage of the professor's open-minded stance on final projects and decided to research my new obsession. My paper topic was teaching grammar effectively in a secondary classroom.

After searching for various ideas about teaching grammar effectively, I came up with a few articles that touched on different ways to teach grammar. I found some very surface level information, to start. I looked at a lot of articles that other teachers wrote about teaching grammar and I began to see the history of the problem laid out before me. I also began to see an inkling of a solution.

Grammar instruction dates back to the Middle Ages when it was taught as one of three important subjects alongside rhetoric and logic. According to one source,

“grammar was viewed as the gateway to sacred as well as secular knowledge; conscious knowledge of grammar was thought to be a pre-requisite for

understanding theology and philosophy as well as literature” (Weaver and Bush 18).

Later, during the Industrial Revolution, grammar was also viewed as a method for class elevation. There were a few books published during the 18<sup>th</sup> century intended to help lower classes increase their manners and income. Because this philosophy on grammar pervaded western culture for hundreds of years, grammar was taught as a separate subject, even now, though it has all appearances of being taught in a Language Arts classroom (Weaver and Bush 18-19). This is the basis for the direct instruction that many of us have had during grade school. However, for countless years, the grammar instruction pendulum had been swinging between two extremes: traditional direct instruction, isolated from writing, and no instruction at all. But which was the better option, or was either the better option? In decades past, although not too far past, teachers had taught traditional grammar, divorced from writing and reading. It consisted of worksheets, grammar textbooks, diagramming sentences and short excerpts whose purpose was to point out a single aspect of grammar. I remembered it, being a product of that methodology myself. The thing was, after all of this practice, multiple studies had shown that student writing hadn't improved (Weaver and Bush 14-15). Every English teacher I knew, at least the honest ones, recognized grammar as a problem of some sort. Why couldn't students transfer their very proper and advanced grammar training to the page? Perhaps it was a lack of developmental readiness or just plain stubbornness. It didn't matter. The point was that students weren't able to demonstrate the practical application of the grammar that they had learned, which

implied that they hadn't learned it to the point of mastery. After a few studies appeared, (the first, *Research in Written Composition*, appearing in 1963) backing up what was already obvious in the classroom, many teachers decided to remove the instruction of grammar because, in most cases, student writing showed no improvement and, in a few cases, their teaching showed a negative effect on writing (Braddock). So, what was a modern day teacher of writing with a classroom full of struggling and failing writers to do?

Almost anyone who went to school in the 90's or earlier knows what traditional grammar instruction looks like. Everyone had a grammar workbook, full to bursting with exercises and rules and definitions. The teacher diagrammed compound and complex sentences on the board and it was like a logic puzzle, where one would try to figure out where each word went, enjoyable for some but, like most puzzles, confounding for others. Grammar is a very abstract sort of concept and it is difficult for students, especially young ones, to grasp it with any clarity. The vocabulary is strange to them. In an article from *English Journal*, Amy Martinson, a substitute teacher and graduate student at Northern Arizona University, explained the problem: "students are put off by the vocabulary of grammar because it is a 'metalanguage,' a language we use to talk about language" (124). The succession of definitions and rules would seem meaningless and pointless to a struggling student and through personal experience, I understood that my struggling students wouldn't retain anything they found meaningless and pointless.

Coincidentally, at that time, my school was finally able to purchase textbooks for our students and so I referenced the new grammar books that accompanied the texts. Even today, in a newly published grammar textbook, *Writing and Grammar*, published by Prentice Hall in conjunction with their 11<sup>th</sup> grade literature series, most of the exercises were disconnected from anything related to the literature within the series. The examples and excerpts were even further removed from everyday student writing. In a unit about infinitives, *Writing and Grammar* briefly referred to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, a selection within the sister text, and then continued with an exercise made of sentences like the following: "The goal of the National Park Service is to conserve natural scenery and wildlife" (310). This was not a sentence that today's student would care about beyond completion of the assignment. No wonder this practice didn't show positive results. This sentence was a one-time exercise that would not necessarily be repeated in any meaningful way. Prentice Hall, however, made some changes, partially embracing the relatively new idea (at least new to me) of teaching grammar in the context of student reading and writing. At the end of each section in the grammar text, there were "Find it in Your Reading" and "Find it in Your Writing" exercises which required the student to look back to previous personal reading or writing.

Many of my early articles referenced three common sources: Constance Weaver, Jeff Anderson and Harry Noden. Unfortunately, bookstores and libraries didn't carry many of their works. According to the professionals who made decisions about the inventories at these institutions, grammar instruction was not important enough for



these resources to be readily available for teachers. Or perhaps it was simply that we had all given up on the subject. I resorted to Amazon.com®. I quickly ordered Jeff Anderson's and Vicki Spandel's *Mechanically Inclined* and Constance Weaver's and Jonathan Bush's *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*. On my school teacher's budget, Noden would have to wait for a later date.

Constance Weaver, an expert in the field of teaching grammar, touted the benefits of teaching grammar in-context. Jeff Anderson, another teacher and author, explained context as meaning (*Mechanically* 11). I liked this. It implied that we should be teaching grammar that *meant* something, grammar that had a purpose and an effect, grammar that made student writing peel itself up off of the page and dance with life. Weaver and Bush said that teachers should “empower students to draw on those aspects of grammar that will enrich and enhance their writing” (3). Weaver encouraged teachers to focus on teaching grammar through student writing and reading in a positive, practical and productive manner. What did that mean? In a practical format, it meant looking at student writing, teaching a grammar mini-lesson, and then teaching the same concept in conjunction with the editing process *applied to student writing*. It meant allowing grammar lessons to be inspired by student need and paying attention to student writing enough to know what that need was. Grammar is, simply put, a study of language and, while that in itself was an adequate and interesting reason to study it, it is *not* an adequate reason for the adolescent mind to remember it. The human mind remembers best through association, and grammar has few associations outside of literature and writing, so why would we teach it outside of those contexts?

What I discovered throughout my initial research was this: Grammar is most effective when taught in the context of authentic reading and writing, and in a repetitive, recursive and positive manner. It wasn't an answer to the question of what is a teacher to do, but the beginning of a lot more questions.

My new expert sources explained grammar to me in a new way. Weaver said that grammar could be used to *enrich* and *enhance* writing when viewed as a variety of options, options for “adding detail, structure, voice/style, and fluency” (Weaver and Bush 7). Anderson stated that he used “powerful literature and student writing to teach the rules of language.” He went on to say that grammar and mechanics are “inherently linked to [writer’s] craft, and by making this link, we alter students’ perceptions of what mechanics and grammar do” (Anderson and Spandel 10). I began to see grammar in a whole new light. Instead of a rigid set of societal rules for writing, grammar became a tool for possibility: molding language into images, stories, emotions and memories. It was a way to *add* to writing, an embellishment meant to sprinkle writing with life, or maybe a tool to translate life more accurately into writing. My focus was originally to improve student writing, and maybe student attitude toward writing as well. I had gotten sidetracked in my single-minded quest for effective grammar instruction. Now, my primary reason for interest in grammar instruction took root in the soil of what effective grammar instruction could do for my students as writers, and it blossomed.

In one of these early articles that referenced many other authors, I discovered a quote by Harry Noden, author of *Image Grammar*, which I particularly liked:

I teach grammar because it is the doorway to the human soul. Its intricacies trigger our laughter, our tears, our dreams. Grammar is the secret muse of all expression, the portrait painter of life's emotions. It allows us to feel the touch of a lover's hand on a bridge in Madison County and hear the cracking voice of the oldest living confederate widow. It gives poets the syntax to paint brainteasers that will delight readers for centuries and helps truck drivers with the "gift of blarney" to spin captivating tales for their buddies over a morning cup of coffee. Nothing in life is more essential, more sensitive, more intrinsic to the human soul. When students come to share this vision, grammar bridges the world of living to the world of writing, reading, and speaking. How could we not teach grammar (Benjamin 19)?

Noden appeared throughout both Weaver's and Anderson's work. He also focused on teaching grammar in-context, but his ideas equated grammar with art, each grammar tool a brushstroke in the palette of the writer. He used the most action-packed, verb-intense sentences to show his students the power of good writing. Grammar was a tool belt of possibilities for writers.

Weaver and Bush went on to say that teachers need to help students, to give "conscious attention to grammatical options [ . T]heir placement and variation in their use will naturally enhance a writer's sentence sense or what is sometimes called 'sentence fluency'" (4). The key word is *options*. Up until then, I didn't look at grammar as a playbook of options. It was a set of rules. While children require rules, they do not inspire creativity or even a willingness to work. While they sometimes give a sense of

comfort, they also inspire fear, embarrassment, and in a spunky child, a sense of rebellion. Martinson says,

There is a psychology at work here and at the base of it is a child's fear of breaking a rule and receiving a reprimand. In a student's mind, grammar is a win/lose game: If you follow the rules, you win, and if you break the rules, [you lose] (Martinsen 124).

While some thrive on rule breaking, and the best writers do, most of us are fearful of breaking any rule that could have consequences attached to it. When it comes to grammar, those consequences usually look like a battlefield of red all over a poor and beleaguered paper. Anderson remarked that "marking every error is about as much good as yelling down a hole" (*Mechanically* 9). In fact, one of Weaver's twelve principles about the teaching of grammar was that teachers do little good and often a great deal of harm by marking all over student papers. She even mentioned an analogy equating English teachers to the God from Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God!" (37). I've done it. I even tried using different colored pens to avoid the stigma of the "red pen." The devastation and very obvious determination to cease trying were the same. I *felt* like an evil and vengeful god. Looking at grammar as a set of rules to be followed was the wrong attitude for the teacher and not at all inspirational for the student.

Grammar should be viewed as a "doorway" into the creative brain of the student. Grammar is strongly related to rhetoric, or "convincing an audience to do/believe something and engaging them deeply through the use of language and a

distinctive voice” (Weaver and Bush 3). The rhetoric wouldn’t only affect the reader. Grammar could be a way of encouraging students to take more ownership of their own writing. When provided with the correct tools, students would be able to see themselves in their writing. It would be emboldening for students for whom writing was a strange and intimidating thing. If they could write and *find* themselves there, it would no longer be strange and intimidating. Weaver gave an excellent example of enhancing a student’s I Am poem through the use of grammar. She began with a metaphor and then taught the student to use participial phrases and switch word order, therefore increasing detail. Throughout this process, she also improved the student’s confidence in his writing ability. (Weaver and Bush 58-62). I began to see the impact of a shift in teacher attitude toward grammar. When the teacher saw grammar in such a positive and empowering light, students would, too.

In addition to the ugly connotation of traditional grammar, some of its tenets were ineffective. As previously mentioned, it seemed that a long list of grammar vocabulary was not only unnecessary, but harmful, burying kids under a mountain of meaningless mess. The experts seemed to concur: minimal grammar vocabulary should be used to maximum effect.

How much Traditional Grammar vocabulary is enough? Weaver defined the basic parts of speech and sentences in *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*, as necessary for a discussion between teacher and writer about writing improvement. I took all of this information and, paired with my own experience as a teacher of inner-city, multi-level students, decided that the following concepts were important:

1. Vocabulary and knowledge for all of the parts of speech and what they do.
2. Vocabulary and knowledge for parts of a sentence and what they do. This is necessary to promote the ability and willingness to manipulate sentences and sentence parts for stylistic and rhetorical effect. (I agree with Weaver in that fewer terms here are better and that “adverbial” and “adjective phrase” will be more effective for students than the list of modifiers that can fall under these categories.)
3. Lastly, basic punctuation, including various endpoints, comma and apostrophe usage, quotation mark usage, the dash and hyphen and colons and semicolons.

According my new ideology, now, all I needed was some juicy literature to use as models for these concepts.

According to Weaver and Bush, “[s]ophisticated grammar is fostered in literacy-rich and language-rich environments” (27). That meant starting with some luscious and sleepless-night-inspiring literature, which does not always translate into the classics or even board-approved reading lists. The stories would have to be at the interest and instructional level of the students, as well as rich in beautiful language. In another source I consulted, one of the few actually available at the bookstore, titled *Getting Grammar: 150 New Ways to Teach an Old Subject*, the authors frequently suggested grammar through literacy, with a focus on read-alouds and student selected literature (Topping). Many of my students struggle to access texts that are rich with language, but this didn’t have to be a barrier. Books on tape or CD or reading aloud are possible

methods for overcoming this difficulty. Regardless, I had a small and not so happy epiphany: comprehension would be an obstacle for my beginning writers.

Further into my research, I learned that students and teachers should *talk* about what writers do that is effective and why it is effective. The classroom would become a thesis panel, critiquing published work, but for the purpose of instruction and simple appreciation of beautiful verbal art. It would work like an art appreciation class, critiquing technique and stylistic choices, but putting us all right up there, on level with the professionals.

This was one of the most concrete ways that I had ever seen reading and writing tied together. I had been told they should be taught hand-in-hand, but no one ever explained what that meant. Anderson supported the Writer's Workshop as an effective tool for teaching and applying grammatical options, and, after a little experimentation of my own, I began to agree. Anderson started with the Writer's Notebook, a pleasing moniker and one that inspires students to think of themselves as writers, an important attitude adjustment. Anderson supported this idea with the thought that

writers of any age need a safe place to spill themselves onto the page. [...] This is the repository, the organizer, the placeholder, the idea catcher, the canvas to experiment and create on, the place to be wrong and to be wrong boldly.

*(Mechanically 29).*

He included a writing section as the primary part of the notebook but also included a mechanics section, a section for striking words and phrases, a "Gems" section (for sentences or paragraphs that work) and a section on writing ideas (which incidentally

meets an Ohio Content Standard) (*Mechanically* 30-42). To Anderson's concept of the writer's notebook, I would add Weaver's Editing Checklist, which is updated by students and teacher together after certain grammar concepts are taught or noticed as a specific issue within a student's writing. With all of these ideas, I wondered how to actually *teach* the grammar, especially since I was trying to avoid the stigma of the dreaded Traditional Grammar.

My new gurus and just about every other expert that I consulted on the topic agreed that grammar lessons should be driven by the student. Instead of marking all over a student's page, the teacher should choose one or two key error patterns and teach a mini-lesson on those, followed by a re-teaching during the revision and editing process. Such instruction would involve examples which should stem from student writing or reading. This sounded like a lot of work but if lessons were student driven, then some student somewhere had to have made the mistake and such specified instruction might actually address the problem effectively. This could, of course, lead to those sore feelings I was concerned about with Nathan, but I would offer praise as well. Successful grammatical experiments would be offered as examples for other students, drawing positive attention to student writers and showcasing strong writing for others. These mini-lessons could look like anything from lectures to classroom games, hundreds of which were listed all over the internet and in multiple books. Sometimes the lessons could include the whole class while other times it might be only one or a few students.

This led to a very important part of Weaver's twelve principles as well as a major concern for many teachers: differentiated instruction. Weaver and Bush said that



“[g]rammar instruction should build on students’ developmental readiness” (31).

Students in any one given classroom would not be at the same level. This meant that a teacher needed to be flexible and willing to meet in groups or individually to be most effective. Since I worked in a school that *required* such strategies, these theories were more practical for me than I originally thought. If writer’s workshop was being used, other students could be busy with their own work, enabling me to teach specialized mini-lessons.

