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# New Voices



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## The Conventions of Conventions

I'm stuck out here in my first job as an English instructor, waving my little white flag and surrendering to the Grammar gods. All the instruction I have to fall back on is what I was taught in high school, which was direct instruction.

—Victoria Long

In the summer of 2003, Victoria Long was preparing for her first year of teaching. She communicated her frustrations concerning how to teach grammar through a conversation on an NCTE listserv for new teachers. Her submission, and the conversation that led to her message, raised many questions for new and experienced teachers alike. How do new teachers create and maintain classrooms that best motivate and prepare student writers? How can new teachers successfully

implement plans for effective writing instruction when we have had little or no experience—either through our preparation for teaching or our own schooling—with successful techniques to integrate grammar and writing? What are we supposed to do when many of our previous school experiences actually conflict with the research that we read? How do we “teach grammar” as it is increasingly mandated on state exams?

And what does “teaching grammar” mean, anyway? Constance Weaver, a researcher and teacher who has studied grammar instruction extensively and whose work strongly informs our practice, has a useful definition of “teaching grammar.” She writes:

When people talk about “teaching grammar,” what they usually mean is teaching descriptive and prescriptive grammar: that is, teaching sentence elements and structure, usage, sentence revision, and punctuation and mechanics via a grammar book or workbook, or perhaps a computer program. They mean teaching grammar as a system, and teaching it directly and systematically, usually in isolation from writing or the study of literature. (7)

Teaching grammar can and does occur within examination of students’ writing, Weaver argues, and she explains that grammar in con-

text is the theoretically sound way to teach grammar. In *Teaching Grammar in Context*, Weaver also identifies several reasons that teaching grammar in isolation from writing happens: curricular requirements, fear of being held accountable if grammar is not taught, incorrect assumptions made by teachers and administrators, pleasant memories of teachers’ own schooling, and so on (23–25). Teaching grammar is tricky for new teachers.

Weaver identifies many of the reasons that new teachers employ isolated grammar lessons. For example, Bud has a file on his desk at school that he calls his “state standards as sales tools” file. In the folder is a growing collection of catalogs, fliers, and other materials

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that advertise ways to improve student scores on state-level standardized tests. Most promote isolated lessons and overheads as ways to improve achievement. As his mailbox fills with these advertisements and as the stakes continue to rise

regarding increasing his students' test scores, the pressure to use these materials grows.

We receive other messages on grammar in the classroom. We are constantly advised to "think outside the box" when deciding what and how to teach (although we are also reminded not to "reinvent the wheel"). This cliché, paradoxically an "in the box" statement itself, does imply that a set of conventions exists for teaching the conventions of language. Presumably, many of these rules for teaching language involve using the isolated exercises and materials sitting in Bud's mailbox. As newer teachers, we are constantly frustrated by the conventions of language, the conventions for teaching those conventions, and the beliefs and practices associated with them. If conventional strategies for teaching grammar in isolation are ineffective, then why do we continue to use them? Why, too, do educational institutions encourage us to "think outside the box" instead of focusing on building another box?

Educators have known for quite some time that teaching grammar in isolation is, at best, a waste of time and, at worst, actually detrimental to students' writing development (Weaver 10). But what educators have done with that knowledge has not impacted what happens daily in many classrooms.

Almost all of the conventional strategies or tools offered to new teachers focus on contrived or arbitrary writing situations: "It is the first week of March, so we are going to examine prepositions and commas this week." To think outside of the conventional grammar box would be to examine grammar and language within the context of a student's writing. Unfortunately,

unlike a worksheet or overhead prompt that allows every child to be on the same word and sentence at the same time, working with a student's writing is quite messy. That might be one reason that workbooks offering quick and easy

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grammar exercises seem to be on all of the bookshelves and in all of the catalogs. Not to mention that it is more difficult for a textbook publisher or materials sales company to produce an "easy to use" and "teacher-proof" book of reproducible and overheads that can help us focus on students' writing. Let's be honest: there is not much market in saying "You do not need our materials."

