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A STORY ABOUT GRAMMAR AND POWER

ABSTRACT: There is little research about how pre-service teachers write about grammar and understand conventionality. Understanding pre-service teachers' beliefs about grammar and conventionality through studying the way they write about it is important since their beliefs as pre-service teachers will likely influence the kind of teachers they become. Examination of samples of 50 pre-service teachers' written discourse about grammar and conventionality revealed that they had largely negative attitudes toward writers who made conventional errors. However, rather than considering this simply as an issue of rhetoric or even pedagogy, this article proposes that such attitudes are reflective of academic power dynamics.

Discovering the Grammar Dynamic

Ann Berthoff told a story about a faculty member who was asked by her dean to "stop what she's been doing . . . and instead . . . teach to a multiple choice grammar test" (5). This exercise of power by the dean over the material that the faculty member chose to teach is an example of how grammar can be used to exercise power over people of lower status. If the faculty member chose to acquiesce to the dean's request and focus on the exam, attending seriously to every error her students made, she would have used grammar to exercise power at another level. Because so much of the English curriculum for those students labeled "basic writers" involves grammar instruction, the way that academics use grammar to exercise power is of special importance to basic writers. We'd like to share a tale that will illustrate how grammar can be used as a tool of oppression, even by those who should know better.

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Lynn's Story

It was almost an aside, the news that, as part of my duties in my new job as Assistant Professor and Writing Center Director, I would give the required departmental grammar exam. I was handed a dog-eared ditto master of a mass-produced multiple choice grammar test. At this point, the meeting about my responsibilities was adjourned.

A day or two later I got up the courage to ask the chair, "How about a portfolio instead?" "No," was the reply, "it must be taken at a single sitting. It must be spontaneous." Apparently more powerful people had been complaining. "They" had been horrified when our students (pre-service teachers) had made errors in notes to parents or while writing on the board. The department needed a cover-its-tail exam. I got to provide the fig leaves.

I was opposed to the idea of a grammar exam. The messages it sent about what was valued and how competence could be detected were at odds with everything I believed about writing. The exam suggested that it was appropriate to deal with grammar in a decontextualized manner. I believed in the importance of context. But I was also boxed in by the professional and economic power my director, chair, and dean had over me. Surely I'd have bigger battles ahead. I'd better pick my fights.

Although I lost round one, I was determined to win round two and create a new exam, one that was at least a little more ecologically valid than the one I had been handed. I worked on it constantly, unpaid, in the summer prior to starting my employment. I developed an exam that, despite being an exam, might send some more useful and complex messages about conventionality to the students. The exam had two major components: error identification in passages of text, and essay commentary on those passages. For the error identification components, students had to cite 122 errors in ten separate passages. There were five essay questions, and four of the questions involved essays for which the errors served as data for discussion. In the essays, students were asked to (a) describe patterns of errors; (b) prioritize errors; (c) take on the role of a teacher writing to a student about errors in a passage of text; or (d) give a rationale for using and teaching conventional written English. My hope was that the structure of the exam would communicate some of what I valued in teaching conventionality. For example, by asking students to identify patterns of errors, I hoped to plant the seeds that writers made errors in intelligible and intelligent patterns. By asking students to prioritize errors, I hoped to suggest that not all errors were equal in importance.

After I had spent the summer composing the exam, I met Ann, who had been assigned as my graduate assistant. She agreed with my perspectives on writing. We both emphasized content and context in

our teaching and response to writers. We got along famously from the start. However, my complicity in using grammar as a tool of power had begun. I foisted much of the responsibility for the logistics of the exam on Ann. The cycle of using grammar to reinforce existing power structures had continued.

The exam was arduous for students. They said it was the first time they had seen anything like it, although the directions (sans error-ridden passages) were available up to three months in advance. The penalty for not passing the exam was high and imposed by the Education Department. Students were not allowed into the program, or, if their parents or advisers complained loudly enough, they were allowed to enroll in the program but would receive an incomplete in Language Arts methods (the course I taught) if they didn't pass the exam by the time their first semester in the program was completed.