The last consideration of this practical look at teaching grammar in-context was grading. How would my students be graded if I didn’t mark up their paper? The grammar-in-context gurus shouted for writing portfolios, which are wonderful, but still need graded, eventually. In addition to other considerations like organization, and adherence to and completion of the prompt, most rubrics for writing assignments tended to allot ten to fifteen percent of the total score for grammar and other conventions. So, how did that ten to fifteen percent get graded? Holistically. Were there only a few mistakes that didn’t detract from the coherence of the paper? Then, full points. Were there more mistakes, noticeable but not problematic for the reader? Take off a third of the grammar points. Were the mistakes very noticeable, detracting attention from the main idea of the paper? Another third. Was a translator needed in order to understand what the writer was trying to say? Zero points awarded. This was not an intimidating red-scrawled paper. The teacher could put a few kindly jotted notes about repeated mistakes and write off the rest as a one- or two-time error. This would ostensibly result in the student being corrected, their self-confidence intact, and the

student-teacher relationship would not be beaten to a pulp. A good day for any English teacher.

While I was aware that many people were aware of all of the information I found, I was not aware of the research, though very time consuming (people write an awful lot about writing), became pedagogy-changing for me. I had already implemented a few of the ideas into my classroom and couldn't wait until the next year to implement even more. I began to understand how it all might work, and I began to understand what "in-context" meant. I had found my muses.

## **Crossing the First Threshold**

Summer came, and along with it ample time to research. I read through multiple works voraciously. I started with Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle*, searching for a way to implement in-context instruction into my classroom. She was mentioned in much of my early research and I had also heard about her throughout my undergraduate studies. I also reviewed a few works of Tom Romano and Ralph Fletcher. I read through my sources and made notes in a notebook. I listed lessons that I thought I would need to teach in order to move toward effective grammar instruction. I also reviewed the various methods from the sources and compared their methodologies so that I could pinpoint similarities and differences and be sure to test them within the classroom.

Reading and writing workshop seemed a viable option, especially since differentiation was pretty much the only path that might lead in a forward direction for my particular classroom. I spent hours poring through Atwell's book, taking copious

notes and making lists of much needed supplies. The imaginary classroom that I kept in my mind began to look like a different place.

This research went much like all of the previous text-based research I had conducted throughout my academic career. I learned a lot of surface level knowledge here, nothing very personal. I discovered what I thought to be a very logical and student-based manner of teaching writing. I made connections between the texts and began to get a bigger and more detailed view of the concept of in-context grammar instruction. I began to visualize how this would look in my classroom. I also ran to the store and spent a lot of money on resources I hadn't previously thought to use: scissors, stationary, glue sticks, folders, markers and pens of different colors, highlighters, etc. I began to plan for instruction under this new concept. It was very time-consuming and very expensive.

In addition to my plan to implement in-context grammar instruction in my classroom as a way of improving student writing overall, the need to choose a Master's thesis topic became pressing. In the previous spring, I had heard about an educational research class that would begin in the summer semester and carry through the fall semester, focusing on research within the classroom. The topic was negotiable and effective grammar instruction was a solid choice. I signed up, hoping that I would be able to form a thesis out of the research that I did within my own classroom. The idea of grammar instruction as a pathway to inspired writing had already overtaken my professional life. Why not make something lasting out of it? I had taken the first

irrevocable step onto the difficult and less traveled path of the teacher-researcher.

There was no going back.

## **The Belly of the Whale**

I had some adjustments to make, especially in regards to the idea of research. Before I began to understand what teacher research truly was, I thought of research as the heavy dullness of an almost deep sleep, at least in the front of my mind where I considered it. Research was what I thought scientists did and not teachers. Teachers learned and taught. We learned what and how we had to teach and, maybe if we were good teachers, we learned a little extra for ourselves. Without a doubt, I viewed my life as a teacher as having a lifelong learning requirement and I thought all teachers should feel the same but I never thought about any of the things that I did as research. But the more I thought about it, the more I considered the excitement I felt when I got a new idea about teaching, when a new unit sprung into being in my head and I had to use books, the internet or other sources to plan. Of course, the energy of the idea fizzled out about half way through and I was left trudging my way through the rest of the unit that I didn't plan as well as the beginning. The problem was that I never began soon enough. I began planning as soon as it occurred to me that my present unit was about to end. Without fail, I was suddenly implementing a half-cocked plan of action and once I got into it, it was difficult to muster the energy to finish researching and planning with any passion. So, in a way, research, in regards to teaching, was a way in which I frequently

disappointed myself and a spotlight on one of my biggest character flaws: my struggle to finish anything as strongly as I began it.

For the past two years, my school had been involved in a program focused on differentiating learning through the Ohio State Academic Standards. Last year, we focused more on pre-assessments and how we could design instruction based on those pre-assessments, given weeks in advance, of course (which I never managed). So pre-assessments had become a sort of research. They were not as easy as they seemed. Trying to test a few topics at multiple levels without overtaxing the student or myself was a daunting task. My educational research experience, at that time, consisted mostly of the art of constructing effective multi-level pre-assessment.

Research, for me, had come to mean boredom, learning, struggle and work and work and work. I had gone through six years of undergraduate studies, two years of teaching and two years of graduate studies worth of research papers. Needless to say, when I heard about the premise of the educational research class, I was at first intimidated by the amount of work sure to follow, but I was willing to try it. After teaching another year and struggling to figure out my classroom in a deep and comprehensive way, it started to sound like a great idea. I was especially excited to see students who few people expected much from become great at reading or writing because I had managed to create or adopt some useful theories and put them into practice.

I began to learn about teacher researching, a new concept for me, through articles assigned in class and discussions during class. A particular article, "Addressing

the Problem of Elsewhereness: A Case for Action Research in Schools” by Garth Boomer, made me think of research in a whole new way. My favorite thing about the Boomer article was the concept of research as a teaching method. I knew that English teachers were notorious for their research papers and that science teachers had science fairs, which involved some amount of research but I didn’t think we used research as a format for lessons often enough.

My classroom was student driven in many ways. I asked questions like, what can they handle? What will they get into? I asked myself those questions all the time and I frequently acted on the answers, but a true student driven classroom went beyond these things and got the students interested in how they learned. I thought it would be interesting to give a struggling reader a few pages from Kyleene Beers’ book. I wondered what would happen. It might be a great way to get kids involved in their own learning, to get them to *own* it, as Boomer liked to say. While I appreciated the tidbits I gathered from my readings, overall, the discussions we had in class affected me more, with the exception of research as a teaching method courtesy of Boomer.

I quickly learned and assimilated a new way of thinking about my classroom. Not only was I going to change my entire curriculum, but also my style of instruction. And not only was I going to change, I was going to observe the changes and their results, and I was going to change again, as needed, and observe *those* results. As a fledgling teacher-researcher, I knew that I would never view myself as an effective teacher again if I ever stopped observing and changing in the attempt to better my teaching. My brain was overwhelmed by the amount of work that stretched out before me. In my own

typical fashion, I shrugged my shoulders at the inevitability of it all and started on the first small steps.

As summer continued and I learned about teacher research, I continued my personal research as well. One of my classmates from the teacher research class mentioned that a local educational service center sponsored quite a few summer seminars on various topics of interest to local teachers. In fact, she told me, in a few weeks, they would be sponsoring a seminar on the very topic of teaching grammar in-context. Four of us, all English teachers from the class, attended the seminar titled “The Craft of Grammar: Integrated Instruction in Writer’s Workshop.” It was run by Terry Murcko, a local veteran high school English teacher who had recently been introduced to Jeff Anderson’s *Mechanically Inclined*. He was familiar with Harry Noden and referenced him as well. It was auspicious, almost as if fate had set me on this path. I got to see what in-context instruction might look like. He modeled Anderson’s lessons and sprinkled the two-day seminar with a little Noden for perspective. I saw a practical application of what I wanted to do and, amazingly, I thought it might work! I was pretty sure before but I didn’t know what it was going to look like or how well it would work across the grade levels. At the workshop, I witnessed a bunch of teachers use it and like it. I was excited, not so much for the improved outlook on my research project but for the improved outlook on my students’ writing. I saw improved grammar usage in their futures as well as improved creativity and, if I was lucky, an increased love for writing. Writing in Miss Hahn’s class in the next year might just be fun, an exciting thought.

I still had a few questions about how I would implement it. How often should I ask them to write? Every day? This would have been ideal but I didn't want to set them up for failure due to burn-out. Also, how much work was this going to make for me, seeing as I had to differentiate at three different levels within a given class? I worried. I decided that I would begin my own writer's notebook for three reasons.

1. I would write every day to see how awful it would be.
2. I would have something to show my students as an example, an inspiration, a realization that I am in the boat with them.
3. I would have a truer picture of what a writer's notebook should look like and hopefully have less struggle of my own, independent of theirs.

I also felt the need to be more selective of the literature we read in my classes. I wanted some stuff with powerful language in it. Great mentor texts. I knew that I would use things that I was reading and hopefully things that they were reading but I thought it would be useful to have go-to texts that we were reading or had already read as a class. I was finding new uses for literature in my class and *this* was what I had believed all along: reading and writing as mirrored images of each other, twins, one projective and one receptive. And now I had a practical and fun way to show this to my students.

Excitement was mounting and suddenly summer didn't seem long enough for planning but too long for my anticipation. I still wanted to cement some great methods of teaching grammar. I ordered Noden's *Image Grammar* and another book called *The Chortling Bard*, which used Shakespeare as a mentor text for grammar instruction. I wanted to look more into grammar as rhetoric for my older students and I wanted to



get sentence strips, which I previously thought were too elementary, and butcher paper and markers and find places in my room to treasure my students' artful language. I was excited about my work and I WAS NOT AFRAID TO ADMIT IT!! I was ready to enjoy learning to teach writing well!

I began to understand how these in-context lessons might affect student writing as well as student attitude toward writing. My attitude was changed and my excitement tangible. The lessons in Weaver's, Anderson's and Noden's books were beautifully crafted and fun. They made writing seem like the magic that I had always thought it was, and what kid, no matter their age, doesn't like magic? My thesis began to take shape in my mind.

I began to wonder if student writing would actually improve, particularly grammar and mechanics, if I used grammar as a key to open the door of writing into a world where my stunted students would be inspired and *able* to let flow the creativity I saw within them. After having crossed that threshold into Atwell's, Anderson's, and Weaver's domain, I almost *needed* to try it: teaching grammar in-context. Utilizing the writer's notebook and workshop, as put forth by Atwell, Anderson, Ralph Fletcher, and Katie Wood Ray, to name a few, seemed to be the most practical approach and a great framework to give guidance during the coming madness.

I then had to consider: What exactly was I looking for? I needed to define for myself what constituted grammar and mechanics. It seemed that different professionals had different ideas about what was encompassed in such topics. I decided to consult

one of my new muses. Anderson provided a nice definition that I found I could agree with and understand:

*Grammar* includes all the principles that guide the structure of sentences and paragraphs: syntax—the flow of language; usage—how we use words in different situations; and rules—predetermined boundaries and patterns that govern language in a particular society. *Mechanics*, on the other hand, are ways we punctuate whatever we are trying to say in our writing: punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, formatting. (*Mechanically* 5)

These structures and rules and punctuation were all tools that I wanted to provide to my students to help them improve their writing. But what would signify improvement? The most obvious and quantitative way to track improvement would be a diminishment in student errors. But I also wanted to see my students making stylistic *choices*. This reflected back on both the grammar and mechanics definitions that Anderson gave. Weaver and Bush said, “*Style* [...] often refers to specific choices a writer makes to create voice” (239). Voice is the attitude a writer takes within their writing. As English teachers, we talk about mood and tone within the literature we read. But we rarely teach our students how to successfully accomplish these things within their own writing. As a reader, style is called mood and tone. As a writer, it is called voice. Voice, it seems, is inexorably linked to grammar employed as a rhetorical tool. It’s tough to teach because it is such an ephemeral and individualistic concept. According to *Rhetorical Grammar* by Martha Kolln, “*Style* is [...] used in connection with variations in sentence structure, with structural and punctuation choices that writer[s] can use to [their]

advantage” (183). If students are making stylistic choices, those choices should be evident within their writing and also during the writing process. Such stylistic choices by students would demonstrate that they had enough knowledge of grammatical constructs to play with language.

After figuring out just what it was that I wanted to accomplish, it became important to fine tune my methodology: in-context. Just what did in-context look like? An ever-shifting pedagogical approach for students and teachers fashioned of student need, student-loved literature, and teacher and student writing. It is well-crafted sentences from much-loved stories to show writing as the art and skill that it is. It is a student who wants to make his writing wonderful, discovering an error that he cares to correct. It is a teacher who sees a pattern of errors in her students and molds the learning of a rule into a game or activity suited for her students and then sets them to the task of de-burring that mistake from their writing, to form a more polished product. In-context instruction is taking the very stuff of specific student minds and molding it into grammar lessons that come from them and speak their language, meet their needs and take root in their writing. I had a few ideas about what categories I wanted to focus on and formulated a few questions in addition to my main question to further structure my research:

<p>Research Question: How will literacy-rich, in-context grammar instruction affect student writing?</p>
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- a. How will it affect student feeling toward writing?
- b. What other motivations might be involved?

- c. What format/structure of lesson works best?
- d. How will the quality of student writing, including content, structure and conventions change?
- e. What frustrates the process?

In order to ensure that I was focusing appropriately on each category, I further defined them for myself as such:

#### A. Student Feeling Toward Writing

I think that the way a student feels about writing will make him or her inclined to write more or less. The more a student likes to write, the more they will write.

This is important for many reasons:

1. Students need to have fodder for grammar lessons.
2. Students need to care about their writing in order to care about improving it grammatically.
3. This research will require a lot of writing, which could discourage students from enjoying the class and its content over the course of this research. It could adversely affect any results.

I need to monitor the students' general feeling about writing over the course of this study to see how it effects and is affected by grammar instruction.

#### B. Motivations for Writing

Motivation for writing is important to this study because I need to get students writing, and if I can discover what will inspire them to write, I can use that to

help them along. I want to monitor student motivations as I continue along and then try to re-create those motivations as best I can in the classroom.

C. Lesson Format/Structure and Effect on Learning

Part of this study is to discover what sort of in-context lessons will have the best effect on the students' writing. I will try different formats over the course of the study and mark what effect it seems to have on learning, behavior and writing.

Formats will include lessons before writing occurs, lessons during the writing process, based on student need, and lessons taught after writing, that allows students to go back into their writing and make corrections. Also, some lessons will be based in literature and others will be based on student writing.

D. Change in Quality of Student Writing (Content, Structure, Conventions)

I hope to see a change in student writing over the course of the study. I am too realistic to think that it will be positive across the board, but I want a good look at each of these areas. It would not be much use if I managed to improve conventions and mechanics but ruined the content of the writing. All of these areas are important parts of writing and should be monitored and controlled as much as possible.

E. Frustrations to the Process of Research

Frustrations are to be avoided, but they need to be monitored so that I can analyze the best way to avoid or address them. There are always frustrations to the learning process in any classroom. By being aware and searching them out, I hope to minimize them before they cause serious issue.

At this point, I was an entirely different person. I understood that teachers were supposed to reflect on their professional practices. And I had. I thought about what I would do again and what had failed miserably. I thought about how to improve lessons and how to get around obstacles to my teaching. I was definitely a thinker. But I became a more purposeful thinker. I planned with intention and I knew that what I planned would require close observation and the willingness to make changes, and more importantly, the willingness to admit that I was a far from perfect teacher. I needed to maintain my focus throughout until the end of my study to see where it would lead. Because I was deliberately planning, observing and recording, I had more reason to pay attention. I was going to dig out the dirty little secrets I had shoved down into my subconscious and give voice to that silence in my teaching stories, and to the silence that descended when I asked for suggestions for dealing with a budding and fragile student writer.