One of the problems that this creates for newer teachers is that there is a disconnect between the resources available and the research that informs our teaching. We newer teachers bring our concepts about schooling into the classroom along with our experiences from childhood and adulthood, matched with the research we have studied and participated in, and these battle each other in our heads. The knowledge that many of us gleaned from understanding and labeling gerunds contradicts the frustrated glances that our students give us when we ask them to define gerunds. The research on teaching grammar conflicts with our experiences in high school English classes and grades in English reflecting our success. Many of us actually enjoyed and thrived on grammar-learning experiences. As weird as it may be to admit, we

like learning grammar. None of those experiences or research studies agree. None. So what is a newer teacher—one still discovering how best to work with students and their needs—to do? As we're continually discovering, there is no easy answer.

What we can offer, though, is one situation where a teacher was willing to ask a question and to participate in an ongoing dialogue on the answers.

### The Listserv

NCTE's Newteach listserv was one among the many hosted by NCTE. It was advertised on NCTE's Web site as a place for new teachers to "connect with new teachers who share your first-year joys and frustrations. Read others' ideas, strategies, problems, and stories while networking with new teachers across the nation." Elsewhere on the site, the listserv was also described as a listserv "for new teachers and their mentors."

Unfortunately, due to computer problems, the Newteach listserv, like NCTE's other listservs, was destroyed in early September, 2003. At the time of this writing, we are unsure about what the long-term solution will be for those teachers who wish to dialogue with their colleagues on matters of interest. We hope that NCTE will restore valuable open forums for new teachers.

Newteach was a supportive collection of knowledgeable and enthusiastic newer teachers and some very wise and helpful more experienced teachers. Most threads on the list began as questions posed by a new teacher about a specific aspect of curriculum, such as working with a particular text, writing strategy, or situation.

## A Conversation about Conventions

We've never met face-to-face with Lisa Loomis. In fact, we live more than 2,000 miles away from her classroom. But we are grateful to her for a question she asked on her summer vacation.

She works with high school students in Connecticut and spent her summer working on lesson plans for her classes. On July 28, 2003, she sat down at her computer and typed out the following message to the NCTE Newteach listserv:

Does anyone have any engaging activities to go along with lessons on the parts of speech for freshmen and sophomores? Thanking you in advance, Lisa.

That short request for lesson assistance, very similar to others made on the listservs to which we belong, started a short yet heated flurry of messages that gave us much to consider concerning the ways in which we teach grammar. Novice and more experienced teachers contributed to the conversation, a conversation that is worth repeating here.

## The Responses

As the thread progressed, it did not take long for a rift to develop between those who argued for teaching grammar in isolation and those who argued for teaching grammar contextually through writing. As the research on teaching grammar in isolation is fairly clear, we do not wish to argue the point. Teaching grammar in isolation is not useful except in some limited circumstances. Constance Weaver was cited frequently, as were other researchers who have studied the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of teaching grammar in isolation.

New teachers expressed frustrations and concern. Victoria Long had this to say in response to a post urging teachers to avoid teaching

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grammar in isolation. As she argues that, in her classroom, she feels the need to teach some grammar as a way to provide a common vocabulary for her students to discuss their writing, she also writes:

Grammar may be a well debated topic, but it is one that, by most state standards, we are required to teach. Teaching the conventions of the English language is required. How we do it is a matter of judgment.

Victoria's experience in the classroom, combined with her experiences as a teacher and a student, seems to tell her that teaching grammatical concepts can be helpful. As she states, that is a judgment call that she is qualified to make. However, it is a frustrating judgment call because of the contradictory nature of the research and her experiences.