The exercise of power had moved to another level. Much as our administrators had forced the exam on us, as it had been forced on them by public school placement officials, we forced it on the students. As our administrators were intransigent with us, we became so with the students. We were often less than sympathetic with explanations for failure or excuses for not taking the exam.

But our lack of charity did not go unpunished, for the exams were torturous to score. The handwritten essays, often in pencil, were physically difficult to read. The corrections on the dittoed passages were often challenging to interpret. Counting pages of passages used for error-identification as well as student essays, each exam was 15 pages long. Because students' academic lives depended on their scores, we were careful with each exam. It was hard and tedious work. The whole process made us cranky and resentful. We didn't enjoy the exam or believe in its purpose. Our only hope, it seemed, was to learn something from it. We hoped that whatever we discovered would either validate our experience with this exam or provide us with persuasive data for why an exam should be disposed of altogether. We decided to look closely at the language in the student essays to discern pre-service teacher beliefs about grammar. We discovered that our students followed our lead and used grammar as a way to wield power over those of lesser status. We believe that this is an important and frightening discovery since our students were training to be teachers.

Review of the Literature

In preparation for our examination of the way that our student informants wrote about grammar, we reviewed literature on response to writers. In our search we discovered that when given the opportunity to respond to anything in students' texts, most teachers (71% for

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Applebee, about 75% for Anson) chose "surface features" (Anson 344). These studies indicated that teachers often chose error as the focus of their commentary. Given this, understanding the way that people who planned to be teachers wrote about errors seemed important. Our study differed significantly from these studies since our informants were required to respond *only* to error.

In order to understand what motivated our students to respond to error in particular ways, we looked at the scholarship on pre-service teacher belief systems. Such belief systems (and the values behind them) are considered to be the root of teaching behavior. Pajares says that beliefs develop from myriad elements including emotions, imagined alternatives to reality, prior knowledge, and application of information (309). Ross describes beliefs as "theories of action" and "practical theories of teaching" that are usually unconscious in student teachers' minds and implicit in their practices (19-31). Scholars like Bullough and Kottkamp differentiate beliefs from knowledge by saying that beliefs are unconscious and largely unexamined while knowledge is conscious and can be examined. We hoped that by reading student essays we could discern some of our students' beliefs about teaching writing and writers.

An examination of discourse patterns can also reveal the beliefs of a writer. For example, use of pronouns like "I," "we," or "you" can indicate where a writer places responsibility. The repetition of a word can indicate what a writer deems important. Such examinations of discourse patterns are becoming more common. A large group of researchers has attempted to identify student teachers' knowledge and beliefs through an analysis of the language they use (e. g. Freeman; Goodman; Nespor and Barslyke; Protherough and Atkinson; and Van Sledright and Putnam). Marilyn Cochran-Smith noted how student teachers detailed their practices, while Kagan and Tippins explored how student teachers described their problem-solving strategies. Manning and Payne considered student teachers' perceptions of past experiences. Christensen examined how student teachers talk with their supervisors. In addition, our interest in what pre-service teachers wrote as a clue to their beliefs is consistent with other current research. "Recent efforts by teacher educators and researchers... have focused attention on student teacher (and teacher...) discourse patterns... as a means to understand their sense-making experiences as educators" (Van Sledright and Putnam 117). Therefore, we decided to examine discourse patterns in our students' essays to better understand beliefs.

While there is substantial research on pre-service teachers' beliefs, and significant research on the language used by teachers, there is no research on language choices in the grammar-focused writing of pre-service teachers. Such research is important to the field because it could contribute to an understanding of how future teachers envision

convention. Studying convention is useful and important. It would be hard to isolate another single area of composition that can stir up controversy so quickly. Because of convention's polarizing effects, a study of the way pre-service teachers approach convention might provide some understanding of pre-service teachers' initial perspectives on convention's role in composing. We believe that pre-service teachers' beliefs about conventionality are connected to their beliefs about language, literacy, and learning. Furthermore, pre-service teachers' beliefs will influence the kind of teachers they become (Britzman). We also think that pre-service teachers' approaches to conventionality provide insights into their view of power relationships.