## **The Road of Trials**

At this stage in my journey, I only had to implement all of these great ideas into my classroom. I was prepared. I had packed my teacher adventuring bag with loads of research, discussion with other professionals, past experience, and a huge ration of optimism. I stood on the beginning of what looked to be a smooth and winding road with beautiful vistas, frequent rest areas and plenty of possibility for success just over the hill. What I didn't see was the nearly impassable canyon just on the other side of that hill, between me and the promise land.

I needed structure and tools not only to assist my students and me in teaching and learning but also to assist me in gathering data for my research. I followed the guidelines set out for me in my educational research class, trusting in the wisdom and knowledge of those who had tried this type of thing before. I used my professor's recommendations for tracking and gathering data, and implemented a few of my own ideas, specific to my study.

### **Reading and Writing Survey**

During the first week of classes, I gave my students a reading and writing survey based on Nancie Atwell's suggestions from *In the Middle*. I gave it over the course of two separate days. One day was the reading survey and another day was the writing survey. These surveys were intended to gauge the initial feelings of students on the topics of reading and writing. I wanted a baseline for my study, to enable me to judge later on if there had been a change.

I wanted to know if my students considered themselves writers. I wanted to know what kinds of writing they liked to do, how often they wrote, and what inspired them to write. I asked them what good writing was. They did not have the vocabulary or experience to answer. They were shocked when I asked them if they were writers. Most of them thought a writer was someone that published books. Most of them hadn't written all summer, and if they were honest about anything, it was that they didn't like *any* kind of writing. Poetry was the second most popular genre for student writing

preference. The most popular answer for writing inspiration was “because the teacher tells me to.”

The reading survey was a little better. Many students admitted to having a number of books in their house and even more admitted to reading during the summer. Some of these students later admitted to lying on the survey about the amount that they read, in order to make a better impression on me. There were also quite a few students who readily admitted that they did not read at all. Many couldn't verbalize how they chose books to read, and I got one word answers for how they felt about reading in general.

The survey was not as useful as I had hoped it would be. I didn't end up using it. I knew there was a risk of students answering the survey with the intention of making a good impression, but I thought that I could minimize that by telling them that it didn't matter what they put on it because I was merely trying to gauge what they felt and wouldn't judge them based on it. The best information that I got from it were the questions asked and explanations needed in order for them to even complete it. From this reaction, I began to understand the current student attitude toward writing and reading. It was disdain, ignorance, disinterest and maybe even a little hate. One of my main interests was student attitude toward writing. I needed to turn this negative attitude around.



## My Teacher's Journal

I began the school year with a teacher's journal. Since much of my research was qualitative, I needed as many ways to document what was going on in my classroom as possible. As soon as the first class period on the first day was over, I began writing down ideas in a notebook. I kept one side for straight facts about what was going on in the classroom and one side for my observations and feelings about what was going on. I kept up the writing for about two weeks before it got tedious to try and write everything down. After that, I switched to typing my journals into my laptop, which I left on my desk during the day. I tried to be sure to make an entry after each class that I taught, to keep the observations fresh in my mind. I used codes for each student and tried to reference events that seemed important as well as what sort of activity we did that day.

The typed journal seemed to flow a little better, but I also quit separating my observations from my feelings. It was easier to get more out. Then, disaster struck. After two weeks of journaling on my laptop and saving it to a flash drive, my flash drive was stolen out of my classroom. Unfortunately, I hadn't backed up anything that was on it and so I was out of two weeks of journaling. Luckily, after that, I had no more mishaps, at least of *that* variety.

I did, however, find it difficult to journal every day. Things kept coming up; I had other things I had to do. I didn't have the time I needed when I needed it. Sometimes, I journaled at the end of the day or at home. The entries that I entered right away were much more detailed and more enjoyable when I went to reread them later. Some of the

entries were dismally short. It also felt as if I didn't get the great data that I should have been getting, as if I were missing details that might be important later. Instead, for some days, I only had a very brief summary of what occurred in class that day, with a few notes if anything outside of the ordinary happened. I didn't jot down as many student comments as I wanted to.

I started out excited about the journaling process and determined to do it well. My expectations in this area were too high and I was disappointed in myself. However, over time, I began to see a much deeper purpose than I had originally. I had initially thought to look over my activities and thoughts at a later date so as not to make the same mistakes. Instead, I found patterns in my thinking that enabled me to make corrections in the midst of the process that I may not have otherwise thought to make. The journal allowed me a bird's eye view of my classroom that I wouldn't otherwise have had, both because it gave me more detailed information over a greater period of time than my memory would have, and because I was forced to think more reflectively about what was going on in order to write about it every day.

### **The Writer's Notebook (The Dreaded Binder)**

After the first week or so of school, I wanted to get into the routines that I hoped to establish throughout the school year. I began with the writer's notebook. Anderson and Spandel devoted almost an entire chapter to preparing and using a writer's notebook. I took their ideas and altered them to fit my needs before I tried them out on

the students. I should have just followed their suggestions and *then* made changes after we got started. I got myself into a list of troubles.

Anderson suggested purchasing composition notebooks for each student (Anderson and Spandel 29). Instead, my hyper organized brain, seeing the need for more structure than a single notebook could provide, decided that one-inch binders with section dividers would be a better idea. I worried that my students, notorious for disorganization, irresponsibility, and destruction, would not fare well with only a flimsy notebook to hold the fodder for their precious writing and my precious study. I decided that binders were sturdier, could hold more, and were more flexible than a notebook. What a mistake!

We spent *weeks* trying to tame the wild binders! First it was making sure that each student had one. I had to battle our dragon of a secretary, guarding her hoard of office and school supplies, and sneak some binders from the book closet. I handed them to students slyly in the hallways or in the morning, before school. I had to avoid causing embarrassment to those who were too poor to afford one, or whose parents refused to purchase them. I also had to avoid getting caught by the secretary with the stolen goods. Once the majority of my students were in the possession of a binder, I then had to address the issue of where to store them. Sixty binders (some were not one-inch, but four) take up a lot of room. The students didn't have lockers and even if they had, I wouldn't let them take the binders out of the classroom. I wouldn't see the majority of them ever again! I also had to figure out how to create dividers within the binder for each of the sections. I decided on woefully flimsy construction paper and hole-punch

protectors. They still fell out, ripped or mysteriously disappeared. By the second week of September, my teacher journal consistently reflected the chaos and frustration caused by the binders:

9/13/10: "Asked them to mark their binders. Chaos."

9/14/10: "Binders, chaos again."

9/15/10: "Got through binders with only seven minutes to spare."

I eventually stored them in milk crates at the front of my classroom and had a student immediately pass them out on days when we needed them. This cut down on some of the chaos, but there were so many other problems that this one kind of fell into the background.

## **Reading Workshop**

There was one major change in my classroom that not only took the students time to get used to and implement, but took up almost one whole class period a week: independent reading. Atwell and Weaver both strongly supported the idea that exposure to good literature was key to creating better writers. While I would definitely use a plethora of awesome literary examples during my teaching, it wouldn't be enough. They had to be reading on their own. I decided to use the model of the reading workshop described by Atwell in *In the Middle*. Not wanting to cause apoplexy in the student body, I asked them to read fifty pages a week, including one-half hour of silent reading time on Fridays. I was giving up almost an entire period to silent reading! It hurt. I was going to offer credit for the time spent by way of a conference, during silent

reading, wherein I could talk to the students about what they were reading, keep a finger on interests and effort, and generally get to know my students better. I didn't have enough time to begin with, but I knew that this was important, especially for my reluctant and struggling readers. I brought a majority of my own young adult novels in to create a classroom library and instituted a Scholastic program to allow students as much diversity in their reading as possible. Our school had a library, but it was woefully insufficient for a school of learning diverse teens. I pilfered what I could and started buying when I had the funds. I spent a lot of time helping students find books that I hoped would suck them into what I jokingly referred to as "the dark side" of book lovers. The difficulty was compounded by students who were at the maturity level of a teenager, but at the reading level of a primary student. They were often embarrassed to be seen with a "kid book." Graphic novels were suddenly all the rage and we couldn't keep them on the shelves. I talked certain struggling students into reading even Shakespeare through the venue of graphic novels.

While the time was certainly an issue, this was one of the most worthwhile activities that I implemented. On September 10<sup>th</sup>, the day that I explained reading workshop and introduced the students to their new library, my journal entry reflected the excitement that the students felt about reading workshop. I wrote "They were really excited to read, and after they picked out their books and filled out the class log and personal log, they all started reading on their own." I had the same class later in the day for a social skills lesson and they repeatedly asked if they could use the time to read instead! I was shocked. Who knew? My kids were suddenly excited about reading! It

wasn't long before I had other teachers complaining to me about kids reading during their classes. I know I shouldn't have, but I laughed. I was giddy with this small piece of success. Of course, not all of the students invested fully in this aspect of class, but it was certainly a majority, and many of those who weren't fully invested, were at least reading, whereas before, they only read when we were reading a piece of literature in class. However much I may have struggled with reading workshop, it was nothing compared to the struggles the students *and* I had with writing workshop.

### **Writing Workshop**

Writing workshop, once somewhat understood, consisted of a variety of activities available to students. The activities consisted of:

1. Freewriting
2. Revisiting/revising/editing old pieces of writing
3. Peer conferencing after filling out a form
4. Publishing
5. Reading/researching within a genre
6. Teacher initiated conferences at least once a week

This was a struggle for them, and for me. The students were trying to figure out what to do with all of the freedom. They were not used to being given time to make choices and do as they pleased. They were making choices but the consequences were rarely what they planned on. They chose to talk but not conference. When they did choose to conference, they didn't ask for specific help from their peers. Revision time was practically non-existent. Editing only happened when they were conferencing with a

teacher. It took a lot of behavior management from our teaching staff in the room to get this to run smoothly enough to consider it useful.

### **A Week in the Life**

After I got through the initial set up of the classroom and attempted to cement some rituals into place, I began with a very definite plan for a schedule:

- Monday: Grammar or genre lesson introduction or reinforcement including notes and activity and about 10 minutes to attempt the concept then share
- Tuesday: 20 minutes for word study activities including teacher conferencing with students to monitor activities and 15-20 minutes of writing workshop while teacher conferences individually with students with optional 5 minutes of sharing time at the end of the period
- Wednesday: Literary selection connected to genre or grammatical convention and occasionally time for writing workshop
- Thursday: 20 minutes for word study activities including teacher conferencing with students to monitor activities and 15-20 minutes of writing workshop while teacher conferences individually with students with optional 5 minutes of sharing time at the end of the period

Friday: Teacher reads a selection and introduces or reinforces a comprehension strategy, then independent reading time while teacher conferences with students on their reading

It was difficult to maintain this schedule all of the time. Besides the normal distractions of the school day, my students frequently take twice as long to perform a task as a normal student and so sometimes we got a day or two behind. However, with the exception of Friday independent reading time, which was a constant as long as we had school on Friday, we maintained this pattern as best we could. I eventually made a few changes, which I mention below.

## **Word Studies**

Before I even began, I knew that spelling was a huge problem across all of my classes, and the problem was so diverse in each class that I needed something flexible yet easily managed. Since part of my intent was to reduce grammatical errors, I needed to address this issue and in a way that met my “in-context” criteria. Atwell included detailed instructions on weekly independent word studies (196-201). I decided to implement her idea, as is, into my classroom. We started with 20 minutes each on Tuesdays and Thursdays to choose words, find definitions, antonyms and synonyms, and draft original sentences utilizing the words. . I adapted her procedures in order to be sure they were as clear as possible for my students. I provided each student with a Personal Spelling List, adapted from Atwell (501), and within their writer’s notebooks, they kept a vocabulary or cool word section, based on Anderson’s and Spandel’s



“Author’s Word and Phrase Palette”(39). They were also given a handout to explain how word studies were to operate. (See Appendix A for these handouts.)

This went well, at first. Assisted by the teachers in the room, each student came up with an initial list of words to add to their Personal Spelling List and vocabulary section of their writer’s notebook. For the students who struggled with reading and writing, we focused on Atwell’s suggestion for “Personal Survival Words,” including words like parents’ and grandparents’ names, street names, towns, months, teacher’s names, etc. For more advanced students, we included Atwell’s “Demon” words, or words most people tend to misspell, like a lot, separate, unnecessary, beautiful and definitely. After this initial assistance, though, students were expected to add to their own lists with words they were unsure of while they were writing or words that the teacher marked as misspelled during editing conferences. This is where the system began to fall apart.

Between the reading workshop, word studies, grammar lessons and other daily goings-on, we didn’t have much time for writing and editing. The students didn’t add much to their word lists. The result was that the weekly word study was reduced to ridiculousness. Words like fudge, nightjar, cougar and dumb began to appear on the word lists of the students who were advanced spellers, and words like the, and, who and where appeared on lists of less advanced spellers. When I noticed this trend while grading the weekly spelling tests, I conferenced with each class, re-emphasized the purpose and importance of the word studies and tried again. When students got stuck and couldn’t come up with any words, they had teacher assistance. We still had a

number of students who never asked for help but used words I had no doubt they already knew how to spell. I thought a more systematic and structured approach might be more appropriate.

While perusing my options at the bookstore, I came across a program that looked like it might be a good fit. It was titled *Small-Group Reading Instruction: A Differentiated Teaching Model for Beginning and Struggling Readers*, by Beverly Tyner. It featured a list of roots that could be used to focus spelling instruction. I created worksheets for the students that had about 20 roots on it. The students were asked to choose one root per week and find five words that featured that root. They would then be expected to look up the words in the dictionary, find the definition and create a sentence correctly using the new word. I even created a tree graphic organizer for them to use each week. (See Appendix A for both of these handouts.) This seemed to make the activity more controlled and purposeful, but I lost some of my “in-context” requirement. Because of the lack of direct correlation to student reading and writing, it wasn’t overly effective in decreasing spelling errors.

Eventually, time took its toll and we had other things we had to focus on, like actual drafting and reading literature and OGT test preparations. Word studies were the first thing to go. They were very time consuming and I didn’t see much decrease in spelling error throughout student writing. I actually got so frustrated with the amount of time and lack of progress that I conferenced with my oldest class on it and we attempted to come up with a solution together. I wrote a memo on it in order to think

about it more reflectively. With a little hindsight, I can see the value in such activities, but I needed to find a more streamlined and efficient manner of accomplishing them.

I did maintain the word studies in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade class, where my most atrocious spellers existed. But once again, I shifted the focus. I found yet another program to adopt. The book titled *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction* by a panel of authors focused on word sorts and offered a pre-assessment that showed exactly where a student had issues. I gave each of my 8<sup>th</sup> graders the pre-assessment and grouped them according to the results. I then provided them with flash cards each week focusing on their problem areas. I also gave them new word study notebooks with instructions pasted directly on the front of each. (See Appendix A for the instructions.) Some examples of the problem areas were long vowel patterns, diphthongs, assimilated prefixes and complex consonants. There was something for everyone and the physicality of the word sorts, cutting, sorting, and copying, seemed to engage them on a whole new level. We spent quite a few weeks trying to get it right and we are still fine-tuning. One of the requirements of this particular word study is that the students observe and notice the spelling rules on their own. It may not be entirely in the context of their writing, but it addresses their particular problems with frequently used words and it encourages them to be responsible for their own learning (Bear.) I have no definitive results for this approach as of yet.

## Grammar Lessons in the Classroom

I spent a lot of time analyzing the formatting of the lessons put forth by Anderson, Weaver and Noden. I outlined each author's general lesson format and compared the benefits and risks of each. Below are my general outlines for each author and my notes on each based upon my teacher journal observations.

