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Towards a Constructivist Grammar Curriculum

for the United States

By

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Childhood General Education

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Abstract: *Towards a Constructivist Grammar Curriculum for the United States* by Tyler Crafts Jennings.

For far too long, educators have been forced to choose between the traditional teaching of grammar—that is, in isolation, usually through memorization and the use of textbooks and workbooks—or no grammar teaching at all. Neither approach results in an excellent education for student writers. We must forge an alternative method: the explicit, constructivist teaching of grammar within the meaningful context of a writing curriculum. This thesis provides a review of the literature on this topic, a sample unit to illustrate a proposed curricular tool for teachers, an analysis of the potential benefits of such a curricular tool and the values that undergird it, and recommendations for future work in this area.

<u>DEDICATIONS</u>

To my mentors: Dr. Hal Melnick, Dr. Greg Blackburn, Honor Taft, Aaron Page, Matthew Stuart, and Cristian Solorza.

To my students.

To Emily.

To my parents, Penelope and Robert Jennings.

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A Letter to Educators

Dear Colleagues,

If your experience as a Language Arts student was anything like mine, your response to grammar lessons may have involved feelings of frustration, boredom, and confusion, as well as a lack of purpose, drive, and engagement. And if your teachers cared about you, they may have uttered such understandable, but ultimately damaging, statements as: "I know, I don't like it either, but we're going to get through it together." Of course, some of the students in those classrooms (myself included) went on to become teachers themselves. Unless they received excellent teacher training or mentorship to interrupt the cycle, their feelings and approaches to the teaching of grammar will be heavily informed by their own experiences as students of grammar. The outcomes are predictable—and hardly their fault.

As dramatic as it may sound, I would venture to argue that teachers have never, in the history of Language Arts education, been given the educational values, pedagogical frameworks, and curricular tools to teach grammar in a meaningful, engaging way. Until now, educators and schools have been given two options from which to choose: the teaching of grammar in isolation, usually through the use of memorization, textbooks, and workbooks, or no grammar teaching at all. In our hearts, we teachers know that our student writers need to know how to wield grammatical concepts; it will empower them, enhance the quality of their writing, and result in greater impact on their readers. We teachers also know, in our hearts, that the study of grammar in isolation results in student disengagement and that the concepts never seem to surface in student writing. We

remember from our own days as Language Arts students, and nothing has changed since then. Every research study on the topic supports these gut feelings that we have as teachers and the memories we have as former students. This approach does not work.

However, few researchers and scholars seem to have considered teaching grammar in a different way: that is, within the meaningful context of a writing curriculum. Very recent research in the United Kingdom suggests that this approach results in stronger student learning and writing. These are exciting times. It is a time to launch a movement towards the explicit, constructivist teaching of grammar within the context of the writing curriculum, and there is a need for research, curriculum development, teacher training, and experimentation. This thesis represents an early step in this direction in the United States. In the coming pages, you will find a review of the literature that exists on the topic; a sample unit plan that exemplifies the possibilities for full year-long curricula for the upper elementary grades and beyond, which will be termed the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum hereforth; an analysis of that sample unit plan, as a means to express the philosophical stance the undergirds it; and recommendations for future work.

Warm regards,

Tyler Crafts Jennings

Chapter One: A Review of the Literature

A review of the literature on the teaching of Standard English grammar to English Language Arts (L1) students in schools reveals two troubling, long-term trends: 1. that there has been a dearth of substantive, trustworthy research on the effective teaching of grammar; and 2. that the body of literature that does exist is marked by a single, massive rift in opinion. Since the 1960's, there appear to have been exactly two prevailing opinions about the teaching of grammar: that grammar is to be taught in isolation, as a discrete area of knowledge of its own, or that direct grammar instruction does not improve writing at all and that, therefore, teachers should not devote any classroom time to it whatsoever. Of course, these two opinions are diametrically opposed to one another; no wonder scholars, educators, researchers, and teachers have been distracted—indeed blinded—by the tension that inherently exists between them. Even today, the vast majority of educators, administrators, scholars, and policy-makers appear to consider these two options as the *only* options. To compound the problem, teacher service training programs often skirt the topic of grammar teaching altogether, and they send fresh educators into the field without knowledge about best practices regarding grammar teaching *and* without actual grammar knowledge and confidence in their own knowledge. No wonder the question of grammar teaching has remained relatively unchanged for the past half-century. And no wonder the term "grammar" alone evokes displeasure from teachers and, thus, of course, their students, as well.

