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Notes from My Teaching Journal  
9/9/97 - 2/21/01

*I have kept a teaching journal from the time I started student teaching. Here are some excerpts from my journals that are particularly related to my research and some of the discoveries and struggles related to it.*

9/9/97

Both classes reviewed pronoun usage today. It was fatally boring. I also had them taping themselves in one corner of the room. I plan to transcribe these or better yet, let them help transcribe them.

9/12/97

I typed and returned their oral exercises. What surprised me in these was not the grammar but their responses to the question: Does a person owe something to the community in which s/he grew up. Traditionally, in the black community, the answer to that has been an unquestioned yes. But these are divided...

9/17/97

After-school session with a group of seniors struggling over S/V agreement. We talked through some examples from the text focusing on the "why." One student was having an especially difficult time; he stayed with me until almost 4:30. Although the session went well, I am most concerned about not yet making a strong enough connection between their own writing and the usage issues. For that matter, I'd like more connection between all the aspects of language arts within the class. We're supposed to be studying the early poets...NOT. I can't even bring myself to go that way. Next week we'll be in the [computer] labs and the library. But we're also to begin the Shakespeare sonnets, which we will probably do. I trying to think of a way to connect the study of those with rap lyrics...

10/25/97

Observations on [student] Interview #1. I'm intrigued by several of her comments. For example, TL appreciates even enjoys drill and recitation in grammar. Copying rules from the book and then repeated drills. Her mother has told me, and I've observed that she is very serious about her school work to the point of test anxiety. When she talked about it, I could sense the security that this method gave her. "I know I've been taught; I know I've mastered it."

The second important point was that Black teachers seemed to care more about whether their students passed or failed. We refuse to "allow" children

to quietly drop out. We fight, pull, cajole, sometimes nag them to the point where they'd rather pass because it's easier.

The third point is the phrase "break it down" which I keep hearing from her and the other students. They mean the way some teachers explain things, making things understandable. This is going to be an important point.

11/15/97

Other thoughts on "break it down." To make the rules and applications of SAE [Standard American English] understandable requires that the teacher (me) have a strong and confident grasp of those things myself. One of the best (worst) kept secrets in English teacher ed is that most of us are not well-trained enough in the SAE conventions to do this. Many of us focus on literature because that's what we know best. Older Black teachers coming from the HBCUs [historically black colleges and universities], especially in the South, received more intensive training in SAE.

1/30/98

The counselor asked me to sit in one of the math teacher's classes so that teacher could come to the office for a parent conference. I knew all of the students and they were very relaxed with my being in the room. It was a geometry class. We joked, and I finished my lunch as they worked. They were actively, no, fervently, assisting each other with the assigned problems. There was no shame (visibly) or embarrassment among them about not knowing how to do the work. I had seen the same phenomena in my own room AFTER they finished our work on English, and they began helping each other with math or science homework.

Why, I wondered, (and asked them aloud) was there not this same attitude of sharing when it came to doing English assignments? My observation had been that they would distrust and disparage one another's knowledge of English, always wary of a classmate's suggestion on a sentence or writing revision. Only my comments were accepted. They are embarrassed that they can't "do" English, but they are also angry. One said, "Well, Miz Mo'lots of people need help in math or science, but everybody s'posed ta know English!"

1/31/98

During a Saturday morning conversation a parent [African American male] made this spontaneous and passionate observation: "Personally, English offends me. It insults me. If you talk to someone who considers himself an English person, the first thing they want to do is correct me. I'm American; I've been speakin' all my life. Why do I have to be corrected? I refuse to stop using my "com' `ere's" and "git da'ts." What

you're saying and what most Black kids are probably thinking is that there must be something wrong with me that I don't know English and I've been speaking it all these years. You feel like a captured slave. Like we're still slaves. We're forced to accept somebody else's culture."