### Method 1: Weaver

1. Show students a model of the concept, either teacher-created or from literature, focusing on the grammatical rules being used.
2. Create a model together as a class, or create a model *in front of* the class.
3. Have students create their own models in small groups or pairs and share.
4. Have students compose models individually and share.
5. Ask the students to apply the concept in their own writing.
6. Provide an editing checklist for the concept, if applicable.
7. Allow time for teacher or peer feedback.
8. Teach a mini-lesson or allow an editing or revision conference on the concept at a later date.
9. Re-teach to all or specific students, if needed.

(Weaver, *The Grammar Plan Book* 23)

### Notes on the Weaver Method (10<sup>th</sup> grade class)

### Notes from my teacher journal dated November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010:

I let them decide whether they wanted a whole group instruction or small group. They chose whole group and so we did compound sentence instruction using *Green Mile*. [...] We covered simple sentences, which they seemed to have down. We talked about using compound sentences in our own language. One student said, "I can maintain, but I am having a nervous breakdown." We used this sentence throughout. It worked well. I posted the sentences from *Green Mile* and we talked about how they were compound sentences. We looked at the student's sentence and talked about which FANBOYS we could use with it. We defined the FANBOYS. Four students were most verbal. I worry that some of the quieter kids didn't get it. We'll see tomorrow.

**This followed on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010:**

I briefly re-covered the concept of a compound sentence and then I asked them to draft anything they wanted, using at least one compound sentence. This went a lot better than in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. I think I need to have them create new before I have them fix the old. Maybe this means that students need to create before they can fix. [...] After drafting, I asked them to find examples of compound sentences in their old writing and make corrections as necessary. Only about 5 out of 18 students got to finding and correcting compound sentences in their previous writing.

I didn't get to steps 8 or 9, but the method seems to work relatively well with 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. Sixty percent of the students had no errors in their compound sentences.

Another 25% missed the comma and the remaining 15% had sentence structure errors.

It is yet to be seen whether or not the understanding of this rule lasts.

### **Method 2: Noden**

1. Provide students with inspiration via a piece of literature, art, movie, visual aid, etc., that uses the concept and will inspire students to write using the concept without being prompted or instructed on the concept.
2. Ask students what they noticed about the piece, what did they like, not like, etc. If the inspiration is a written piece, write any favored sentences on something that can be left posted in the room. (This step can occasionally be skipped.)
3. Give students a formatted template in which to practice the concept.
4. Give students time to free write.
5. Get student writing noticed. Ask for volunteers to read their writing and then ask the class what they noticed or liked (only positive comments here!), or have students switch with a partner and then ask students to volunteer their partners' best sentences. (Noden, *Image Grammar*)

### **Notes on Noden's Method (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade class)**

#### **Notes from my teacher journal on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010:**

We watched *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. I couldn't display the text at the same time because I couldn't get the movie to burn onto a DVD. The movie kept freezing and I had to skip parts of it sometimes, but the kids were amazingly into it. We didn't get to talk about the brushstrokes and tomorrow is silent reading. I

may have to re-introduce it on Tuesday. Three students kept making comments about the way the movie was filmed, the reasons they chose to slow things down or film in different ways.

**Notes from November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010:**

Today we tried Noden's found poems. I used words from *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* and they seemed to like it, generally. One student's was rather abstract and I noticed his tendency to leave out letters or words in his haste. I helped a particularly low student directly at first, reading each word to him. Then he went off on his own with a few selected words. He did fairly well creating. I had to come help him edit afterward. [...] An Asperger's student once again astounded me. He got a little stuck at first because he thought he could only use the words provided. He did a great job writing about an assassin. He even used elements of poetry like incomplete sentences and such, ON PURPOSE! Another student wrote about a mustached assassin, with a particular focus on the mustache. Very funny. Two more students talked the whole time but they both made comments about how fun it was and how much they liked it. Even my most reluctant writer got something down.

Noden's method inspired great writing and excitement from the students, but it did not encourage usage of conventions like commas, periods, or even capitalization. It did encourage the students to appreciate imagery and beautiful language. It also taught about how tone can be deciphered through word choice. Word choice is a step on the road to making stylistic choices, the very technique that I wanted to see my students

using. Noden focuses on five basic tools or brushstrokes: participles, absolutes, appositives, adjectives out of order, and action verbs. This found poem exercise was the equivalent of teaching a painter how to mix paints before giving him instruction on how to move the brush. It certainly improved student morale in regards to writing.

### **Method 3: Anderson**

1. Perform an activity using the concept in small groups or pairs.
2. Provide examples and ask how these examples meet the definition or test.
3. Define the concept as a class based on examples from literature. (2 and 3 are interchangeable, depending on the difficulty of and student familiarity with the concept.)
4. Explain the concept and/or a test for the concept
5. Create or show a visual scaffold that can be posted in the room.
6. Ask students to attempt the concept.
7. Perform a follow-up activity at a later date with students working independently that uses or creates a new visual examples scaffold, to be placed in the room.

*(Anderson, *Everyday Editing & Mechanically Inclined*)*

### **Notes on Anderson's Method (8<sup>th</sup> grade class)**

#### **Notes from my teacher journal dated, November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010:**

Today we did a Capitalization Search. I had the students search through their own books for instances of capitalization. They had to write three examples on sticky notes and then group together to form categories. We then met back



together as a class and wrote each category, one at a time, on the board. They stickied their notes under the appropriate category. They were pretty into this but my co-teacher got them a little rowdied up and I couldn't talk over them so toward the end I had to have them go back to their seats. The speech therapist was also in today and she assisted four of the students. She was great to have at that table. [...] No obvious comments but this seemed to go well. There isn't a whole lot of integration into their writing [...].

The next day, we looked at the categories that came up in our examples and created a capitalization poster to be placed on the wall. The students liked being responsible for coming up with the rules. These younger kids enjoyed this activity more than the older kids did.

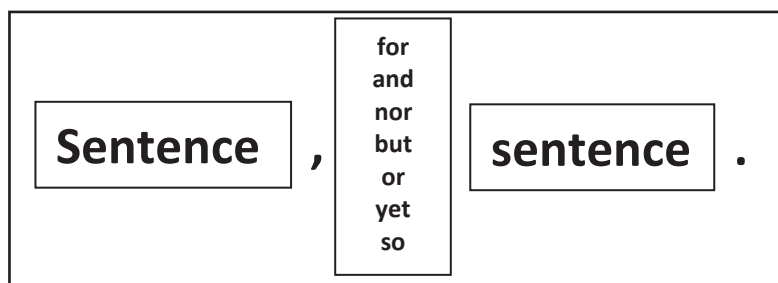
### **My Own Lesson Format**

After I attempted the three different formats of grammar lesson, I decided on an amalgamation of the three. Weaver's ideas from her *Grammar Plan Book* tended to coincide with Anderson's, but Anderson provided a permanent graphic organizer for the classroom that the students could use as a reference whenever they needed it. After seeing Anderson's lesson format in action a few times, I knew that such visual aids would increase engagement during the lesson and assist in retention later. Noden and Anderson promoted getting student writing noticed, and, when I attempted it, I noticed that the students got excited and even a few of my shy or weaker writers offered to share after they were comfortable with the class. I thought this was important and so implemented it in the following Frankenstein of a lesson format as well:

1. Show students an example of the concept, either teacher-created or from literature, focusing on the grammatical rules being used.
2. Create visual scaffold *in front of* the class, which can be posted in the classroom as a reference. Apply examples from literature or student writing to show the validity of the scaffold.
3. Have students create their own models in small groups or pairs and share.
4. Have students compose models individually and share.
5. Ask the students to apply the concept in their own writing.
6. Get student writing noticed. Ask for volunteers to read their writing and then ask for positive comments from the other students, or have the students switch with another student and ask them to read aloud their partner's best sentences.
7. Provide an editing checklist for the concept, if applicable.
8. Allow time for teacher or peer feedback.
9. Teach a mini-lesson or allow an editing or revision conference on the concept at a later date.
10. Re-teach to all or specific students, if needed.

I used this format at least once a week to introduce or reinforce a grammar or other writing concept. One example of the above lesson format in action is the lesson I taught on the concept of the compound sentence with my 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. I decided to use *Bridge to Terabithia* as my mentor text, partially because a few students in the class had read it or seen the movie, but mostly because I think that Katherine Patterson did a wonderful job on the novel.

1. We quickly reviewed what we knew to be the requirements of a simple sentence (subject, verb, agreement between the two) and then I wrote the following sentence on the board, from *Bridge to Terabithia*: “Leslie liked to make up stories about the giants that threatened Terabithia, but they both knew that the real giant in their lives was Janice Avery” (Patterson 48). I asked the students to identify the two simple sentences within the example, which they did easily enough. I pointed out and circled the coordinating conjunction, “but,” as well as the comma before it. I explained that whenever there were two complete sentences joined by a coordinating conjunction, or F.A.N.B.O.Y.S., there would always be a comma before the conjunction. We had covered the F.A.N.B.O.Y.S. (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) in a previous lesson.
2. On a 24” by 36” piece of sticky-backed paper, I drew the following visual scaffold, based on Anderson’s graphic (Anderson & Spandel 86):



I asked if anyone could compose a compound sentence based on the visual scaffold. Being that it was near Thanksgiving break, one student offered the following sentence: “I hate turkey, but I love going to Tennessee for Thanksgiving.” I wrote it on the board and asked whether or not it was

compound, and why or why not. They decided easily enough that it was indeed a compound sentence. I asked them to pinpoint the F.A.N.B.O.Y.S. They identified but. I wrote a few more examples from *Bridge to Terabithia* on the board and asked them to identify whether or not they were compound as well as the coordinating conjunction, if it was. Also, if it was not, I requested that the students make it so. We also spent some amount of time discussing why certain coordinating conjunctions make more sense in certain situations. We defined the relationship of each coordinating conjunction for clarity.

3. I asked the students to work at their tables to come up with some awesome and descriptive compound sentences, using the scaffold on the board. I circulated while the students worked. This was met with success at all three tables, although one table had a little too much assistance from the Title I Reading Teacher, I think.
4. Regardless, seeing this success, I asked the students to draft their own on index cards, which they turned in just as class was ending. The remainder of the steps would have to wait until tomorrow. Lessons typically move slowly due to the need to repeat and a generally slow pace of student work. The index cards revealed that about half of the students fully grasped and could apply the concept. About a quarter of them have sentence level errors and that would need to be addressed in a whole different type of lesson.

5. The following day, I reviewed the compound sentence, coordinating conjunctions and necessary comma. I then asked the students to find compound sentences within their previous writing. If they could not, I asked them to create one by joining together two simple sentences that appeared next to each other. This was a bit of a disaster. There was a lot of whining happening about not being able to find anything. Among the three teachers in the room, we were eventually able to assist everyone in finding or creating one, but it took most of the class period.
6. Whenever I noticed a particularly good compound sentence in the students' writing, I handed out a sentence strip, asked them to carefully copy the sentence on the strip and tape it to the wall. After the first few sentences were posted, I had a stampede of students who wanted to post theirs as well. Those sentences are still posted in my room.
7. When the next assignment came due, I marked compound sentence rules on the editing checklists of those students who did not use the concept correctly in the writing we conferenced about.
8. Students were asked to conference with a peer as well as the teacher in between completion of their assignment and submission. Very few students focused on conventions in either conference, unless prompted by the teacher. Students tended to address only the errors specifically pointed out by the teacher.

9. About 50% of the class demonstrated mastery of the concept after this first round. Another 25% could be prompted to fix their errors with minimal instruction. The remaining students needed more than re-instruction of compound sentences. We needed to back up even further.
10. The students who demonstrated sentence level errors were asked to participate in a lesson focusing on sentence construction and two-word sentences.

This lesson format worked the best out of any of the above that I tried. It worked better because Weaver's method of introducing a concept in the context of student reading, paired with my careful selection of samples, engaged the students in the lesson to begin with. Anderson's advice to create a visual scaffold for the students ensured that my lower students had another way to learn the concept and everyone had a constant reference guide posted in the room, one that they helped to make and had a connection to. Throughout both all of their books, Weaver and Anderson both emphasize the need to have students attempt a concept together before attempting it alone. This also allows me to group my students by ability and provide them with the correct amount of teacher assistance and differentiation. Some students wouldn't make it past this stage, but this format allowed for the students to attempt the concept on their own, also allowing the teacher to do a formative assessment on who would need reinforcement or remediation. This format also used Noden's and Anderson's suggestion to get student writing noticed, which motivated the students to write as well as increased positive attitudes not only about writing but about my class in general.

## Student Work

After a month or so of instruction, the students finally began to provide some work samples to refer to. After almost two months, they had finished their first piece of writing and had completed the revision process according to peer advice and the lessons that I had provided. I had first drafts that were completed with minimal grammar instruction and final drafts that were completed with specific lessons taught based upon categorized student weakness. After the first draft was turned in, I wrote each student a note, making content suggestions and categorizing them by the types of errors they made the most. This was my first method of analyzing the students' writing. It allowed me to see who made what sort of errors and what errors appeared most frequently. I decided to narrow my focus to capitalization, dialogue, and commas, because all students made mistakes within those areas. I didn't want to overwhelm them with a page long list of errors. I also wanted a few lessons that I could teach to small groups who would benefit directly from them, and every student fell into the category of needing help in at least one of the afore mentioned areas. It was efficient, effective, and purposeful. When final drafts were turned in, I counted all grammatical errors against the student, but I weighed the mechanics that a particular student had been taught more heavily than conventions that had not been addressed.

The last way that I analyzed student work was that I chose 15 students, at random, from my stack of papers, five from each class. I wanted to compare those students' early writing with their later writing with an eye for whatever grammar rule I had taught them. I would look for instances in which the rule belonged and I marked

whether or not they used the rule correctly, then I would calculate a percentage of instances that the student used the convention correctly. While I was doing this, I was also looking at the quality of the writing. I tried to judge based on coherence, descriptive language, and improved storyline or information included, depending on the type of paper.

The writing samples were difficult to analyze. Writing is a much more amorphous thing than I had previously realized. It is possible to count errors and the differences in errors between two papers, but then the following papers must be reviewed as well, to see whether or not the rule is truly learned. Content quality is difficult to judge in some cases as well because sometimes the writer just isn't at his or her best. It is easier to see a trend over a longer period of time, say six months or a year. I felt extremely limited by the amount of time I had.

Nine weeks and a few more grammar and content lessons later, I collected another set of work samples from those same students, looking for patterns of error and any other data I could collect. I weeded out those students who had not followed the instructions of the assignments, turned in a half-completed assignment, or didn't turn in an assignment at all. I needed to be able to compare like to like. I even looked over students whose work I had previously passed over in my search for samples. About 40% of my work sample pool was unusable due to incomplete or missing work and assignments not completed to the specifications of the assignment. There weren't any students who consistently had issues, but about 40% of them did not consistently perform according to assignment requirements or expectations of submission. I don't



feel that this was any different than any other year of teaching, but I never noticed that it was such a large percentage of students who missed instructions or instruction. I would have to do a little research into how to decrease this number.

### **Data Analysis and Memo Writing**

My first data analysis was driven by the educational research professor who requested it, but I was also a bit obsessed with the topic at the time. The data analysis was based on the amount of things that had happened in the classroom to deter me from getting to instruction. I noticed a lot of complaining in my journal, so I went through it and copied anything that seemed to mention reasons why we weren't getting to instruction. I pasted them into a new document, marked with their dates, and viewed them all together. From this I was able to get a more cohesive picture and I wrote a brief memo reflecting my thoughts. My purpose for this was twofold. I wanted to vent my frustrations in a physical manner, so that I could look at them later more objectively. I also wanted to see if there was any sort of pattern that would help me to overcome the numerous frustrations. I wanted an organized way to look at the mess in my mind, and I recognized data analysis as a viable method. (See Appendix B.)