Recently, however, a few scholars, researchers, and educators in the United States and the United Kingdom have advanced a valuable "third way" (Weaver, 2007, p. 1): that

grammar can be taught effectively within the context of authentic student writing. While belonging to a still quite fledgling movement, this important line of argument has been gaining some traction, especially in the United Kingdom. The discussion here in the United States feels much less coherent and focused, completely lacks the foundation of empirical research, and seems to be borne out of anecdotal wisdom passed from one educator to another (Weaver, 2007, 2008; Anderson, 2005, 2007; Weaver, Bush, Anderson, & Bills, 2006; Noden, 2011; Romano, 2000; Atwell, 2002; Kittle, 2014; Horst, 2012). In the United Kingdom, by contrast, scholars and researchers there undertook the first empirical study on this topic (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2012), have continued to win grants in order to extend this research (http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/ES.K002511.1/read), and already appear to have begun the development of curriculum materials for classroom teachers to use (http://www.pearsonschoolsandfecolleges.co.uk/Secondary/EnglishAndMedia/11-14/SkillsforWriting/SkillsforWriting.aspx).

This literature review briefly will map relevant histories and trappings of these three opinions: the explicit teaching of grammar in isolation, the avoidance of explicit grammar teaching, and the new movement for the teaching of grammar explicitly in the context of a writing curriculum. From the sum total of the literature review offered here, it will become clear that the invaluable argument for teaching grammar in the context of writing needs to be strengthened and improved, and that it needs to be delivered more forcefully to practitioners and the public alike, especially in the United States.

Two Prevailing Opinions: Grammar In Isolation or Not at All

A momentous occasion in the world of Language Arts teaching occurred in 1966, in the small town of Hanover, New Hampshire: the so-called Dartmouth Conference. At this four-week conference, Language Arts educators from the Anglophone world—with the most representation from the United States and the United Kingdom—discussed philosophical and pedagogical questions about best practices in Language Arts education, and attempted to forge an international consensus on these questions and a new direction forward (Miller, 1969; Marckwardt, 1967). This conference has been cast, in no uncertain terms, as the source of some of our present evils in the world of Language Arts education—including by some highly respectable scholars at the University of Exeter who have been advocating for the explicit teaching of grammar in the context of a writing curriculum (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2012; Myhill, Jones, Watson, & Lines, 2013; Myhill & Watson, 2014), as well as more traditionalist educators (MacDonald, 1995). According to these scholars, the Dartmouth Conference was the source of the belief— which became widespread in many American and British schools—that the direct teaching of grammar cannot impact student learning, nor student writing, and that therefore it should be regarded as "a waste of time" (Myhill & Watson, 2014, p. 42).

While I most certainly agree that the avoidance of direct grammar instruction altogether is a grave mistake and generally agree with the University of Exeter team's work, it is difficult to understand their forcible rejection of this conference in particular. It appears that the participants in the conference came to a consensus on very little— perhaps only the questions of tracking and testing, both of which were correctly identified as ills of the system, as noted by Miller (1969, p. 19) and Marckwardt (1967, p. 13)—and that "much ambiguity remained" afterwards (Miller, 1969, p. 2). Indeed, the actual