Methods

The informants in this study were 50 pre-service Elementary/ Inclusive Education majors at a large, private university. Informants were completing academic minors in many disciplines including history, English, anthropology, and sociology. These students had not taken any education methods courses at the time they served as informants. Nearly all of the informants had taken the same two required university writing courses. The informants were generally 18-22 year old white women, mostly from the eastern United States, 80% in their sophomore year, 20% in their first semester of graduate study. These demographic characteristics reflect many traits shared by most teacher candidate populations in the U.S. (Brookehart and Freeman; Su).

The informants were expected to pass the three-hour exam as one of the required tasks for entrance into the program. The exam was designed to determine their competency in identifying and responding to conventional error. It also sought to assess their ability to write conventionally in a time-pressured situation. Data were collected over a one-year period. Fifty informants wrote five essays per exam. These 250 essays, which ranged in length from one handwritten paragraph to one page, formed the core of our data. However, an additional 200 essays, written by a portion of these same students on subsequent attempts to pass the exam, served to verify and extend our initial findings.

The informants were asked both to identify errors in passages on the exam and to write essays about the errors in those passages. See Appendix 1 for the exam questions.

Descriptions of the types of questions on the exam, as well criteria for evaluation, were available to the informants at the time they signed up for one of the four exam dates scheduled each semester. The student informants could sign up for the exam (and thus receive the description of the tasks) as early as three months prior to taking it.

We both gave directions and fielded questions for each of the eight exam sessions. We also provided informants with logistical information about receiving scores. We gave numerous oral and written reminders about what to focus on in the exam. For example, we talked about how we might prioritize various kinds of errors, we used the pronoun "I" to frame our responses, and favored words like "explain," "respond," "lack of conventionality," or "patterns of error" instead of verbs like "correct," "grade," or "fix." We also asked informants not to respond to "style," but only to note error. We also modeled responses which demonstrated a variety of possible approaches to sections of the exam. Informants were able to ask us questions at any time.

Analysis

Once we collected the nearly two-foot high stack of exams, we began our analysis. We employed Bogdan and Biklen's constant comparative analysis on the written language in informants' essays from the exam. Our procedures included reading, categorizing, charting, discussing, and revising the emerging patterns and themes we found in the data. We analyzed data guided by the following questions: (a) *What were the repeated words and word combinations within and between informants' responses?* (b) *How did the phrasing and structure of the responses position the informants and hypothetical students? Did the informants sound as if they were writing as friends, parents, peers, or authorities?*

For our initial reading we divided the exams between the two of us. We each read 75% of the total, with 50% of all texts read by both of us. We began by reading the first attempts of the 50 students and moved on to later attempts by initially unsuccessful students only after we had discovered patterns and themes. In our tabulations of patterns and themes, we independently assigned similar descriptors 85% of the time. In our analysis we focused on these felicitous overlaps.

Findings

The phrases and tone of our informants' responses were consistently hierarchical, monologic, and even haughty. They wrote as if they viewed errors as deeply rooted in individuals, and as if they themselves were the ones with the answers the writers needed, but expressed few doubts about their own abilities or knowledge. They expressed many doubts about the abilities and knowledge of the writer. Sometimes this doubt bordered on scorn.

Phrasing

Phrasing patterns in our informants' responses to error suggested some of their beliefs about conventionality. We noted several repeated words, among them "problem," "needs," and "tendency." None of these were words that we used in the exam. The term "problem" was used freely and frequently in nearly every exam text. It was used to indicate major issues as well as minor ones. Here is a sampling of the informant responses (the names "Chris," "Pat," and "Terry" refer to the hypothetical writers of the passages on the exam): "One of Chris' main problems seemed to be forgetting a period at the end of the sentence. . . . He also had a few problems concerning capitalization. . . ." Another passage firmly located the "problem" in the writer: "The problems Chris had were mainly starting and ending sentences. He also had problems writing commas where he shouldn't have." The next two passages imply that the writer has a problem by virtue of the aspects of writing that are identified as problematic: "A pattern of your writing I noted that is problematic is identifying when to capitalize and when not to. Another problem is ending sentences with the proper punctuation." Still another informant said: "The main problem here is improper use of punctuation. . . . Problems make it extremely difficult to grasp the meaning of the text."