4/3/98

According to my students, there is not much "straight" [direct] teaching of grammar at our school, especially above the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. On the face of it, that should be good news according to the current language arts research. Students report they are spending most of their time on writing and literature. The students are angry. They feel they've been cheated out of learning important information. One girl said, "If you asked me to write an essay, I could, but it would be full of grammatical errors." Another complained that they [students] are penalized for grammar errors but no one has ever taught them how to avoid the mistakes. Several others sitting around agreed with her.

I intend to do some interviews with my colleagues in the department (if they'll agree). What I suspect is that they have become frustrated and are teaching less grammar – not integrating it into the writing and literature lessons, although at least one of them would insist that she is. "Teaching grammar through writing" has become a catch phrase for not teaching grammar at all. As one of my more traditional co-workers is fond of pointing out, it's one thing to use students' writing to remind or review them on usage and mechanics, but SOMEBODY has to do the dirty work of teaching the concept in the first place.

7/27/99

There are dozens, hundreds of decisions to be made just in the preparation to teach.

9/30/99

I completed the summary of each student's performance on the grammar pretest. The overall results are fairly consistent. A close reading and analysis of their writing samples and see what I find consistently as far as usage and mechanics. My goal is to make them aware of their own patterns, so they can take responsibility for learning and mastering their weak areas.

11/22/99

An intensive grammar lesson on verb conjugation. I created a verb chart for them to use as a guide. I modeled on the overhead projector. We went through principal parts, all six major tenses, the progressive and emphatic forms. Quite a large dose.

Mrs. H—our English dept. chair, has voiced many times how important she feels it is for students to have a strong grounding in verbs. Much of the difference in and distain towards BE comes from our use of verbs. I am curious to see how they respond to this particular unit.

My presentation included a great deal of cross referencing to Black English. Example: While defining the emphatic verb form, I noted that AA [African American] use the past participle "done" before the past tense ("I done told you").

11/23/99

A good activity for this unit might be to compare verb usage in various songs, poems, stories, by AAVE [African American Vernacular English] speakers. As I ease them back into the daily sentence labeling, I'll include various verb forms for them to identify.

4/19/98

A discussion with group of parents from my DreamKeepers project. See the tapes for the full transcript, but one parent comment stood out:

DL: "Break-it-down means takes their time, explains it step-by-step, don't go so fast. Simplify. Some of them rush like they don't care. It's that "don't care" attitude that bothers me most. [Amen's and head-nods around the room] I had a teacher that understood that. She explained things over and over until EVERYBODY understood."

The discussion itself was more about "how" than "what." The primary focus of participants was not on what got taught but rather on the attitude of the teacher. It is so important to get the parents' point of view because the parents are the primary transmitters of the culture.

12/23/98

My own sense of the English curriculum is that it is too unstructured, too fragmented for effective teaching. I've grappled for years with how to sequence the necessary grammar instruction. Many teachers simply follow the textbook, but I'm not comfortable with the order presented there either.

12/29/98

A so-called reading specialist from the State Dept. waltzes into our high school and without so much as a casual conversation with any of us proceeds to announce that THE problem with our students is that they come from poor, single parent homes in which they were not read to often or at all. We are, therefore, to compensate for this lack by taking 20 minutes of each class period to read primary level books to them. The fact that she looks like Shirley Temple and had only taught for a year or two in lower

elementary before going to work for SDE doesn't help her credibility with the faculty, many of whom laughed at her out loud, or cursed under their breath.

2/10/99

I am working on the development of a systematic, consistent English curriculum. My model has two parts:

- a) The Communications Skills Portfolio that I first developed some years ago. The pf consists of performance-based units each focusing on practical use of language skills.
- b) Modified version of Ed Vavra's KISS Grammar Curriculum. I am adopting Vavra's proposed curriculum for use with the MS RLAF (reading/language arts framework). I like the idea of focusing student attention on the standard or "correct" models rather than incorrect ones they are constantly trying to guess how to fix. I also like that it is sequential and cumulative nature.