summary paper from the working groups assigned to consider the role of language study at the Dartmouth Conference put forth tentative arguments that almost seem like fledgling descriptions of teaching grammar in the context of writing. Its authors write: "A wide variety of opportunities for *using* language must be devised by the teacher… But these opportunities are not sufficient… Attention to content and interest needs to be accompanied by a more systematic attention to how a thing is said or written" (Marckwardt ed., 1968, p. 66). This passage essentially argues for the explicit teaching of grammar *as students use language* in their writing and speech. In other words, they suggest that educators consciously pair grammatical awareness with writerly purpose. Indeed, in a paper written as a reflection and summary of the Conference, Marckwardt also advocates for a deeper approach to teaching grammar than a "shotgun corrective technique" (1968, p. 20). I do not believe that here Marckwardt advocates for teachers to allow students to flounder in unsuccessful grammar usage; rather, his argument resembles the same ones made by advocates for the explicit teaching of grammar in the context of writing: that simply marking so-called "errors" on students' papers fails to educate them and only causes them to feel that grammar is a series of mistakes rather than a set of writerly options (Weaver, 2007, 2008; Anderson, 2005, 2007; Weaver, Bush, Anderson, & Bills, 2006). As well, the papers edited by Markwardt argued that teachers need to be trained deeply in linguistic grammar so that they can assist students—not in learning linguistic grammar themselves, but in using grammar rhetorically in their writing (1967, p. 13; 1968, p. 36).

Thus, on close inspection, the outcome of the Dartmouth Conference neither seems unanimous in general, nor unanimous about the wastefulness of direct grammar

instruction in particular. Nor does it appear to have been the loose, chaotic pedagogical free-for-all that many scholars describe. However, the concluding papers from the Conference also do express a great deal of uncertainty about the future of grammar instruction. Marckwardt writes: "there remains the unanswerable question of just when, what, and how much direct teaching of the structure of English there should be" (1967, p. 13). Again, he does not state that the Conference participants came to believe in the avoidance of grammar instruction altogether; instead, on their behalf, he asks *how* to teach grammar to students. I believe that several decades after the Conference, educator-scholars such as Constance Weaver and Jeff Anderson in the United States and the team from the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom have begun to answer this question—a question which had been thought to be "unanswerable" just a few decades ago. And this thesis carries that work forward in vitally needed ways.   Regardless of the true source of widespread avoidance in Standard English grammar instruction, I believe that most importantly this trend represents an understandable reaction against the traditional teaching of grammar in isolation. Research studies confirm what many educators already perhaps suspect: that the teaching of grammar in isolation lends no appreciable impact to student learning and student writing. Indeed, in their recent meta-analysis of research studies, Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara, and Harris (2012) noted the dearth of studies on grammar teaching, and they also stated that, taking the existing studies into consideration, few as they may be, there appears to be no appreciable impact of explicit grammar teaching on student learning and writing (2012, p. 880). However, the authors of the meta-analysis fail to note the pedagogical strategies employed by the teachers in the studies. None of these studies focused explicitly on the direct teaching of

grammar in the context of a writing curriculum. A highly significant message lies between the lines here: that the studies under consideration may have focused solely on programs in which teachers taught grammar concepts in isolation, which indeed do not yield results. Constance Weaver summarizes this position definitively: "Teaching grammar in isolation from writing … has been found again and again to have little if any positive effect on most students' writing" (2008, p. 14). Indeed, in 2012, professors at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom became the first group of researches to conduct a study on grammar teaching that controlled for pedagogical approach; they focused specifically on the potential benefits of direct grammar instruction within the context of a writing curriculum and found statistically significant positive outcomes (Jones, Myhill, & Bailey, 2012).

Interestingly, the study by the Exeter team was published in the very same year as the afore-mentioned meta-analysis by Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara, and Harris. These two works illustrate perfectly the stark contrast between the dangers of rehashing traditional approaches to grammar teaching and the dire need for a new way of thinking—"a third way." This synchronicity also suggests a difference in the movement along international lines: the Exeter team's study was conducted in the United Kingdom and *for* the United Kingdom, while the meta-analysis was conducted by a team of American scholars. I will explore these divides in more depth in the coming sections. They will become particularly salient to understand because this thesis will propose a publishable curriculum for classroom teachers specifically working in the United States. Interestingly, one of the motivations for holding the Dartmouth Conference in the first

place was the need for greater cohesion in the teaching of English on an international scale (Miller, 1969; Marckwardt, 1967); this need clearly persists.