These "problems" were usually framed as something that the writer had — not something that the reader had. The "problem" was usually considered to be universal, rather than situation-specific. Only occasionally was the "problem" confined to "this passage" or "in this section."

"Problem" is related to another repeated word, "tendency." The informants stated that the writer might have a "tendency" to use sentence fragments, or a "tendency" to use contractions incorrectly. Here is a sample of what our informants said: "Terry has a tendency not to be fully explicit with his information." The next passage also locates the "tendency" in the writer: "Pat has a tendency to do things. . . ." The notion of "tendency" was also used as a verb: "Chris tends to leave out periods. . . ." Chris also had another tendency: "He tends to run things together."

The use of such words indicated the assumptive nature of our informants' responses. We were struck by how these pre-service teachers repeatedly focused on how a writer had "tendencies" and "problems." Rarely was there a "problem" with the text or the reader. Our informants seemed to assign blame to the writer for "problems." They also used the words "need" or "needs" to warn the writer not to go astray in the future. Such reference to "problems" might be evidence of a "particular schema [i.e. 'problem solving']" which our informants

"perhaps acquired as pupils" (Florio-Ruane 1-2).

"Needs," as in "Chris needs to use commas less frequently," or "Terry needs to learn that you have to use quotes when someone is speaking" was also a word we saw much of. Informants said things like this: "This paper is a jumble. Terry needs to gain some 'reader empathy' --i.e., he needs to put himself in the place of the reader. . . ." Sometimes the comments were addressed directly to the "needy": "You need to freshen up on the proper use of apostrophes to show possession. . . ." Another indicated that caution was needed: "You need to be more cautious as to where you put your commas. . . ."

Reference to "needs" made correcting and avoiding errors seem urgent — it sounded like a requisite for survival. This repeated reference also rarely offered actual examples or procedural advice. Instead "needs" was a veiled warning about the necessity of change without instruction for how to change. Writing from a position in which one identifies someone else's problems, needs, and tendencies indicates a sense of superior power. Our informants apparently envisioned themselves as more powerful than Pat, Terry, or Chris.

In the essays we also found frequent allusions to "work." Frequently work was mentioned in phrases like "If you work hard, you will be able to solve these problems," or, "you need to work on apostrophes." In all of these instances work was a good thing, the path to virtue and a conventional, error-free existence. It was also often something urgent, something that was "needed." There were never any admonitions not to work too hard, or to remember that writing shouldn't be all work and no play. Instead, work was the answer, the solution to writers' "problems." Again, explicit examples of the kind of work "needed" to solve "problems" was rarely offered.

Tone

There seemed to be a surprisingly negative tenor to most of our informants' responses. While we were not surprised that the informants found and commented on error (the task mandated it), we noted the consistency of the negative approaches. Many passages seemed harsh or haughty in tone, as in the following examples: "Be more consistent with your use of contractions. Sometimes you used them in your text and other times you <u>did not</u>. If <u>you are not</u> sure, <u>do not</u> use them at all." (Informant emphasis.) Sometimes relatively minor issues seemed to have great importance: "If (paragraphs) are not indented, there will be one big mess with no order or form." And this informant seemed to want to communicate her boredom: "The author should watch out for monotonous repetition of an idea or repetition of examples."

"Do not," "big mess," and "monotonous repetition" are comments that place the blame on the writer. Other comments bordered on rudeness or made personal attacks on the writer: "You are making very basic errors. I am tempted to believe they are due to inattentiveness." In the next passage, the informant implies that the writer's thought processes are less than ideal: "Think carefully before you choose a word just because you need one."

These responses carried within them an assumption that the writer was somehow purposely making errors. Many informants seemed angry with the writers. For example, one informant said: "Your paper's ... main flaw was in the area of run-on sentences. The most severe of which was the fact that most of your article ended with a comma and it should have stopped. It got very tiresome to read."