One fear teachers may have of KISS is that it uses randomly selected texts from the reading assignments or student work. This puts the teacher in a very vulnerable situation—without a teacher's guide or key. Questions could (and will) come up for which the teacher may not have a ready answer. Unlike textbook or worksheet exercises these sentences will often contain constructions that the teacher hasn't "covered" yet. The teacher (me) must be competent, confident, and willing to admit what she doesn't know (yet).

4/20/98

I started class today by explaining that we are going to combine our study of the end of Othello with a review of grammar. Interesting, 1<sup>st</sup> period, which has most of my slower students, worked slowly, but steadily. Students helped one another, some asked me for suggestions and clarification. No one appeared overly frustrated. The 2<sup>nd</sup> period Honors class, however, seemed more baffled by the assignment. They had a harder time getting started; they question every instruction and need more reassurance at every step. They are much more concerned about neatness. There is MUCH less enthusiasm for the assignment and MUCH greater anxiety. Yet this is the class that has been asking for more work to happen to the subject (verb)? When do you want it to start (tense)? Does this thing need or relate to something else (objects)? Can you give more description of the things in the sentence such as colors, numbers, sizes, locations (modifiers)? Are there other ways to say this (sentence patterns)? Such an exercise would not only reinforce the p.o.s. (parts of a sentence) but help AAVE speakers with the specifics of sentence structure.

I regret now that I did not start the year off with this sentence exercise and build on it gradually and daily throughout the term.

My version of daily oral language consists of giving students 1 – 3 sentences (often containing thoughtful or moral lessons). We follow three steps:

1. Students explain the meaning of the sentence (sometimes we start by defining key terms or any words they don't know).
2. Analyze and label the parts of the sentence.
3. Practice other ways of saying the same thing; changing the parts of the sentences structurally.

5/10/99

I've been re-reading George Hillocks. He talks about the professional, almost artistic decisions teachers of writing must make moment by moment everyday in the classroom. His research stresses the need for teachers to be reflective not reflexive. He stresses, as I do, the need to know the students, their talents and needs, and other particulars.

2/15/99

I am now teaching 10<sup>th</sup> grade English (2 classes). A co-worker is out on medical emergency. So I will pick up the grammar work with these two groups.

3/13/99

I'm going over a series of basic grammar review exercises from the 10<sup>th</sup> grade classes. The results are dismal. These are standard workbook drills that I was using while I had to be away from class on jury duty. I have not taught a grammar unit to this class. Most of the work is 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, and they clearly do not understand.

8/10/00

First day of school for students. We were handed our rosters at 4 pm yesterday and I was here working until after 6 p.m. I think this weekend would be a good time to begin contacting parents and significant adults. Today, we began pre-assessments. We spent a lot of time on the classroom standards, especially that they also apply to me. They seemed very impressed that I spelled out consequences for myself.

8/20/00

Tallying up the pretests has been tedious. It's not just a matter of scoring right or wrong answers, but also of identifying and listing types of errors and weaknesses. The "eyeball" summary says S/V agr. is the major grammar weakness of this group. No surprise...but why and how after 10 years of English?

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What astonishes me is how easy everyone assumes it to be to teach grammar. Parents and the general public think it's the first thing English teacher do and any one who can't isn't worth the name. Students assume they must really be dumb if they can't learn it. yet the evidence of our failure is daunting. Still, we cling to old methods, egotistically assuring ourselves (English teachers) that WE will be the one who finally teaches these children grammar. When they don't "learn" it, we blame them. Or worse, they pass a grammar test or two and we proclaim a false mastery.

8/24/00

I wish I had thought to videotape the first 2 weeks of school. This is where much of the foundation for grammar instruction and my engagement with the students. I've already done my language/clothes analogy. I compared how AA's use BE to how it is used in SAE. This example always stuns and delights the students. I think it's the idea that the way we speak actually has rules; that it's not just street slang or "country."