My second analysis/memo was based on my notice of too much time spent on a particular activity, word studies, in class, an off-shoot of my first memo. Because I now had some concrete data, in the form of my first data analysis, I chose to conference with a class of students in order to address the issue and gather ideas. I presented them with the problem as outlined by the analysis. I told them my motivation for word studies, and

asked them for suggestions about how to spend less time and yet still accomplish extension of vocabulary and spelling improvement. I memoed about my observations and thoughts on the conference.

Where previously I would have dropped the activity, I now had a manner of thinking about it objectively, and because of this, I also had a reminder of why I had initially thought they were important. Instead, I ended up changing the way the activity was accomplished and later changing the activity altogether in order to accomplish the same goal more effectively. I went from making very general observations followed by snap judgments to more detailed observations (through my teacher journal), followed by careful analysis (through the data analysis) and purposeful changes.

My third memo actually came out of a vignette I wrote for my educational research class. During an interview that I conducted with my co-teacher, he said that the students *needed* approval from the teachers. He noted that they were always up in front of us, asking what we thought of their writing and if it was any good. I went back through my teacher journal and discovered multiple instances of students seeking approval. I pulled each out and pasted them into a new document, pulled out more of the same from the interview then memoed about them.

In my classroom, this translated into my being more careful with praise. I was always sure to give it, but I started to add a little piece of constructive criticism to accompany the praise. I had also inadvertently been discouraging students from seeking teacher approval by encouraging them to seek out peer conferences instead. I minimized the times that I pushed them away, knowing that the students wanted praise

from someone they viewed as knowledgeable and experienced. Without delving too far into psychology, I could also guess that some of the students were almost desperate for adult approval, and writing had become a way for them to meet that need. My approval had become like money in the bank that I could trade for student effort and willingness to learn.

My last memo also came out of my interview. While we were discussing, the idea came up that students cannot benefit much from grammar instruction until they care about writing. I wanted to see if I could find any evidence to back up the idea. I found about ten or so instances and pulled them out for a memo. I also pulled out the ideas from the interview for the memo. I was absorbed with the idea. I began to treat students differently according to their investment in their writing. From three years of teaching the same students, I knew which students cared about their writing, which ones completed assignments merely to please me, and which ones didn't care about much beyond passing. I knew which were on the verge of caring deeply and just needed a few more little nudges of confidence. I acted accordingly. Ethan, a student who completes assignments to please me, is not a student who will self-correct, but he will refer back to his writing when I ask and look at a poster outlining the rules of a convention. He will try to find a few mistakes and correct them, but he will not correct everything. However, over time, his writing has improved, both in content and in his willingness to attempt conventions. I snuck grammar instruction in on him, a slow injection, over time. There are other students who have become truly devoted to their writing, maybe even a little fanatical. They see the value of grammar and attempt to use

it when they know it. However, traditional grammar instruction confuses many of them horribly. When grammar is presented in the context of beautiful literature and their writing, it makes sense. Grammar becomes a wonderful sort of art, and it becomes worth learning because they want to make their writing beautiful, too. Lastly, the students who do not care about their writing beyond a passing grade, those students I leave alone the most, only providing minimal feedback and only the sorts of suggestions that I hope will interest them in their own writing. After I have them hooked, then I can drag them down into the depths of grammar instruction. Otherwise, my time and theirs is wasted, especially because I don't want to chance discouraging them from liking writing.

### **Vignette**

The professor of my educational research class asked all of us to write vignettes, both to get a focused look at our research as well as to give us another way to look at our qualitative data. I began to think about meaningful interactions between my students and writing, or at least interactions that I had witnessed. The biggest difference between before and after the instruction was implemented was the number of students who approached me outside of class time to discuss their writing. I thought back to all of the times various students had done so and decided to condense them into one morning. I also wanted to give some scope to the research and show some difference, so I included the student who started it all for me as a sort of flashback. I found a significant emphasis on how important it was to my students that their writing be a

vehicle of adult approval, specifically mine and sometimes my co-teacher's as well. I am still changing as a teacher, and the exercise of writing this first vignette made me realize that the very least I can do for my students in return for their hard work and creativity is to look at their writing and find one unique thing in it to comment on. I try my hardest to make time for them when they ask, and if I can't, I set up a more convenient time later. This strategy has more than paid for the time I invested with a willingness to try and a willingness to trust me with their writing.

After I was done with the first vignette, I had an important realization. Everything in it was positive. I was only looking at the positive results. I needed to look at what was not going well. I decided to do a second vignette. I wanted to adequately depict the failures, or at least the not-yet-successes, as well. I don't mean to say that the students were failures, because they weren't. I mean to say that I had failed to reach them up until this point. These were the students who did not care much for writing and some of them didn't care much for me. I was left without a leg to stand on. However, I am still working on finding some way to sneak in under their defenses and jumpstart an interest in the written word, whether it is through a great book, or by finally finding the one thing that student might care to write about. Writing the vignettes was very important to me because they encouraged me to find both positive and negative themes within my research and results.

### **Vignette 1: A Positive Look**

In the mornings, I always have about 20 minutes of good, solid work time. I refresh my brain with what has been going on in various classes, as well as what will be

going on today. I clean off my desk from the previous day and file papers. Today, while filing, I see a paper crumpled in the back of my filing cabinet, as if hiding to avoid being thrown out like the rest of last year's papers. I start to pull it out but pull more carefully once I see what is on the paper.

I remember last year when, as a ninth grader, Nathan handed in his short story, *GothPig*. I had spent a whole year gaining enough trust to get him to just *write* for me and he writes Joseph Campbell's hero cycle into a gothic animal story! I remember having to ask him to read it for me because it was written so poorly. I remember being afraid that if I let him know how poorly it was written, he would shut down his writing life and shut me out.

I think about this story a lot because, for me, it was the beginning of my own hero's journey. The look on Nathan's face when he handed in his story and the corresponding "can you read it for me? What do you think?" was enough to keep me from telling him that I couldn't even read it. I smiled and said I'd get back to him after I read it. It was one page, handwritten, and it took me nearly an hour to decipher and I still had to have him read it aloud to be sure I got everything. Nathan's story fell on the heels of a nine week unit on grammar. I felt like a failure.

I look up from my reminiscence to a cacophony of voices and sounds. The heathens were descending. In the chaos of my 10<sup>th</sup> grade homeroom, three students approach my desk. The first is Lee, a frequently misunderstood, mismatched blond boy who spent his entire 8<sup>th</sup> grade year picking fights for a little attention, even if it *was* negative.

“Miss Hahn! Did you get to read my story yet? I need to know what to fix to make it better. And did you give me a list of spelling words like I asked?”

I sigh. “Lee, you just gave it to me yesterday afternoon. I told you, I have to get through all of the papers turned in *for grades* before I get to any other ones. Give me a few days. I’ll get to it, I promise.”

His face falls, just a little, but he nods and trudges over to put away his jacket. I smile because last year, even the beginning of this year, Lee never would have turned in extra writing. He had liked to write but he rarely turned in anything extra. Next customer: Jessica, my angst-ridden, teen docu-drama, who has developed a taste for writing. A lot.

“Here, Miss Hahn. I brought you my story. I know it’s a little longer than three pages but I knew you wouldn’t mind.” She hands over five pages, typed, and double-sided. “Oh, and my dad said if you could give me assignments that don’t require this much writing, it would be better.”

“But, Jess, I only asked for three pages. If you choose to write more than that, then that’s on you. I certainly won’t stifle you.”

“I know, but, you know sometimes when I start writing, I just can’t stop and then it gets to be too long.”

“I see. So you want something that’s more limiting?” I ask, certain of her seeing the error in this reasoning.

“Yeah.” She pauses, considering. “Limiting? Like telling me I can’t write about whatever I want? Or telling me to only write about certain things?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Oh.” She frowns. “Well, no then. I don’t want to do that.”

“Okay then. Thanks for the story. Try to make it shorter next time, for your dad’s sake.”

She also wanders away, pensive about why her father might need her to write less. I think about my struggle with her last year. She didn’t turn in much of anything, ever, when she even *came* to school. Behind her is Nathan, a year older and what seems like a foot taller.

“Miss Hahn, hi!”

“Hey, Nathanicus. What’s up? How was your evening?” I ask, using my nickname for him to encourage that sweet-natured smile he usually hides.

“Oh, it was good. I brought you something.” He pushes his glasses up on his nose and smiles, pulling a slightly crumpled paper from his camouflage backpack. “I know I turned in that story for my grade but I really want to put this one in the class magazine.”

I take it from him and glance at the title. “10 Things Children are Not.” It’s typed and there are minimal spelling errors that I can see on the first page. It’s insightful and even amusing. Heart-wrenching, maybe. All from a glance.

“Okay,” I say and smile. “I’ll look at it.” I can’t believe how incredibly far his writing has become. I see a few places where he forgot to place a period but because of the past few months, I know he’ll know where they go if I ask him to take another look at it. Better yet, I know he is expecting me to give him some constructive criticism, both



content and grammar related. He's waiting for it so that he can polish his work and then be proud of it when it gets published.

As the class leaves the room and I am left clutching his paper to my chest and smiling, Nathan turns at the door. "Don't forget to read it, Miss Hahn. I gotta get it done by next week."

Themes:	
1.	Change in Student Attitude Toward Writing
2.	Change in Student Writing Output
3.	Change in Writing Ability
4.	Creation of a Writing Community in the Classroom
5.	The Importance of Grammar Instruction
6.	Student need for teacher approval
7.	Teacher change in attitude toward student writing.

In regards to grammar instruction, this vignette demonstrates how some students' attitudes toward grammar have shifted. They see the value in it as a tool to polish their writing. It has become the way to make their writing viewable to the public. They also see the value in learning about grammar. They still see grammar as a set of societal rules for writing, but that is my fault. Maybe next year I will find a way to portray grammar as Noden's painter's palette. I still have more to figure out and learn.

### **Vignette 2: A Less Complimentary Look**

#### **Miss Hahn:**

Today was going to be a typical day, I could tell. Students were talking. Trash was flying. Jessica was smacking Brandon. Jose was staring into space and chewing on his hair. Nathan was at my desk, staring at me. Ethan was talking louder than everyone else and waiting for me to get "The Look" so that he could tell everyone to "Shut-up!" Ugh.

“Nathan, please sit down. Jessica, keep your hands to yourself and I’m giving you a check.” I look around the room to see if there is anything I missed before I begin.

Ethan has noticed that I am about ready to begin and so goes for his customary “Everybody, shut up! Miss Hahn is waiting to start!” I roll my eyes and grab for the mallet of my Tibetan Singing Bowl. I give it a good *BONG* and wait. Silence descends and all eyes are on me, except Jose’s; he’s still totally zoned out, and chewing on his hair.

“Okay, ladies and gentleman, time to get started! Today, we are going to continue writing whatever it is you started yesterday. I will be around and Mr. Levstek will be around to assist you. I will be noting what you are doing and how much you have done and you *will* be getting points for the work you do in class. So, get to it and don’t mess around!”

I grab my clipboard off of the nail on the bookcase and begin to circulate.

**Jose:**

*I wonder what we’re having for dinner tonight. It was pretty cool last week when my mom let me eat a whole pizza. I’m pretty hungry now, actually. I wonder if Miss Hahn will let me out of this stupid class to go get my snack in the office. She usually doesn’t. She usually goes and gets it herself. Doesn’t she realize I need the break from this stupid class? I hate this class. It’s so boring. I think I’ll play some Sega when I get home. Yeah, Sega. Sonic is by far—*

“Jose!” Miss Hahn shouts.

“Huh? What?” I look at her, blankly.

“I’ve said your name like four times now.”

“Oh, what?”

“What are you working on?”

“Uh, I don’t know.” I look down at the blank paper in front of me.

“You were supposed to have started something yesterday. Come on, man. You gotta get something done. We already talked about this. I don’t want you to fail,” Miss Hahn says, with that dumb I’m-in-pain look on her face. I hate that look. As if she really even cares about me or knows about anything I care about. She thinks I need to get better at my writing, but I can already write just fine.

“I don’t know what to write about,” I say, to make the look go away. It becomes an eye roll.

“Jose, we gave you twenty ideas yesterday. What happened to those? I thought you were going to do an op-ed piece on old school video games.”

“Oh, yeah.” I pick up my pencil, hoping she’ll go away.

“Mr. L., can you keep an eye on Jose, so that he doesn’t zone out again?”

“Sure,” he says, and smiles at me. This is not any better. He talks a lot. A lot more than Miss Hahn. I can’t think when he’s talking to me. He doesn’t even let me think about what he’s saying. He came up with the idea about video games, which is pretty cool, but now he won’t quit talking. I wish Miss Hahn wouldn’t have moved my seat by him, even though I know I need to work more in here. I put my head down to show that I’m working. Maybe that will fool them.

*What games should I talk about in here? Sonic, for sure. And Mario, I think.*

*Maybe I’ll play Mario again tonight, instead of Sonic. I like the music on Mario better. It*

would be really cool if they came out with the old games on the new systems with saves and everything. That way I wouldn't have to remember all those dumb codes or start over...

**Ethan:**

"Ethan, how's it going? Where are you at?" Miss Hahn say from next to me. She leans over to look at my paper. She smell good. "How come you're not using capitalization like we talked about?"

I look up. I knew she was gonna hit me next. I always know where she at. She fine, a little mean, but fine.

I smile. "I'm just trying to get some stuff down, you know. I'll worry about that stuff later. But I think I'm done. Can you read it?"

She frownin'. Uh oh. "Why don't you get a peer conference sheet and ask one of your classmates to read it for you and make some suggestions?"

I hate when she do that. She *know* I don't like other people readin' my stuff. It's personal, and I don't want these fools readin' my stuff. Sometimes they say stuff like all out loud to make fun. They'd *really* do that to me. I don't trust no one in here, anyway.

"Can't you just read it? I don't want no one else to read my stuff."

"Ethan, I can't read everybody's writing every day. I just don't have enough time."

"Well, I'm not doin' it," I say, waitin' for her to give in. Maybe she'll send me to the office. That'll get me outta dis shit. I'll just tell her and she'll send me. She look a little stressed today, so I won't hafta try so hard.

She sighs. “You have to do it at least once. What’s the problem? Find one of your friends to read your paper. It’s not a personal story.”

“No. Just send me to the office. I don’t care. I’m not doin’ it.” I start to yell a little, to be sure she’ll send me.

She sighs. “Fine. Go.”

I smile and nod, grab my stuff and hit the door. I’ll be bad enough to stay down there. Principal’s an idiot, anyway.

Themes:

1. Disinterest in subject area
2. Students pre-conceived positive or negative attitude about themselves and their work prevents their acceptance of instruction
3. If students don’t care about their writing, grammar instruction is irrelevant
4. Students will increase negative behaviors to avoid unpleasant tasks

In regards to grammar instruction, these students are the students who have grown the least grammatically and in content. They don’t care to improve and frequently do what they must in order to fly under my radar or avoid putting their very self out in the public eye through their writing. Although lately, as mentioned below in my findings, Ethan has started to write to please me. I only hope that this is a step toward writing to please himself.

## Old Habits as Temptress

I didn’t see the results that I wanted to see. The positive results I got were an unexpected bonus, but I didn’t see a solid improvement in grammar and mechanics. I think that much of this was due to my old habits, as well as the old habits of my

students. We were used to a different sort of classroom. Reading and writing workshop were new and different to us. We needed time to adjust. We were trying to learn how to do this thing called workshopping. Their papers didn't reflect more purposeful writing or stylistic choices and I didn't blame them. I don't think we ever got to the level where we could talk about making stylistic choices with any amount of understanding. Their grades were not what they were used to from when I edited their papers, *forced* them to revise, and kept my proverbial foot to their neck every step of the way.