We wondered where this consistently negative tone came from, but it wasn't only the repeated words that surprised us. We also noted absence of certain words. Missing from our informants' essays were words teachers commonly use to create images of movement and collective participation, like the pronoun "we," and "give," "show," "share," "extend," "move," "convey," "growth," or "build." Instead, informants often used words which connoted isolation, confinement, and lack of movement or exchange. The informants often repeated terms like "still," "base" or "basis," "structure," "organization," "stuck," and "foundation." Authors were advised to "slow down," and to "stop" (to "think," "plan," or "be more careful"). Words like "flow" and "fluidity" were mentioned only as negatives or in the context of conditional rhetoric, like "this section doesn't flow," or, "it would flow better if you..." We never encountered positive references to learning or growth. As we read these essays, we puzzled about the common tone in them. Although the individuals who had written them came from diverse disciplines, most seemed to speak with a common voice. Was this the way they thought teachers of writing should sound?

Discussion

We were surprised by these dominant, negative patterns in phrasing and tone in our informants' writing. We found them notable in several ways. Our findings were often dissonant with our assumptions. We believed that an examination of those expectations and a comparison of them to the findings would illuminate the beliefs of pre-service teachers about responding to conventional error.

We assumed that the rhetoric our informants chose would reflect the rhetoric of the exam. The language of the exam was process focused. We used the words "error" and "conventionality" to empha-

size that what was represented were minor mistakes in a social code. In addition, the exam asked for role playing (both explicitly in question #4 and implicitly by designating writers as "Pat," "Terry," and "Chris"). Finally, the passages that we chose to put the errors into were interesting and often humorous. Because of the process language and the invitation to role play, we anticipated the language of reflection and speculation in informants' essays. We thought they would use words like "why" to reflect and "wonder" to speculate, but those kind of words were not present.

We also expected diverse perspectives among the essays. We figured that informants' language would reflect various degrees of commitment to the process approach to teaching writing. Our findings challenged these assumptions.

First, we assumed we would find process-oriented language. We traced our assumptions both to the language of the exam and to our sense of the educational systems in which these students received instruction. The exam's format came out a Shaughnessy-esque tradition which treated error not as something which occurred because of laziness, stupidity, or bad intention, but as something that happens because of a flawed set of internalized rules. The exam, in the language it used and in the tasks it required, tapped into this tradition. For example, the exam used the term "conventional errors" to describe what the informants needed to locate, correct, or respond to. We didn't use descriptors like "grammar mistakes" or "problems." Nor did we instruct informants to find anything "wrong" or even "incorrect" in the passages on the exam.

Bartholomae suggested that rhetorical choices are indicative of a writer's sense of norms in a discourse community. He described how writers, when entering a new discourse community, seek to appropriate, but are often appropriated by the discourse. We believe that the norms of the discourse community are related to the paradigmatic beliefs held in that community. Over a decade and a half ago Maxine Hairston hailed the change in the discourse of composition, describing the shift from the current-traditional to the new paradigm in writing instruction. However, the repeated words and images that we found in the texts did not seem to reflect the values of the new paradigm, with its emphasis on process, recursiveness, productive chaos, and cooperation. Our informants' repeated words and phrases seemed instead to reflect the values of the current-traditional paradigm like product, linearity, and neatness.

The exam was purposefully devoid of any descriptions of error that connoted a moral or intellectual deficit. In addition, the tasks on the exam emphasized the cognitive (not psychological or pathological) aspects of error. Included among the tasks were (a) a request to look for patterns of error across passages written by a single writer, (b)

a question asking for the prioritizing of error, and (c) an inquiry into rationale for teaching conventional English at all. These rather process-focused words (like "respond" or "explain") and requests (like "find patterns" or "prioritize errors") dominated the rhetoric of the exam. We expected this to be reflected in the responses.