Rather than a successful movement towards the explicit teaching of grammar in the context of writing in American classrooms, the current state of affairs in the United States can be characterized by a mixture of silence, confusion, avoidance, bonds to traditionalist approaches to grammar teaching, and fragmented and paradoxical theorizations of grammar pedagogy. The lead voice on the issue of grammar education at the most substantial Language Arts educational think tank in the United States, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the work of Brock Haussamen appears to emblemize many of these national characteristics. His most recent volume, called *Grammar Alive!* (2003), presents a fragmented, incompletely theorized, and under-researched proposal for grammar teaching in this country. A few of its core arguments do align with successful, progressive educational values and with the values of proponents for the explicit teaching of grammar. For instance, it argues for the place of grammar teaching in the school curriculum (2003, xi). It also rightly argues for language arts educators to renounce the use of textbooks and workbooks in the teaching of grammar, in favor of models found in excellent literature (2003, pp. 16-7). It even seems to recognize the truth that grammar and meaning are inextricably tied (2003, xi, p. 28), as well as the power of teaching grammar as a set of rhetorical effects for writing. However, not only do the authors fail to suggest how to implement these values in everyday teaching, but they also devote several chapters to the advocacy of sentence diagramming (2003, pp. 75-9)—whose connections to the meaning and purpose of a sentence is too abstract for young writers to comprehend and take advantage of—and of

the use of grammatical terminology as entrypoints to understanding the use of grammatical options (2003, p. 23, 27). On the one hand, then, these authors vaguely promote the values of teaching grammar in the context of writing, while their more specific recommendations for everyday teaching can be located firmly in the traditional approach to grammar teaching which the Dartmouth Conference and related studies concluded was completely ineffective long ago. In essence, our leadership on the issue of grammar teaching in the United States is scarce, hardly visible to the public, and theoretically fragmented.

In the vacuum created by this lack of leadership, research, and discussion on the national scale, many American schools continue to cling to traditionalist approaches to the teaching of grammar and fall prey to seemingly easy "solutions." The pre-packaged grammar program called *Shurley Grammar* represents such an approach (https://www.shurley.com/pdf/Brochure-Grammar_072009.3.pdf). First of all, it promises that, with the use of this program, students will master grammar in 15 weeks. Of course, this promise sends an extremely damaging message: that grammar is solely a discrete body of knowledge that can and should be memorized, rather than a tool and set of choices that can be used in writing. If grammar is viewed as the latter, then it quickly becomes evident that it is not a body of knowledge to absorb and lock away. One should learn about grammar infinitely, throughout life, as one uses it to write and speak. Writers can and do manipulate grammar in infinitely diverse ways. The *Shurley Grammar* approach also makes extensive use of chants as a method for memorizing grammatical concepts (https://www.shurley.com/pdf/Brochure-Grammar_072009.3.pdf). This approach represents sheer memorization in an isolated, decontextualized learning

experience. It holds no meaning for the students whatsoever, and they do not come to see the connection between grammar and meaning-making in writing.

A Brief, Recent History of Grammar in the Context of Writing

The first person to seriously raise the call for teaching grammar in the context of writing, in those explicit terms, appears to be Constance Weaver, a professor of English at Western Michigan University in the United States. Her first seminal text on the subject, *Teaching Grammar in Context*, was published in 1996, and the ideas espoused in that book have been updated by her as recently as 2008 in *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*. Weaver's work has been essential if only because it signals a firm departure from traditional methods of teaching grammar in isolation and as a set of tasks designed to reduce errors, and it does so without then renouncing the teaching of grammar altogether as so many studies and publications have done. In fact, Weaver argues that grammar can and should be taught explicitly in the context of students' writing, and that grammar is a creative tool for authors of all ages to wield (2008, p. 6). She also argues that teachers of grammar must recognize student errors as signs that they are ready to learn and experiment with a new grammatical concept, rather than something that needs to be "cleaned up" (2008, p. 37, 45). In essence, Weaver conceptualizes grammar as a set of options from which student writers (and all writers) can choose as they write (2008, p. 25). Such choices enable writers to enhance their writing, so that it becomes more engaging and more effective in achieving its purpose and reaching its intended audience. That is, the study of grammar is pragmatic and purpose-driven, serving the needs of the writer (2008, p. 25).

