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Reading Journal Sample

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I begin with the title of Chapter One "Toward a Middle Way." That's a reference to Aristotle who championed a middle way as the best way to move through life--no extremes. You can debate that as much as you want, but there is something important here about the role grammar plays in our writing and the role we suggest it plays when we teach or talk about grammar with students. But, first, some key things from the text: The public demands we teach grammar in school--this public that *thinks* that if we taught grammar explicitly students would automatically become better readers, writers, and, I assume, citizens. There is nostalgia around this golden age when when everyone wrote perfectly (we will read, shortly, from Mike Rose, that this is not the case--this time never existed). Another point: grammar is taught as a set of prohibitive rules--do this; don't do this. Another point: grammar just is. We all know grammar because grammar is what carries meaning in language. If we didn't all know grammar we wouldn't be able to talk to each other. It would be the tower of Babel. There is also the idea of teaching grammar just to know the rules of grammar. What is the point of that? If you know what a dangling participle is but can't fix it in a sentence you know the rule but your writing hasn't improved, and, and this is Weaver's point, there is 35 years of evidence that suggests that memorizing the rule does not lead to better writing. Not at all. Get over it. It doesn't happen. We can want it to happen because, in our own writing heads, some previous experience has made us say, well, my writing is better because I had explicit instruction in grammar so there must be something to it. But, and this is Weaver's point, your singular experience is not enough to extrapolate a whole curriculum from. Also, you are probably wrong. You are probably a good writer because you read a lot, because you write a lot, because you've been writing and reading for a long time. I'm going off on this because this is a thing that happens in this class a lot. We spend all this time talking about what works and what doesn't to help students be better writers but I always have students who say, "but there has to be some memorization."

What is most interesting to me in Weaver is what she says about how grammar can make students better writers. She talks about grammar as a rhetorical move--using rules to help a student say most precisely what he or she wants to say. She is interested in helping students write better, nicer sentences rather than correct sentences. This is where students learn to write: in the creation of more interesting and precise sentences rather than in writing correct sentences. There are a lot of correct, boring sentences out there. We need no more of them in this world. Learning the deliberate use (her word) of grammar and punctuation can be a powerful force for meaning making for a student when done well.

So what does well look like? Well, this is what is frustrating, I know, to students who want to be good teachers. There is no easy way. There is no one way. There is no short way. What you teach your students one year might not mean anything to their writing for another six years. But, that said, Weaver does offer some guidance. First, off, teach grammar as part of the process of writing. She has a diagram on page six of the text that positions grammar as a powerful force in a larger process. She also, interesting to me, highlights the role publication and presentation can play for students as a motivator and rational for powerful grammar and punctuation. I very much believe in this and have seen it in action. She also talks about having students use grammar instruction to help them develop voice--something idiosyncratic that says this is the writing of this one person. That's tough to manage with students. Correct sentences tend to sound the same. Adventurous sentence, lovely sentences, sentences that risk something--both in what they say and how they say it are prone to error but more interesting to work on.

Close to graph on page six, she offers a numbered list of things to keep in mind. I think this can be essentially summarized by saying that teaching grammar separate from the writing process is a waste of time for students and teacher. That this idea that all of our correcting on a student paper will yield better writing is, to be frank, a stupid waste of everyone's time. It's not our correcting that helps our students writing; it is their participation in reading and writing activities that does it.

I think that much of the next two chapters follows up in things that she lays out--and that I've already gone on about here--in chapter one. But there are a few things that I think merit highlighting. First, she talks about the role of error and how we should understand error in student writing. Students, as they take risks and try new ways of expressing themselves will, in fact, make mistakes. Error, then, represents something very powerful: not mistakes but evidence of real learning. That doesn't mean we don't fix error, but it might mean that we don't always penalize error. If error is a sign of learning we don't want to create a situation where we limit learning.

Another point that Weaver brings up is that rules are, as written and taught, pretty confusing. The grammar test I give in class is evidence of this. She also talks about something that I think I'm sort of talking about above: sometimes people teach grammar because they think, like eating liver, its just good for you to do. But, just like eating liver, which, turns out, very bad for you, direct instruction in grammar isn't really that good for you.

Something that Weaver only really hints at is that our obsession with grammar is also class-based. While the real world manages to allow for many different dialects and slangs (even embracing it--bling, selfie, rofl: all part of our lexicon now), school has persistently demanded students learn white, middle-class grammar. I'm not arguing that anything goes, though, sure, a part of me is. But I am arguing that we shouldn't teach our students that school grammar is the "right" grammar and home grammar is wrong. That's developmentally hurtful to all students and particularly so to those students that are often the most vulnerable folks in our classrooms.

This journal is too long at this point, but there is a lot to cover and I feel strongly about this. Again, without going through everything else I might say, I close with Weaver's catch phrase from the start of chapter three: grammar instruction should be positive, productive, and practical. I am not one to reduce ideas to alliterative phrases, but I see how these three words encapsulate what she is working on in these first three chapters. Students need to read a lot and with care. They need to write for authentic reasons with real audiences (not just a teacher). And they need to be ready for what you are going to tell them as a writer and thinker. We aren't going to spend the whole semester talking about teaching grammar or not. The question now becomes, how do we do those things: read deeply, write extensively and authentically, and ready our students to become the writers they are capable of being. That is the work or our class.