The language of the exam was not the only reason we expected the rhetoric of process to emerge. It seemed logical to us that our informants would reflect the process-oriented approaches of their previous teachers. Nearly all of the 50 informants had taken two writing courses in the university's writing program. These courses used the rhetoric and methods of process and post-process approaches. Because we knew the perspective of the courses our informants had taken, we expected that our informants' academic background would lead them to use words and phrases which reflected their experience as students in process/post-process classrooms. That was not the case.

The repetition of "problems," "needs," and "tendencies" indicated that informants viewed writers who made errors as people who had something wrong with them. A writer with "problems" assumedly always had those problems — they were simply dormant when she was not writing. This approach seemed at odds with the values of process and post-process teaching, approaches which emphasized a more positive view of writers, and the situatedness of each composition site, respectively. Instead, the personalized, moralizing language used by our informants seemed bent on pointing out and focusing on enduring absences.

We don't think that it is stretching the point to suggest that writers who are conditioned to believe that they are people with problems, needs, and tendencies become less powerful writers. Writers who are taught that they have deficits are unlikely to take risks in their writing. Writers who don't take risks are less likely to challenge the status quo in print. Convincing writers of their enduring inadequacies can silence them.

In addition to those words present in abundance, we noted that those we expected to find in teaching discourse, but did not. The absences we noticed included words connoting community, flexibility, and growth. These were words we associated with the process/post process approaches which privilege development, context, personal empowerment, and voice. Our informants' discourse also echoed the current-traditional paradigm in the words they avoided.

Interpretations

We were smug when we looked at what we found in our informants' essays. They were so haughty and arrogant. Our informants

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had so much to learn, and we had so much to teach them. We would have the chance, too, in Language Arts Methods. We looked glibly forward to that. We bemoaned the fact that despite how much the academy had done for them (presenting them with an enlightened exam and providing composition classes that were taught from an enlightened perspective), they still failed to "get it." Clearly, these were problematic students, with tendencies to judge, who needed redirection.

We then turned our disdain on their teachers. Our informants had to learn these types of response somewhere, and since they had been engaged in an apprenticeship of observation for 13 or 14 years, their responses must echo their teachers' responses (Lortie). We lamented the existence of those uninformed and dangerous teachers who churned out bloodied texts, who scorned their students, who abused the power vested in them by the institution.

Whoa! Wasn't that what we were doing? Weren't we using our higher status on the academic food chain to wield the grammar exam? And wasn't the severity of our wielding, and our eventual belief that the exam gave us important information about these students, the same kind of exercise of power that our administrators used with us?

Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, we were alerted to this by folks who are higher on the academic food chain than we were. Senior colleagues who were readers of earlier drafts of this document reacted against our solicitousness toward the students. They also picked up on our insincerity when we considered this largely a rhetorical issue. But it is not simply rhetorical; it is systemic and political. English and other types of education reinforce hierarchy; they emphasize status in and out of the classroom. Our informants showed us that they were very good students of the educational system. Although the language of the exam was different, the students read the subtext: Grammar can be used to make you more powerful.

Attributing our informants' approach to their teachers was probably right. But upon reflection, who can blame teachers for grabbing power wherever they can? In a system that doesn't even allow high school teachers the same opportunities to use the bathroom as students, who can fault teachers for asserting their power with the red pen?

There is much to be resisted here, and much that seems irresistible. While many teachers have, no doubt, conditioned themselves to move away from picayune and petty responses to grammar errors (we thought we had!) we doubt that it is merely a matter of "education" to change this trend. We did not circle repeated errors on the exam, we didn't write snotty notes in the margin, but we did use grammar to gain power, and we did so because it had been used to assert power over us. While thinking of it in this way seems more sensible to us, it seems depressingly large.

We believe that teachers and teacher educators can help break the cycle of using grammar as a thumbscrew by ceasing to be scornful in response to error. Instead, teachers can be charitable and helpful. Teacher educators can help pre-service teachers learn to respond in this way through modeling, various ungraded writing assignments, peer response, and journaling in varied formats (Pailliotet).