I can't say I was much better. I was not always as clear as I should have been because I was not sure what I was doing. This was my first year using such a strategy, and I was unprepared in a lot of ways. I had materials, but too much stationary, glue sticks and folders and not enough notebooks, pencils and time. I set up my classroom in a way that I thought would promote the workshop. I was wrong there, too. I didn't have enough space between the writers and conferencers. Sometimes the students had to climb behind my desk for reference materials, and the students weren't the only ones with time management issues. It always seemed as if they were rushed with their final drafts. I knew that part of it was their fault for not planning their time out well, but I tried to add editing lessons on the fly that ate up time. We had things come up, as all schools do, things like assemblies, snow days, fire drills, student absences, and one time the janitor came in with a drill to fix something and made it impossible to work for a full 20 minutes. Because I had report card due dates to deal with and a requirement to show student work for portfolios, I had to be somewhat stringent on due dates, and the final products suffered. Alternately, I thought we spent entirely too much time on one

piece of writing, and I didn't get as many writing samples as I wanted, let alone student samples that were usable for comparison.

I am not giving up, though. I learned a lot of things, about myself, my students, and teaching writing. I will use those things to fine-tune what I have already tried and liked. I will increase the number of students who complete assignments according to requirements and I will have a classroom where writing happens.

## **The Rest of the Journey**

I am still working my way through the rest of the journey. I am not yet comfortable with teaching in this manner. I see the merit and I am definitely continuing, but there is still much work to do. At the very least, I have developed an understanding that I want to teach in this manner, because, even though I have not found that it works definitively, I still believe in it. I understand that until I am comfortable with this manner of teaching, my students will not benefit fully from it. However indefinite the documented results, I know how it *feels* as a teacher. There have been many days where all 18 students in a class were engaged to some degree (an amazing feat in an ADHD school), and we all developed a different sort of love for literature and writing. We have also developed a sense that grammar and mechanics are important for us as readers and writers and we all, including me, need to work to get better at them. While my students have not increased the number or pages of finished pieces of writing per grading period from last year (two 2-3 page papers per nine weeks), they have increased

the amount of informal writing produced, especially writing drafted outside of class time.

The revision process is still difficult and new for the students and also for me as a teacher. Last year, there was little to no revision. I simply did not have time to conference with every student and tell them every mechanical mistake they made. I also refused to mark all over their papers. Now, on average, 4-5 students per class have begun to seek out revision and editing opportunities on their own. Another 2-3 in each class will revise when asked without argument or constant supervision. The remaining 9-10 students have to be watched constantly, reminded to get back on task or why revision is important, and occasionally refuse to edit or revise at all. We are still learning to get rid of our bad habits.



## **CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS ALONG THE WAY**

### **Student Feeling Toward Writing**

It is difficult to prove quantitatively, but through my observations, I get the impression that there has been a slight increase in positive feeling toward writing, but there are still a few outlying students who have remained unaffected. As I mentioned in the section above focusing on the vignettes, my students are writing more. Some are even writing in their free time.

I know that there are some unaffected students because I still have to constantly monitor what these students are doing during freewriting time. They frequently choose to talk, stare off into space or have a pressing need to use the restroom. I also have to pester them to turn in anything at all after the due date has come and passed. Their freewriting is minimal and they require as much assistance now as they did at the beginning of the year when it comes to getting started. In my 18-student classes, I have 3-4 students on any given day who require this extra vigilance. I know that this is due, in part, to my specific population, but I am determined to decrease this number by persisting with these methods of teaching. I can say that I am reasonably sure that there has been no increase in negative feelings toward writing.

The most interesting reason, to me, that there has been an increased interest in writing, is the surprising love of language that my students have evinced. It was a surprise to them, I think, and it was certainly a surprise to me. There have been some

instances that have led me to believe that my students love language. One example is one student's request for a cool word of the day and then many subsequent reminders over the course of the year from a handful of other students to change the word when I forgot. Other examples are 3 particular students who found out that the dictionary has a lot of neat words in it and now make it a habit to read through it when they have free time. Also, my oldest class, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders have repeatedly used the unique words I pick out for them for word studies from the literature we read. They use them in everyday conversation and they use them a year after they learned them. While there were little hints of this throughout my study, the most glaring incident occurred with a student who regularly fails my class. Here is an entry from my teacher journal, dated October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010:

Today I used Harry Noden's Artist's Palette activity and had them use 10-20 of the words and phrases that they collected from *Beowulf* and then another 15-20 words and phrases that they came up with on their own to write a paragraph. Wow! This was great. I had a few kids testing but I worked really closely with Robert, Scott and Tim. All three got really excited about writing. Tim was asking a lot of spelling questions for words like "shred," "unbeatable," and some others. Scott asked a few questions about commas and semi-colons. Tim said, "don't that sound good! I am a beast writer! I should write stories." He was also excited to read it to me.

Another piece of evidence came from my interview with Dean Levstek, my co-teacher:

At the same time, they see you getting excited about things, and they see you, you know, displaying an earnest love of literature and language, and I think that pushes a little bit. It's definitely something that can't be taught like math. Like, anything in this classroom, we gotta act like it's the best thing that's ever happened in life, and how awesome it is, and how cool. We love it. Because that's the only way they're gonna buy into it, especially the younger kids. (7).

Language has been a surprising motivator of interest in writing. I can't say that it has been *the* reason for writing, but it has certainly increased their interest when I talk about it.

Harry Noden, the author responsible for the activity mentioned above, has built his entire grammar repertoire on the idea of interesting words, or images, built from those words. One of my favorite quotes from Noden is:

Traditionally, the study of grammar has dealt only with words, phrases, and clauses. However, when I began to see grammar as the process of creating art, it seemed unnatural—even impossible—not to view grammar as a continuous spectrum in a whole work. (ix).

Noden recognizes the importance of words, like brushstrokes on a canvas for a painter. While his ideas don't lend themselves very well toward mechanics like proper comma usage or semi-colons, he does provide a number of strategies for improving language usage and increasing the chances of style and voice coming through student writing. He encourages writers to *show* images instead of telling them, increasing their interest or even love of writing.

I could guess at other reasons that seemed to encourage students to get more interested in writing. The students seemed to enjoy the instances of literary examples that I pulled in for examples. The language in the samples was lively, and I also provided background from the stories that seemed to interest them, if not in writing, then at least in reading. This relates to another reason that I can guess at. Most of the students have dramatically increased the amount of reading that they do. This has increased their interest in the written word.

## Reading Workshop

After two solid grading periods of reading conferences, I tabulated the following class averages to show what percentage of the required weekly 50 pages was being accomplished by each student:

<b>Class</b>	<b>Average %</b>
<b>Grade 12</b>	43.38
<b>Grade 11</b>	77.63
<b>Grade 10</b>	72.38
<b>Grade 8</b>	66.63

To get this data, I allowed the students to tell me how many pages they had read and then used their book (present in class for independent reading time) to quiz them on whether or not they had read as well as their ability to use comprehension strategies we went over every Friday. Each student was given a score out of ten based on the number of pages they had managed to read and comprehend. Students were provided with

books at a variety of reading levels, to ensure that this reading experience was as pleasurable as possible. The goal was to encourage them to enjoy reading, and for some of the students, giving them books at grade level would have entirely defeated that goal.

Although not entirely a surprise, it shocked me a little to see exactly how poorly my seniors had done with the reading. On average, they were reading less than 22 pages a week! I know that *all* of the teachers have been complaining about the seniors' work ethic this year, but to see it in one specific area made it more real and gave me some statistics to put in front of them. It is yet to be seen whether or not this will encourage them to pick up their reading during the remaining grading period.

However, I was pleased with my other three classes, even the 8<sup>th</sup> graders. This new aspect of my class wouldn't affect those who were already readers, but those who weren't readers were reading, at least a little bit. I even had a few students become readers because they found authors or genres that they liked. Those students who scored less than 50%, dragging down the class average, ranged between 10% and 40% of each class, with the exception of the seniors, where only one or two students maintained good scores. So, statistically speaking, at least 60% of my students were reading a decent amount each week according to the conferences we had. This was a vast improvement over the initial two to three students per class that I *knew* were reading outside of school before I instituted the reading workshop and weekly reading requirement.

## Motivations for Writing

As I mentioned, there was a slight overall change in student feeling toward writing. I'm not sure that it is a positive change, or, more specifically, I don't know that the motivation for the change is truly a good thing. Many of the students appear to like writing more in that they are quicker to begin writing assignments and have demonstrated an interest in others' reading of their writing.

The reason for my concern is that, as evidenced by my data analysis on Student Eagerness for Approval from the Teacher and also through the interview and vignette, many of the students seem to be writing because they are actualized by the teacher's approval, not only for completing class work, but they are also touted as skilled writers in a number of ways. Teachers in my classroom understand the importance of being supportive of student work and we always manage to find something positive to say about student writing, whether it is the story line, correct usage of a convention or just one great word. The students have come to rely on this complimentary method of dealing with their writing and are eager to write and show the teacher their writing for that little morsel that makes them feel appreciated or just noticed.

If I consider my 18 student class of 10<sup>th</sup> graders, there are 6 students who will almost always stop the writing process after they have received acceptable praise from the teacher. This usually results in minimal revisions and only the editing that is directly discussed in the editing conference with the teacher. There are, of course, also one or two students who never attempt the revision process unless they are forced to in some manner, but these students hardly perform, regardless of teacher disapproval.

*Notice* is a big word for Jeff Anderson. He invites students to notice things about writing and then notices that they have said something intelligent, creative, or have just tried. He also encourages teachers to notice student writing. Anderson addresses this in both of his books by encouraging the teacher to post good examples of student writing on sentence strips and posters around the room. He uses this method in various lessons. He also posts student work that is not correct but a great attempt for a particular student, in order to encourage that particular student. (Anderson).

The other big proponent of this finding is Nancie Atwell. Atwell suggests that teachers provide publishing opportunities for students such as class magazines or even bigger, more public opportunities, such as newspapers and journals. She expects her students will be published before they leave her class (100). This may be a better method of fulfilling this student need.

I had initially planned to create a class magazine. I even put out a schedule to the students, but when it came time to take submissions for the first issue, I only received three pieces of writing. We were still working on learning routines and no one had actually finished a product in class. The three submissions were from students who had written them at home because they were excited to be published in a magazine. I pushed publication back. When I attempted to publish the second issue, I got 17 submissions, but only six of them were typed (one of the requirements of submission). I had to allow extra time for the students to type them, and we have no computer lab and only six computers available in my class room. I decided that with all of the other

changes going on in my teaching and their classroom, the class magazine would have to wait for next year.

While neither author outright says that students need that approval, they both imply it through Anderson's *noticing* and Atwell's call for publication opportunities. Practically speaking, most adults don't write without reason, so why should we expect students to?

## **Change in Quality of Student Writing (Content, Structure, Conventions)**

Time has not been my friend in this research. It is too early to tell whether or not there will be permanent improvements in student writing in regards to any of the questions I was interested in, namely:

- a. How will in-context grammar instruction affect student feeling toward writing?
- b. What other motivations might be involved?
- c. What format/structure of lesson works best?
- d. How will the quality of student writing, including content, structure and conventions change? And
- e. What frustrates the process?

I blame this partially on myself. I need to get better at teaching this way. However, as of right now, I have seen a lot of improvement, across the board, in content. There



has not been a lot of improvement, over time, in conventions, and I have not even begun to address structure.

I have included some samples of student work to show the differences between first drafts and second. They are not always obvious improvements, but most of the students have shown some amount of improvement, if only due to increased familiarity with the task of writing in my classroom over the course of nearly a year. Improvements tend to appear in quality or quantity of content and willingness to get started on the task of writing. However, second pieces of writing are completed now and there is minimal proof that the lessons have had an impact. This was the area where I got the least answers in the time that I had.

Dialogue is a great example. I taught this convention to my 10<sup>th</sup> grade class in October. In November, after I received first writing submissions, I separated the students into groups based on what sort of grammatical mistakes they made and I thought they might benefit from the most. I had seven students in a group that focused on capitalization, another topic we had already covered, and mostly the remedial group. Many of these students made many other mistakes, but capitalization was something I thought that they could succeed at. I had six students in a group with a focus on dialogue, and I had the remaining five students focus on comma usage. Out of the seven students that attempted dialogue in their writing, only one used it with any success.

Per the lesson plan that I formed, each group rotated through a brief reinforcement lesson on their specified convention, free writing while I was not meeting with them. I also placed dialogue rules on those students' editing checklists. Two

months later, when I collected final copies for second submissions, only two out of the five students who were in the dialogue group and attempted dialogue used it successfully, most of the time. They both still struggle with dialogue rules a little, but are easily reminded of the conventions. Another two students, including Ethan below, attempted to use some dialogue rules, albeit incorrectly, and the last of the five did not include any dialogue punctuation. One student opted to write a piece that did not contain dialogue.

### **Ethan: Attempting New Conventions**

I had a number of students who displayed no use of a convention and then misuse after a lesson was taught addressing that convention. Misuse included overuse, underuse, and new mistakes using the convention as can be seen in Ethan's examples below. Weaver and Anderson both frequently comment on how new mistakes are not necessarily bad. They show that the student is trying a new concept. Here are two pieces of Ethan's writing. They both feature dialogue. In the first, it is obvious that Ethan either doesn't know or doesn't care about the rules of dialogue. This piece of writing was something that he chose to do during freewriting time during the writer's workshop. It was not specifically tied to any set of assignment requirements. However, after the first submission of assignments, Ethan was grouped with other students who needed to improve dialogue use in their writing.

I Seen this beautiful  
 girl walking down the  
 street so I said excuse  
 me do you have a cutter  
 my mom told me to  
 call her when I feel in  
 love. She laugh and ask  
 what was my name she  
 said Candi I said that  
 a beautiful name Candi said  
 thank ask if she wanted  
 to go to the game and  
 she said sure.

Figure 2: Ethan's Pre-Grammar Instruction Writing

After the lesson was taught, using the above lesson format, Ethan put forth another piece of writing. While the content is a great commentary on how Ethan thinks socially, his usage of quotations marks is a great commentary on how he is learning. He demonstrates an understanding of the fact that quotations marks are necessary, but he obviously is not using them correctly, confusing what is spoken for the speaker in regards to what gets put *within* the marks.

One Time I got a phone  
 call I didnt answer the  
 first time Cause , didnt know  
 the ~~an~~ number. So they called  
 back a second time I answered  
 I Say hello The he Say is  
 this Ethan "I" say yeah who Dis  
 he said "God" he said i  
 called you cause i wanted  
 to disuce you coming to  
 heven "I" say Im not ready  
 to die "God said" no you dont  
 have to die yet I said when  
 will i die "God said" in 45 year  
 I ask him when i do i want  
 to have my own cloud i want  
 to throw party ever weekday  
 have pancakes in the shape of  
 a airplane "God said" OK  
 but I have to turn you  
 white "I" say Deal.