9/18/00

Stayed home today nursing a cold. Off and on, I've been finishing scoring my English III students pretests. I have some numerical scores from each part of the test and some tallies such as most common errors. But what I'd really like to do is a much more personal narrative for each student explaining where I think we need to go. Time consuming, yes, but vastly more accurate and useful to them and to me....The narrative analysis could look at things a flat score cannot such as: Which grammatical or spelling errors does student make consistently in original writing?

9/26/00 [At the District's Strategic Planning retreat]

The most contentious debate was over whether to include a statement about our belief in God as one of the core values of the Strategic Plan. While everyone (literally) in the room agreed that this is a value we all share, several of the educators in the room refused to support including it on the list of core values because they felt it would violate the criteria of separation of church and state. The community representatives were extremely upset by this. To them, it highlighted the chasm between the school and the community...If we include it, we reassure the community that they can trust us with their children. By rejecting it, I'm afraid we send the message that we're more concerned about our jobs and paychecks than we are about doing the right thing.

1/6/01

Reading my students' essays has been one of the most rewarding grading experiences of my career. I can actually see significant improvement in the quality of their writing. The trick will like helping them to see it and getting them to make the association between process and product

1/9/01

Although I want them [the students] to have a multicultural experience, they and their parents expect that I will place special emphasis on learning the works of the Black authors. Black schools in the South have always, unashamedly promoted our own culture because this (and the church) were the only places in this country that culture is preserved and passed down.

Just two weeks ago, I attended Kwanzaa celebration at a local missionary Baptist church. The parents and elders expected—and got—memorized recitations by the children of James Weldon Johnson's "Creation," Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," speeches about Mary McLeod Bethune, Martin L. King, and Harriet Tubman. And, of course, there was singing and clapping and much Amen-ing. A glow of pride lit the room as we watched our children with the reassurance that they knew and cherished our common past. More important, we hoped that knowledge gave them a greater sense of responsibility for their community and race.

1/10/01

Today during our class opening grammar activity, we came across the following sentence:

"I took my dog Sam to the lake who was lame."

One of the students found this in an ACT practice exercise. The author's intention is to create a misplaced modifier by suggesting the lake is crippled rather than Sam, the dog. However, my students all interpreted the word "lame" in its more popular common Black English connotation "boring." Hence, their "correction" of the sentence was to change WHO to WHICH. The incident became a teachable moment for me to explain cultural bias and how often, African Americans must "think white" in a testing or formal situation.

1/10/01 [Mid year review of students' personal English plans and exams]

The numbers suggest certain patterns, but have to be taken with an understanding of the nature of language study. As students try new things and move from one aspect of language arts to another, grades will fluctuate. Portfolio grades or scores tend to be higher the more those on more standard assessments (a fact that unnerves many teachers when they use portfolio assessment for the first time). Also, my method of grading, though generally consistent, is not always an exact science. Nevertheless, the

numbers do matter, and they do raise fascinating questions about teaching and learning.

1/16/01

There are SO many details to attend to I'm sitting in the middle of the gym with cheerleaders chattering, basketball players warming up as they prepare to leave. Parents are coming in to pick up report cards and sign folders. I'm stationed at one of the tables as I try to sneak time to write on my lesson plans. So much for the "teacher work day."

1/17/01

(3<sup>rd</sup> period) Even as I'm writing the assignments on the board, I'm changing them making revisions.

1/18/01

[1 a.m.] I am incredibly tired. The first day of the unit was not as smooth as I had hoped. Many interruptions. Students are skeptical about this unit. I talked to a few parents yesterday trying to generate support for the literature study. Invited them to visit the classroom.

2/21/01

A full day workshop! Another day out of class. We are learning to use the new computer system for classroom management (actually to monitor us).

My worst fear has come true. This system encourages teachers to rely on multiple choice tests and to break everything down into discrete skills in order to track them electronically. It's a giant leap backwards. As usual, we must look to subversion or conversion of the administrative powers...