Soon after Victoria's post, Lisa responded to those who had discussed her question:

Hi Everyone, my question started all of this, and I'd like to explain myself a little in order to get some guidance. Like Victoria, I am a new teacher (I just finished half a year in my own classroom and am starting my first full year). I had some pretty liberal professors, so when I began teaching I was very much of the thinking that students learn

writing through writing, not through direct instruction on how to construct a sentence. As a result, I incorporate a lot of informal writing into class to provide students this opportunity to develop their writing skills. I found, though, that I could not talk to students about their writing because of their lack of grammar knowledge. I have had students that graduated from high school who could not identify a verb (I am not kidding), and juniors who habitually wrote fragments no matter what I said. So I thought I would try teaching the parts of speech to my freshmen. Maybe this is not the best way. I know of the research, maybe I need to have my students not only write, but be more reflective about their writing (revision I have found also next to impossible to teach thus far). When I think about my own education, I see that I did not develop a conscious understanding of grammar until college when my job as a writing tutor and my struggles to write poetry required me to really examine our language.

So I did not learn grammar until I cared enough about our language to. My question, then, is how do I get my students to care about their writing and our language? Last semester I asked my juniors in Expository Writing to write 1 page on any topic that they cared about in the hopes that they would want to take the time to revise and edit in order to get it right. I have encouraged students to publish their work. I haven't been successful yet.

I am in a new school, so have to plan for a whole new curriculum. I am feeling the pressure to get as much planning done now before the school year starts. I was going to start the year with this Parts of Speech unit which I have pretty much all planned, now I feel like that is the worst possible thing to do.

HELP!

Lisa

Lisa relates valuable experiences that have helped her understand the research presented by some of the respondents. She has allowed that research and her experiences to influence her practice. Unfortunately, though, she is not feeling any better about her skills and herself, as her “HELP!” indicates. She has refocused her question. She is no longer interested in parts of speech. She is seeking ways to get her students to care about the writing that they are doing.

Newteach served an important role in helping a teacher stuck in a problem.

### Scary Stuff

Victoria had the last word on this thread in early August, until the discussion came to life again at the end of that month. We feel that her words are fairly indicative of new teachers’ struggles with this subject. In the same message where she describes herself as “surrendering to the Grammar gods,” she writes:

So, how do I teach this grammar that everybody is so worried about? I think that is advice that all new English teachers could do with. Maybe I’m just scared, but I’m scared enough that I will learn so that my students can learn.

Victoria is right to be scared. Not because she is a poor teacher, but because it is scary to be a language arts teacher: to have to teach when the culture clashes with the research, to be new in the face of frightening high-stakes tests that place too much emphasis on the details of writing and not on the big ideas. But teaching against

conventions when it comes to the conventions of language can also be quite exciting, provided we have our mentors and supportive colleagues to help us chart the course and devise some new rules for quality instruction.

It is not only scary for teachers charting new ground. What about students? Many of our students have spent their schooling in classrooms featuring conventional grammar lessons. What happens when we change the rules of their writing instruction? Could those grammar lessons, hated and useless as they may be, comfort a student simply because of their familiarity?

When faced with the question of how to best teach grammar in our classrooms, it really comes down to this: there are no definitive answers. While we may find *responses* to our questions, there are no answers. What the research, such as that reported by Weaver and others, tells us is that the very nature of effective writing instruction is variable. This is a classic

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concept in the English language arts classroom; very seldom do we ask for “answers” to questions about a text or a philosophical question. Rather, we explore possibilities and encourage genuine

responses. Even the examples offered in this article do not provide concrete answers; rather, they are a series of responses exploring both the controversy over methods and the possibilities for effective instruction. There is, however, a very basic response to the convention question that can guide our teaching: focus on what *your* students need. Each and every one of them.

The benefit and drawback to having only responses instead of clear “answers” to these questions is that the power ultimately resides with us. No one can hand us reproducible that target skills that all 150 of our students must acquire; no one can prepare for us the minilessons that will target the collective and individual needs and frustrations of our students.

Deciding what *must* be taught as well as *how* to teach it depends entirely on our professional judgments. And the planning is not easy. However, the way we respond to students’ writing has the potential to transform not only their writing but also their confidence and self-perception in the English classroom. While standardized tests may not be able to measure these essentials, we are confident that a well-informed and carefully planned approach to our own conventions for teaching conventions will cover skills while empowering students.

### Acknowledgments

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### Work Cited

Weaver, Constance. *Teaching Grammar in Context*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1996.