Figure 3: Ethan's Writing Post-Dialogue Lesson

However, all is not lost. I am not even disappointed, much. I applauded Ethan's attempt but told him we had a little more work to do. Many of my students evidenced new errors after we have addressed a new convention. There were times when I grew very frustrated with the new errors, but I tried to keep Anderson and Weaver in mind. Number 10 of Weaver's twelve principals specifically states, "Progress may involve new kinds of errors as students try to apply new writing skills" (Weaver and Bush 45). More specifically, she goes on to say that students do not typically master a concept all at

once and may develop many wrong ideas about how to apply a concept before demonstrating mastery (Weaver and Bush 48). Ethan demonstrated this tendency toward hypothesizing wrong ideas before, hopefully someday, getting it right. Ethan's example is representative of a host of such small victories.

**José: Adopting Rules through the Editing Process and How Getting Started Reflects Change**

José represents a few changes that occurred throughout the process. One of the positive changes was that students seemed to find it easier to write. I mentioned José in my second vignette. He was one of my most reluctant writers, although he would tell you that he knew what he was doing. In this, his first pieces of writing, it is blatantly obvious that he does not take writing or even my class seriously.



## Clueless

• Yet I'm sitting here still wondering what to write. As I sit there quietly in the class writing I end up finding myself writing this isn't that funny but seriously I don't know what to write. You know what happened to me one day I was playing DBZ Budokai 3 and I was Broly v.s. Goten and I was winning when all the sudden he teleported and knocked me out of the Arena and I lost in a flash. But anyway I need to find out what to write.

• I'm wondering why I'm writing what I'm talking and thinking about. You know what I want to do when I get home well wait wait wait I'm getting off topic seriously though what should I write. What it's almost time to go. You know what I wish I could find something to write. Well one day when I was playing budokai 3 I was Goku VS. Cell and we were one hit away from dying right and I went up to him and he jabbed me I was really mad that I lost. The thing is I'm still wondering what to write and wait a minute I think I just wrote one page yep one page.

Figure 4: Jose's Pre-Grammar Instruction Writing

I have to write a page in a half when  
 I want to go home play DBZ  
 Budokai 3 and beat cell and Gohan for being  
 cheap. Alrighty then what do I write what  
 to write what to write this remind me  
 of the time that I was with Curtis and  
 he made me think to much and you dont  
 want to know what happend. I wonder  
 why im writing this down oh yeah in budokai  
 3 The fastest I died was in two second I  
 dont know what happend but when I was  
 distracted and turned and looked back  
 at the screen I was dead just like  
 magic. I guess it's time to leave see ya...!!

José was placed in a group where Capitalization was stressed, specifically capitalization of the first person singular, "I." In his first submission (above), José was not consistent with capitalizing his "I's." After about nine weeks of instruction in the manner described above, José produced the piece of writing below. Through the writing process and peer conferencing over his editing checklist with a classmate, José managed to eliminate all of his mistakes in regards to capitalizing "I." However, he obviously did not transfer all of the capitalization rules to his writing.



# A NEW BIRTH

It all started when I was at home during a cold January night. I was just done playing video games when I was called down stairs. I was by my ~~sis~~ sis that my mom will have the baby tomorrow. When I was told this - new I had to be prepared. So I asked what do you think the baby will look like she said I don't know a sasquach. So I asked my mom what do you think she will look like. She said Her dad. So I asked why's that she said just a feeling. So I went to bed. My mom then woke us up early so I hurried up and got entertainment for when I was at the hospital. So then we got in grandma's truck and went to the hospital. When we made it we hurried into the hospifile and to a room. While my mom was lying in the bed I asked why did she rush us and she said I just want this done and over with. So me and Seth, my sisters boy friend waited in a waiting room while we were waiting he was asleep while I was watching tv. He eventually woke up and talked you know about dumb stuff and then we got kinda thirsty so we found a vending machine in the waiting room and when he put the money in it wouldn't take it and then



He straightend the dollar bill and it ate  
 it with no soda he was mad. So he  
 was kinda funny, so he put money  
 in the vending machine next to  
 it. It ate it to he was mad I was  
 also kinda mad so we went to see  
 my mom, my sister, and my grandma,  
 who hung out for a while and my  
 sisters friend Alex and her mom and her  
 sister Alyssa came and then later  
 we went to the cafeteria in the  
 hospital and got drinks we were  
 still thirsty. We then later order  
 seth bought everything we went back  
 to the waiting room just to talk  
 and then grandma came and checked  
 on us. We then went to see my mom  
 she was fine but when I heard it  
 was going to be hours before the  
 baby was born, grandma to me and  
 seth to my house and we played  
 video games until my sister called  
 and told us that we had a sister.  
 Later my mom came we hung out then  
 she told us tomorrow she's  
 coming home the baby's coming  
 home then a little later we  
 went to bed and the next day  
 there the baby was sleeping in  
 my moms arms. 13 days  
 later here I am now.

Figure 5: Jose's Writing After Grammar Instruction

Also of note: José became much better at getting started. This was something that I noticed across all of my classes. I spent a lot less time assisting students in the beginning stages of writing. In comparison to the beginning of the year, many more of

the students get to the work of writing within five minutes of being instructed to begin writing workshop activities. This occurs with minimal teacher assistance and, for the most part, continues throughout the 15-20 minute time period, only interrupted by a student periodically asking for teacher approval, or sharing with a neighbor. Even through a poetry unit, which typically causes students all sorts of problems in the initial stages, students were more likely to start on their own. From an observation at the beginning of the year in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade class, I noted that 55% of the class required initial attention from the teacher before they wrote *anything* on their paper during writer's workshop. In April, during a poetry unit featuring writer's workshop in the guise of poetry workshop (all of the same rules apply), only 18% of the class required assistance of some sort from the teacher before beginning. One of the students only needed to be reminded that there were self-starters posted on the board for those who were struggling to start. This reflects a change in the way the students feel about writing as well as a change in confidence. If they are willing to begin without added impetus from the teacher, it signifies that writing has become easier for them, they are less intimidated by it, and, although this is a guess based on some few months of observations, they might just enjoy it a little more.

#### **David: Confidence and Ease with the Writing Process**

Another thing that I noticed was that many of the students demonstrated more comfort with the whole writing process. When we began, I was lucky to receive even a completed first draft from some of my students. There were very few who proofread, revised, edited or even provided a neat final copy. In March, when we completed our

third grading period and drafts were once again due, there was a remarkable change in the number of students who saw the process all the way through to the end. I received quite a bit more submitted copies that were legible and showed evidence of editing or revision after the first draft. I think that this has happened because I pushed and pushed and pushed the importance of revision and a polished product at the end. I modeled how to conference with a peer. I took the time to meet with each student for an editing conference when assignments were due. The students say that as they adjusted to their new freedom, they started to care about the final product because they liked their writing more. It is difficult to know for sure why the students have increased time spent on final projects, but it is easy to observe that they have, and that this demonstrates more care about their writing. After all, I do not force them to conference with peers or apply the editing discussed in their conferences with me.

One particular student, David, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, who frequently moaned and groaned about any assignment that took longer than five minutes turned in a piece about Halloween at the beginning of the year. It was not edited and wasn't very neatly written. I also spent about ten minutes helping him find enough information to fill a page, which was the assignment length requirement. He did not care much about what his final product looked like and he didn't want to hear about his spelling, punctuation or anything else that might require him to spend more time working on this particular piece of writing. This was normal for most of my students at the beginning of the



year.

Every year we have a halloween party. every one wears a costume. people wear costumes like Demons vampire gig saw of saw and much more. We also have lots of food like wings form little bit the best wings in whate name high wood pizza and cookie second place. We also have a Bonfire Back in my pond. The bonfire is big usaly burns all night my pond is big with lots of water and fire theres a pond that see around it. My friends and I like to stay by the pond and the fire all night. We also have a hay ride. The hay ride is fun and my friends like to scare the little kids on it we so hide in the woods or some where in my back yard and jump out. We also decorate the Blasmusm with skeletons and vampires and masks and stuff. we put candy out on the tables and little packets. and we decorate the gazebo with confetti and vampires and pumpkins. I get to stay up late and hang out with my family and friends. one year I dress like I was emo. an emo is some one who Dress Goth but cuts them self.

Figure 6: David's Writing Pre-Grammar Instruction

However, last grading period, with minimal help from the teaching staff, David turned in a poem. The assignment did not require a poem, but permitted it.

I was shocked to find that he had decided to write in this format, one that required a little more thinking. He was a student who turned in minimal writing, not even enough to meet assignment requirements. Here he was choosing a genre that required him to think carefully about words and grouping ideas into stanzas. He even thought he had to rhyme his words. He initially started by rhyming it, but after I told him that poetry did not require rhyme, he just went with what came into his mind. His finished product showed a wonderful difference in his confidence in his writing, his willingness to experiment and he even asked a peer for a conference on his conventions and content. I think his classmate, one of his best friends, was a little shocked when he read what David had written. The spelling is not perfect, and the capitalization and punctuation leave something to be desired, but he did most of this on his own, with minor assistance from a peer. Also, it was much more neatly written, definitely an attempt at a final draft.



When I am eighteen I will have my own place and my own car.

I will work out Sunday's tire while I am going to college for motor skills.

I will do what I want when I want and no one would be able to stop me even if I was dead wrong I will be able to have my girl over and make out with her on my couch. And she would be hot.

I will never get married because I don't want to have to get a divorce if it don't work out.

I will throw a cool party every day I would invite all my friends. I would buy an old Corvette Zing, Ray and Resore it.

By the time I was 35. I will build a big garage for all my cars. I will have six girls they will all probably find out about each other and all break up with me.

Then I will just find more my neighbors  
will not like me because of my loud rap  
music.

If they call the cops about my music I will  
get evicted and have to find a new  
place to live when I am eighteen.

Figure 7: David's Post Grammar Instruction Writing

This was a pattern that I noticed throughout all of my classes, as well. Many of the students were turning in something that could be called a final draft. Many were typed and those that were not were neatly written. I only had one or two students per class who were not going through the entire process eventually.

## **Frustrations to the Process of Research and In-Context Teaching Method**

There are a lot of obstacles to teaching in this manner. The biggest one that I encountered was the new routines that needed to be mastered, both by student and teacher. We spent a lot of time focused on learning how to learn in this new way. The students had to learn to come into the classroom and get their materials for the day right away. The students were used to more hands on activities and they had to learn to sit and be attentive for 10 minutes during focus lessons. The students had to learn the proper procedure for requesting peer conferences. They had to learn how to finish a

draft early enough that the teacher could assist in editing. The students were not the only ones who ran into adjustment issues.

I had to learn to lesson plan using a writer's workshop. I had to figure out how to differentiate instruction using in-context grammar instruction. I eventually came up with a three group rotation that allowed me to design the grammar lessons for a specific group of students. I had to learn what writer's workshop was all about so that I could clearly explain it to my students and allow them the illusion of freedom while still making it clear that they had to work. I also had to learn how to assist in editing without marking all over a student's paper. It was tough on all of us. The only answer for this problem is time, time and determination to continue to try. It is also important that the trying be systematic. I need to maintain this new purposeful way of making decisions in my classroom. We need time to perfect these routines. We need time to learn about being a writing community in a classroom.

Another obstacle to teaching in-context grammar is the time schedule of a normal high school. There are only five 50-minute periods in a week and those must be split among writing, reading, analyzing literature and words, revising, editing, comprehension, and so on. A block schedule would be more appropriate. The problem was that we were always on the verge of getting into a lesson when the bell rang and we were done. Some days we did not even get to the writing because we took too long to get through the lesson.

A huge obstacle that came in the beginning of the year was the students' negative opinion of reading and writing. The intensity of the apathy or hate that the



students felt for these activities could be specific to my particular school and student population. However, it was a large hurdle to overcome. I spent a lot of time waxing poetic on the benefits of reading and writing, how they were important to life, why they could be pleasurable. I was lucky that we had already established a rapport and the students trusted my word. They were willing to listen to what I had to say and they were willing to try. Most teachers don't get this advantage.

A similar issue that a teacher who adopts this pedagogy will face is the obstacle of the students' grammar readiness. This idea came as a bit of a surprise in my interview with my co-teacher. He said: "grammar instruction is probably irrelevant if they don't care about writing to begin with" (Interview 7). There were also multiple observances, some in my journal, that lead to the same idea. The observances from my journal can be seen in my data analysis memo on the topic (See Appendix B).

This would seem to almost kill my study, but it doesn't. It narrows it. Just because not every student will benefit from grammar instruction, doesn't mean that we shouldn't teach it. Also, even though I haven't been actively using Weaver's or Anderson's techniques with my oldest class of students, the percentage of these students who care about improving their writing, is larger than younger classes. It is reasonable to guess that this percentage will grow larger as students get older. However, there are students in all of my classes that care about improving their writing.

In addition, there are aspects of grammar that can be taught to those who do not care about their writing, and those should be addressed. Lessons on sentence

structure are particularly important. Plus, though I hate to mention it, grammar does show up on state tests and so cannot be ignored for that reason.

Lastly, since student attitude toward writing appears to have improved, and the impetus for the big change in pedagogy this year has been in-context grammar instruction, it is logical to guess that a more efficient program of in-context grammar instruction could further improve student attitude toward writing.

## **CONCLUSION: THE CHANGING WAY WE TALK ABOUT GRAMMAR**

When I began my teaching career, grammar was just another subject that got looped into the English/Language Arts curriculum, like reading and writing. These were three separate things to be considered. They were certainly related and none of them belonged in any other content area, but they were still separate. I learned them separately, and subconsciously, I planned to teach them separately. I was *told* by my college professors that they were to be taught in conjunction, but it wasn't a philosophy that was covered well. Regardless, it was a tidbit that my brain found useful enough to store.

In my first year classroom, when I saw how shockingly low the writing ability was, we talked about nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and all of the other eight parts of speech. Most of my students were two grades below where they should have been, or worse! I had little sea-themed elementary style posters with all of the parts of speech, examples and definitions on them. They stayed up in my room all year round. I tried worksheets on each of the parts of speech. I tried diagramming sentences. I taught quotation marks and commas and colons. I tried grammar exercises that were printed out from the internet or self-created. I tried getting the students to create games to help them learn the parts of speech. I could frequently be heard saying things like, "Okay, what is a noun again? If you can't explain it, can you give me an example?" We

were still struggling with these questions at the end of the year. I knew I wasn't going to get more than a blank look when I asked a more advanced question such as, "Where is the verb in your sentence?" I was at a loss.

This is the language of Traditional Grammar. It has only the most cursory relationship with writing, and the two are not friendly. This is the language that was spoken in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year. It was the language of my graduate level grammar class in college. It was a refreshing challenge to me because I had to expand my thinking in order to encompass this new way of thinking and talking. I never looked at my writing and thought, *you know what would make this sentence? A participial phrase!* Grammar was like solitaire or the Mensa challenge puzzles you can buy in collections from the bookstore. Writing was something that happened deep in the back of my brain. The words just magically came out. The two were not connected, not even in my thinking.

Looking back, it seems that I understood that grammar should feed writing instruction, but I used writing as a diagnostic tool for grammar instruction, and then I treated grammar as if it were more important than writing. I eventually abandoned it when I didn't see any improvement in student writing. Writing was important, but I knew that grammar, at least *that* kind of grammar had no place in the education of my population of students. My students were high risk for dropping out. I needed them to see the point in school, and if they didn't, I needed to sneak in the important stuff while I could. Traditional Grammar is not the important stuff to a below poverty level child who thinks that his biggest goal in life will be to work at a local fast food restaurant with

his mother or deal marijuana downtown so that he can finally have the kind of jeans he likes. Grammar was coming between us. It had to go.

At the beginning of my second year of teaching, those same sea-themed parts of speech posters went back up on the walls, but we didn't talk about them. On the off chance that I said something like, "you have no verb in this sentence," and a student would ask what a verb was, I would point silently to the wall and move to the next student. I voiced *nothing* about grammar. I figured, they should know it, and if they didn't, they had to learn it on their own, because we had more important things to worry about, like spelling or reading comprehension. I was leaving them behind and I didn't even care. It bothered me, at first, but I let my helplessness lull me into complacency, and from complacency, I moved to purposeful ignorance.