Upon reading Weaver's work, the uninitiated teacher of grammar in the context of writing may wonder how these concepts might look in practice, in the day-to-day life of a classroom. The answer to this need has been Jeff Anderson, an educator in the United States, more than anyone else. Because Anderson remains a classroom teacher, he is able to give detailed accounts of these theories as they play out in practice in his own classroom. Particularly in his book *Everyday Editing* (2007), Anderson shapes these theories into a pedagogical routine that other teachers can adopt and with which they can experiment. In *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*, Weaver emphasizes the importance of examining grammatical options in models of great literature, playing with them in a guided practice setting, and then eventually opening the way for students to apply these options to their own writing (2008, p. 64). Anderson takes a similar approach in his framework, but he renders these lessons in a detailed and slightly more formalized structure.

In *Everyday Editing*, Anderson created the framework of a series of "invitations" to his students: first, inviting the students to notice grammatical patterns in mentor texts; second, inviting them to imitate those patterns in writing exercises; third, inviting them to share and celebrate their creations; and fourth, inviting them to test these grammatical options in their own writing (2007, pp. 28-46). "Invitation" is a colloquial word for the general body of wisdom that progressive thinkers and educational reformers have formulated over the past hundred years. To invite the students to notice, discuss, and create, is constructivist, child-centered, and social in nature. At its heart, it aligns with the theories of John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. It is a gravely needed alternative to the traditional approaches to teaching grammar in isolation,

which in practice ultimately becomes frontal teaching or a "banking" approach to teaching. Although he does not say so directly, Anderson's work importantly illustrates the possibilities of grammar learning as a constructivist pursuit. The new Constructivist Grammar Curriculum, proposed here in this thesis, also aligns with these basic and essential progressive theories; these connections will be explored in more depth in the Philosophical Stance section.

While the collective work of Weaver and Anderson signals an important departure from the binary debate between traditional grammar teaching and a complete absence of grammar teaching, it is nevertheless plagued by serious flaws that may hinder teachers from teaching grammar in the context of writing successfully, detract from student learning, and diminish the presence of the movement in the United States. Indeed, while they certainly pay homage to the important work of these colleagues in the United States, the team of researchers at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom also correctly express concerns that their work is neither based in empirical research, nor is it fully theorized. They write: "In the US, there has been some emphasis on the notion of grammar in context (Weaver, 1996, for example), but a theoretical relationship between grammar and writing has never been adequately articulated, and the idea of 'in context' is problematic, often meaning in practice an isolated 'mini-grammar lesson' within an English lesson" (Jones, Myhill, and Bailey, 2012, p. 1244). The team at the University of Exeter, therefore, argue for an approach that is: based in empirical research; crafted into a full, cohesive curriculum; capable of shaping policy; translatable into a widely applicable curriculum tool; and that always grounds itself in the connection

between grammatical concepts and writerly purpose. Indeed, the sub-title of their grant proposal for the study concluded in 2012 was: "Shaping Policy and Practice."

The researchers in the United Kingdom currently have the last word on the subject—and a convincing word it is. Neither Anderson nor Weaver have been publishing since 2007 and 2008 respectively, nor have other researchers seem to be stepping forward in the United States to carry their work forward. By contrast, not only did the British contingency complete the first true research study on the topic, continue to win grants, and begin to develop actual curricular materials, but they also have appeared in the press and continued to publish regularly. For instance, one of the lead researchers on the Exeter team, Debra Myhill, has been interviewed regularly over the past several years by such publications as the Times Educational Supplement. In the article "Secret to Knocking Grammar for Six" (Bloom, 2011) and the feature article "Are You Ready to Go Boldly?" (Bloom, 2012), this major news outlet highlighted the benefits of teaching grammar explicitly in the context of writing, and they were able to point to the Exeter team's research and cohesive theorizations to support the claim. More recently, she was interviewed as a major voice of caution and reason in the current age of standardized testing in the article "Warnings Ignored Over 'Flawed' Primary Tests" (Ward, 2013). By contrast, none of the proponents for teaching grammar explicitly in the context of writing have appeared in the popular press, nor have they come close to shaping policy. The only grammar educator to appear in the New York Times recently has been the afore-mentioned Brock Haussamen of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), who espouses quite a few traditionalist approaches to grammar education, in the article "What Good Writing Indicates, and Doesn't" (2012). In this article, he emphasizes the

importance for students of learning linguistic terminology so that they can discuss language in linguistic terms—a far cry from rhetorical, pragmatic, constructivist approaches to the teaching of grammar for student writers. All of these exciting advents in the British scene are, as the subtitle to the 2012 study suggests, tailored specifically to shape *national* policy and life in *British* classrooms. The work conducted by the Exeter team will not necessarily be translatable to the United States, and there is a serious need for similarly cohesive theorizations; focused, comprehensive research studies; and widely applicable curricular tools in our own country.