We both know teachers who are charitable and provide useful comments about grammar to their students. Charitability can be as easy as inserting the letter "I" into a comment. We have seen students become more consistently conventional when they received comments about errors that are owned by their teachers. Even words like "problems," "needs," and "tendencies" can be transformed with the word "I." Comments like: "I had a problem following this section because of where commas were placed," and "I'm a reader who needs all the punctuation to be correct in order to understand a point," or "When I read I have a tendency to get distracted from the meaning by errors," can be seen as charitable by student writers. In addition, these kinds of comments can also be helpful, for they provide writers with information about how their writing has been read. Writing goals, meta-analyses, conferences, writing teams, fishbowling, and dialog journals further contribute to procedural understanding.

These owned comments can be even more useful when combined with information about conventions. Teachers can help students change their patterns of error by focusing on one or two errors in a paper. We've seen students learn quickly once they realize that their beliefs about usage are unconventional. For example, a student who routinely puts periods and commas outside of quotation marks can easily change that pattern with a little bit of information. We think that a useful response to that error (which our informants made often) might look like this:

> I noticed that most of the commas and periods in quotations are placed outside of the quotation marks. Actually, they go inside. I can understand how you might get confused since semicolons and colons go outside. I have a strategy to remember the conventional way, though. I think of commas and periods as the "meat" in a sandwich with the quotation marks as the bread. I picture this "." and "," to help me remember.

A comment like this could help a writer change that error pattern forever. If teachers only attend to one or two error patterns per paper, it doesn't take much longer to respond in this way than it does to circle every error and write "You have a problem with quotations" in the margin.

Using conventional English is indeed important. Writers need to know that errors can cause them to lose credibility with readers. But writing in school should be designed to help writers learn rather than to produce pretty prose. Attention to convention in writing instruction should keep the role of grammar in perspective. We think an analogy is useful. Conventionality is like a tie for a man at the door of a four-star restaurant: He can't get in without wearing a necktie, but he can't get in wearing *only* a tie, either. If teachers choose to sacrifice students' motivation and morale in order to discourage unconventionality, they may end up with students clad only in ties.

Instead, we recommend helping students learn conventional patterns while they develop as writers. We suggest this be done by attending to conventionality only briefly, charitably, and after issues of content, focus, and organization are considered. We believe this will help all student writers gain admittance to the four-star restaurant.

Epilogue

Nearly all of our informants eventually became students in Language Arts Methods. In that class we tried to practice response methods that seemed charitable and useful. After informants discovered they could learn about conventionality from such responses, we helped them learn how to respond similarly to their own students.

While we were reasonably pleased with our informants-turned-students' change in response to conventional error by the end of the course, we do not believe that rhetorical changes get to the root of what made them – and us – use grammar as a way to wield power over those of lesser status. As long as teachers are considered to be next to the bottom of the academic food chain, the impulse to feel more powerful by being scornful to those below them will be present. A real change in the way that teachers exercise power will occur when there is a change in the way that power is exercised over them.

APPENDIX 1

1. Correct the errors in these passages. (*Three paragraph-length passages were adapted from popular magazines to include a total of 44 errors.*)

2. Identify the errors in the passages written by hypothetical writers Terry, Pat, and Chris. Next, write a description of the patterns of errors that you noted for each passage. Please be conventional in your own writing. (*Each passage was 1 double-spaced typewritten page*

long. Each passage was taken from a popular magazine like Allure *or* Consumer Reports, *and attributed to either Pat, Terry, or Chris. The errors were planted in the passages according to patterns. Pat's 18 errors were with commas, apostrophes, and homophones. Terry's 15 errors were with quotation marks and titles. Chris's 29 errors were with capitalization and end punctuation.)*

3. Identify the errors in this passage and write a note directed to the student writer of this passage which prioritizes the errors that you have noted. Include a rationale for why you considered some errors to be more important than others. (*A passage from a magazine included 18 different types of errors that we planted.*)

4. Write a brief statement about why you think it is important to use and teach conventional written English. Be sure to be conventional yourself in this essay. (*Space was provided for the students to write an essay by hand on the exam sheet.*)

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