This is the language of no grammar instruction. The crazy thing was, the writing improved. It is possible that I simply became a better and more experienced teacher. It is possible that because we didn't spend nine weeks on Traditional Grammar instruction, we were able to spend more time on writing instruction, and writing gets better with practice. It is also possible that the students were more focused on writing because they weren't worried about where the comma was supposed to go, or whether the end point went inside the quotation marks or outside of them. My students were less worried about whether or not they were following all of the rules in this writing activity, and more worried about telling a good story, or getting their facts straight. I wasn't teaching them grammar, and I was not sorry. However, mechanics were not improved at all and the content was only slightly improved. In fact, there weren't any

*good* writers in the bunch. They didn't use description, figurative language, or sound devices. There was little sentence variation and verb tense was all over the place within one piece of writing, but the writing was the upper side of mediocre, instead of less than mediocre. I was less disappointed, and sometimes, I thought, that was all you could ask for.

This year, my third as a teacher, we talked about the way writers use language in their writing. "Cool words" were a frequent topic of discussion. We collected them like different species of butterflies and pinned them to our writer's notebooks, the chalkboard, our writing, and sometimes to our very skin when paper wasn't handy. Students traded them like old school baseball cards and candy. We talked about compound sentences and why they sounded better mixed in with all of the simple sentences, the way a room full of plain girls will make the few attractive ones that much cuter. Instead of staring blankly when asked for a verb or noun, the students were treasure hunting for them in their favorite books and racing to the board to smack them up there in the best place to create new and crazy sentences. We were interacting with words in new ways. There was a sense of excitement about reading and writing. Grammar became a little less like a set of rigid rules and more like a compound that suddenly made language malleable and moldable.

This is the language of grammar instruction in-context. My students were more interested in writing than they had ever been before. I had them coming up to me before, during and after class, slipping me poems, hand-drawn comics, and pages and pages of story. They were excited to write. Reading on Fridays was like ice cream. They

begged, wheedled, and connived to get more of it. In-context instruction did not greatly improve everyone's use of grammar and mechanics. We spent a lot of time getting used to new routines. I spent a lot of time and energy getting them to meet deadlines. It was very tiring. It was a lot of work but mostly because I had to change almost everything about the way I taught. I am still glad that I did.





## Procedures for Independent Word Study

1. Copy no more than five words from your **Personal Spelling List** or **Personal Vocabulary List** into the first column of your **Independent Word Study** form. Copy exactly as the words appear on your list: *don't learn misspellings*. And print, so you can see the individual letters.
2. Now, read the first word: look at it and say it.
3. Spell the word to yourself: touch each letter with your pencil and say each letter to yourself.
4. Close your eyes. See the word in your mind. Say each of the individual letters to yourself again.
5. Take a short break to give your long term memory time to process the look of the word, its letters and their order.
6. In the meantime, grab a dictionary or refer to your **Personal Vocabulary List** and copy the definition of the word onto your form.
7. Now, back to the spelling: cover the correct spelling and print the word in the second column.
8. Proofread: check the word you just wrote, letter for letter, against the original.
9. If you spelled the word correctly, put a star in the third column and go on to the next word on your **Personal Spelling List** or **Personal Vocabulary List**. If you misspelled it, repeat steps two through five and step seven, this time printing the word in the third column.

## Procedures for Spelling and Vocabulary Reviews in Pairs

*Tester:* Say the word, use it in a sentence, and say it again.

*Printer:* Print the word.

Go through the whole list this way. Then:

*Tester:* Spell each word out loud, slowly.

*Speller:* Proofread by touching each letter of each word with your pencil. Circle any errors: *just the part you missed*. Then, with a star or checkmark, highlight the words on your **Personal Spelling List** or **Personal Vocabulary List** that you spelled correctly in the review. Circle any words you missed, and study them again next week.

## Root Word Reference Sheet

	<b>Root</b> act	<b>Root</b> aud	<b>Root</b> cred	<b>Root</b> dic
	<b>Meaning</b> do	<b>Meaning</b> hear	<b>Meaning</b> believe	<b>Meaning</b> speak
Choose 5 words that use the root	action			
	actor			
	react			
	transact			
	enact			
	<b>Root</b> graph	<b>Root</b> loc	<b>Root</b> man	<b>Root</b> mot
	<b>Meaning</b> write	<b>Meaning</b> place	<b>Meaning</b> hand	<b>Meaning</b> move
Choose 5 words that use the root				
	<b>Root</b> ped	<b>Root</b> pop	<b>Root</b> port	<b>Root</b> sign
	<b>Meaning</b> foot	<b>Meaning</b> people	<b>Meaning</b> carry	<b>Meaning</b> mark
Choose 5 words that use the root				
	<b>Root</b> spec	<b>Root</b> tract	<b>Root</b> vid	<b>Root</b> volve
	<b>Meaning</b> see	<b>Meaning</b> pull, drag	<b>Meaning</b> see	<b>Meaning</b> roll
Choose 5 words that use the root				

# Weekly Root Word Study Worksheet

The diagram is a tree-like structure with a central trunk and several branches. At the bottom of the trunk are the labels "Root:" and "Definition:". From the trunk, two main branches extend upwards. The left branch has three sub-branches, each with labels "Word:", "Definition:", and "Sentence:". The right branch has three sub-branches, each with labels "Word:", "Definition:", and "Sentence:". The labels are oriented vertically along the branches.

Root:  
Definition:

Sentence:  
Word:  
Definition:

Sentence:  
Word:  
Definition:

Sentence:  
Word:  
Definition:

Sentence:  
Word:  
Definition:

## Word Sort Instructions Handout<sup>3</sup>

<i>Monday</i>	<b>Demonstration</b>	The teacher will introduce your new words and categories. We will identify patterns and begin the word sort together.
	<b>Sort and Check</b> <i>(Individually or with a partner)</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sort your words alone or with another student in your group.</li> <li>Say the word and then place it in the column you think it belongs in.</li> <li>If there are any words you are unsure about, set them to the side.</li> <li>I will come around to check on you when you are done.</li> <li>Copy your sort into your notebook.</li> </ol>
	<b>Reflect</b>	<p>Make a statement about your word sorts. Think about these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✍ What do you notice about the words in each column?</li> <li>✍ How are the sounds in the words alike?</li> <li>✍ What kind of pattern do you notice?</li> <li>✍ Are any of these words similar in meaning?</li> </ul>
<i>Wednesday</i>	<b>Extend</b>	<p>Choose one of the following activities and complete it according to instructions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speed Sort</li> <li>Blind Sort</li> <li>See activities for your word study level</li> </ol>
<i>Friday</i>		

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from *Words Their Way* by Bear, Invernezzi, Tempelton and Johnston

## **APPENDIX B: DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Data Analysis: Procrastination of Grammar Instruction**

#### **Teacher Journal**

10/4: we have barely been writing anything meaningful yet and this makes things difficult. Without seeing the student's writing, I cannot format grammar lessons. I need to get them writing.

-I worry about the usefulness of such studies, especially when I have so much grammar and writing to get in.

10/5: I think that the periods are too short this week to really get anything accomplished.

10/6: We tried to do a little drafting today and my three talkative students seemed to struggle with what they were going to write for me. For some reason, there isn't a lot of reliance on the WNB. I wonder why and how I could fix this.

-Many expressed a worry about getting some writing done in time for the deadline.

10/7: We didn't do anything other than this today and I still had to assist quite a bit.

-Word studies today. Again, this is all we got done. I need to change this. I think it might actually be cutting into the flow of reading and writing. I want them to increase

vocabulary but this is too much. Plus, I haven't really even introduced a grammar topic yet!

10/8: I also talked to the kids and we decided that we are cutting down Word Studies to every other week instead. I think this will give all of us a break and I can fill the time with grammar or writing.

-We had zero time in this class.

## **Memo**

I am beginning to notice that I am spending more time on house-keeping and preparing for the grammar studies than actually doing the grammar studies. This is awful! I only have so many weeks left and I need to buckle down and see if what I think will actually work. I notice that I complain about time a lot. I know that part of this is just the kids getting used to new ideas and rituals. The other half is my fear of being unprepared and then failing when the actual grammar instruction takes place. I think I need to just jump in.

The other problem is that I don't know where to start. One of my classmates from my educational research class and I started talking about this and it has been weighing on me. I need to just take a breath and jump in and then adjust as I need to. I do this with everything else I teach. I don't know what the problem is here. Also, writing attitude doesn't seem to be changing too much, since we don't write a whole lot. The only thing that seems to be a great motivator thus far is the fact that I am not reading

their pre-writes. This seems to open up a lot of kids, taking away the fear of being judged.

## Data Analysis: Student Grammar Readiness

### Teacher Journal

10/12: Oh, my God! This was a disaster! I tried to do the Sentence Smack Down activity with this class. They were out of control today.

10/13: Same activity today. Went waaay better. I made my own worksheet and I used my Tibetan singing bell to manage the activity. I also gave the instructions one at a time.

10/14: We did a little more of the sentence structure stuff. This did not go so well. As soon as we got some more complex sentences, they got lost, which I should have expected. I need to back it up a little more. I also need to segue into how this is useful for them.

10/18: Then I started going over the dialogue rules. I asked them to highlight what they got right or fix what they got wrong. A lot of talking. Very few indented correctly. Four students used quotations. Most capitalized the first word inside the quotations.

10/20: I introduced peer editing today. It seemed to go alright. The kids were a little too eager to fork over their papers. I had to ask them to stop before I could explain everything.

11/9: Eight of the students were with me working on complex sentences, or adding on without running on. I don't know how to check if they get this other than to sneak into later writing and see if they use it. One girl wanted to make compound sentences, David



didn't know to add, and another girl got it solid. Toya wanted to do a comma splice.

Jason got upset again and I had to fight him to get him to work.

11/10: This was miserable. I tried to get them to apply the concept to their own writing.

I reviewed it and then asked them to find the sentences in their own writing. If they couldn't find any, I asked them to add one somewhere. Toya is still splicing. Justin was doing compound sentences. Taylor kept saying he was sick and left for a bit. [...] Three of the boys at the lowest table needed a lot of direct help. This idea is not ripe enough in their heads to be applied to their writing.

I think I need to have them create new before I have them fix the old. Maybe this means that students need to create before they can fix.

11/17: There isn't a whole lot of integration into their writing and I worry about skipping a day for word studies.

Four of my more advanced students all showed me examples that were incorrect. None were indented and some wasn't even dialogue, just parts of text with quotations around them. I need to re-cover this somehow. I think my two most advanced female writers have it down. I showed them how to do it while they were typing their own work.

### **Interview:**

DL: I feel like [grammar is] something that should come after they're comfortable with writing.

DL: I don't think the grammar part's having any impact on him, really, but I think he's becoming more comfortable with doing the writing in class, to the

point where he doesn't need as much prodding to get the process started. And like any of the other ones, I don't think that instruction's really gonna take until they feel they have something to apply it to. Until they want to improve their writing. Because, otherwise, you're just teaching them something they don't care about. But once they care about writing, and they care about their own writing and what you think about their writing, then they're going to want to improve it.

DL: So, again, it's probably the same thing. I'm trying to get them to the point where they want to make their writing improve and I never actually thought about this before, until just saying it, but, you know, grammar instruction is probably irrelevant if they don't care about writing to begin with.

DL: I think he actually cares about making it sound better and the subtleties of writing, I think, matter to him, more than other people. Because he's to the point where he's confident enough that he's got some skill in writing, but he also knows that, if you serve it up looking like trash, the ideas don't even matter because it's sitting in a trash can. So, it's all about the presentation, and even when he talks about

writing his rap, especially when he talks about writing his rap, it was all about he wanted to make sure that the flow was right. He wanted to make sure he wasn't rhyming something for the sake of rhyming it. He wanted to make sure that he broke the lines where he wanted people to look at it and wanted the emphasis. And that directly translates into grammar, to punctuation. So, I mean, somebody like him, who actually cares about it? Totally. I mean, the opportunities are kinda endless.

**Memo:**

Wow! This is an interesting idea that could affect how I will continue this research. I understand that we cannot just NOT teach grammar because kids are not ready to receive it, but what can we do to encourage students to become ready to receive it? Also of note: students can vary in when they are ready to receive grammar instruction. Every class of 7<sup>th</sup> grade and up that I teach has at least a few students ready to receive grammar instruction. The percentages increase as the students get older, but I cannot ignore the younger ones. Lastly, an interesting thought: what grammar can we teach to students who are not yet grammar-ready and how can we increase the chances of instruction being meaningful?

## Data Analysis: Student Eagerness for Approval from the Teacher

### Teacher Journal

10/6: Lisa and Justin seemed very excited to show me their work. I like to encourage this but I simply don't have time to read all of the drafts.

Michael showed me his draft from P1 and it was about a man finding peace. I told him that I really liked it and found it to be deep. He disagreed.

Two students from P3 keep giving me their stories to read.

10/14: Tim said, "don't that sound good! I am a beast writer! I should write stories." He was also really excited to read it to me.

10/20: Ethan got very stubborn and refused to participate. He requested to be sent to the office, so I did. When Levstek had him down there, he started tipping chairs and crying. He told me that he didn't want to share with anyone. I tried to make him and I guess I shouldn't have.

10/25: The students were very eager to share theirs, and they did a good job. I had more kids that wanted to read but class was over. I paused periodically to read aloud a student's writing who was managing well.

New student volunteered to read. So did Steve. A few others wanted to read but we ran out of time.

11/17: Four boys all showed me examples that were incorrect.

**Interview:**

DL: Most of them don't have confidence, even those that enjoy writing, don't have confidence in their writing. Because those that enjoy writing, the first thing that they always do is, hey, look at this, hey, read this. What do you think? Do you think it's okay? And I don't think they're doing that for the pure bouncing idea off somebody else. I think they're looking for—for some sort of gratification. And they want that and they desperately need that.

**Memo:**

There are a lot more times above that students asked me to read their writing. Even when I tell them to have their peers read it and ask for help, they still come to me. They ask what I think more often than anything else. Rarely do they ask for help with their grammar or spelling.

This is rather interesting. Even students like Ethan, who doesn't seem to like me too awfully much, is constantly asking me for my opinion of his writing. He won't show his to any of the students, either. Perhaps the issue is that he is afraid they will laugh at his poor spelling or frequent slang. He knows that we won't laugh at him for that, I guess.

This is an interesting motivation for students to write. I wonder how I could play on this to get them to write more.

## APPENDIX : HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH APPROVAL

Protocol Number: 80-2011

**Youngstown**  
STATE UNIVERSITY

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School of Graduate Studies and Research  
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December 13, 2010

Dr. Jeffrey Buchanan, Principal Investigator  
Ms. Sarah Hahn, Co-investigator  
Department of English  
UNIVERSITY

RE: Human Subjects Research Protocol Number: 80-2011  
Title: Teaching Grammar in-Context and in a Literacy-Rich Environment

Dear Dr. Buchanan and Ms. Hahn:

The Human Subjects Research Committee of Youngstown State University has reviewed the aforementioned Protocol via expedited review, and it has been fully approved.

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Human Subjects Research Committee and may not be initiated without HSRC approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the Human Subjects Research Committee. Best wishes in the conduct of your study.

Sincerely,

Peter J. Kasvinsky  
Dean, School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Research Compliance Officer

c: Dr. Gary Salvner, Chair  
Department of English

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