The Constructivist Grammar Curriculum: Resonances with, and Departures from, the Current American Literature

Because this thesis intends to set into motion the development of curricular tools for classroom teachers specifically in the United States, which will be called the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum from here forth in this thesis, it is important to consider the earlier American contributions to the discussion of teaching grammar in context in greater depth. The Constructivist Grammar Curriculum and its theoretical underpinnings do take some important inspiration from the work of these earlier scholar-educators; it also will make firm, clear departures from their work—without these departures, it is clear that the movement in the United States would continue to wallow unproductively. There are two particular scholar-educators in the United States who have devoted significant professional energy to the movement for teaching grammar in context: Constance Weaver and Jeff Anderson.

Resonances with Jeff Anderson's work. As previously mentioned, Jeff Anderson's concept of "invitations"—that is, inviting students to explore a model text, inviting them to collaborate to imitate it, and inviting them to experiment with a particular grammar concept in their own work—aligns with some of the most foundational theories of quality progressive education in general. As Carol Garhart Mooney has written, "As a progressive educator [John Dewey] shared with Vygotsky, Montessori, and Piaget the central ideas of that movement: education should be child-centered; education must be both active and interactive; and education must involve the social world of the child and the community" (2000, p. 4). Indeed, these core tenets of the progressive philosophy of education describe Anderson's invitational framework quite neatly. He invites his students to collaborate on imitations of a model, and he also invites them to share their own models that they have collected in a group setting. Using interesting model texts and open-ended questioning, he invites vigorous discussions of model texts and the grammatical patterns that lie within them. In this way, he invites students to interact with a textual, two-dimensional learning environment; that is, he treats model texts as a constructivist environment, although he may not realize it.

Another of the strengths of Anderson's work is that classroom discussions about grammatical options almost invariably also are conversations about writerly craft and the impact of the writing on the reader (2007, pp. 28-9). He writes that, in any given discussion about a model text, he will "make sure that the students hit on the craft and at least one key point about the patterns in the sentence" (2007, p. 29). In other words, grammar and other elements of the writing process not only become twinned in

Anderson's work; they are discussed in the same breath. This approach sends a clear and important message to students: grammatical choices produce particular effects on the reader, and in the artistry of the writer, grammar has a meaningful, creative purpose. Perhaps more than anything else, this is what it means to teach grammar in the context of writing. Not only does it show students that grammar is not the avoidance of errors, but it also shows them that every time they are writing, they are doing grammar and that every time they write something that they like and that others enjoy reading, they are probably doing grammar *well*. Doing grammar well is distinct from, though often overlapping with, the writing of pieces with perfect Standard English mechanics. Doing grammar well is making thoughtful choices about grammar that makes the impact of the writing more powerful.

In the new Constructivist Grammar Curriculum, which has been partially developed for this thesis, grammatical choices, writerly craft, and impact on an audience, all are examined together, as well. For example, when students examine the poem "Between walls" by William Carlos Williams, they engage with discussions and activities that connect part of speech with the generation of imagery. They also connect specific word choice and part of speech with the ability to capture the essence of an unusual place and make what might seem to be an ugly place feel beautiful. Or, for instance, in the lessons on semi-colons, students come to realize that semi-colons can be powerfully useful tools for them and can help them to address several problems that writers often encounter. Semi-colons can serve as a clear structure that will hold or contain a bounty of ideas and descriptions, and they also can push a writer to become more detailed with a description. They will see that a semi-colon often helps a sentence to telescope into a

deeper layer of description. The students will be able, in turn, to connect this tool with the genre and purpose of the particular piece that they are writing. Being able to telescope into deeper layers of detail can become highly useful with a descriptive memoir, particularly one that focuses so much on setting. Students also will be able to understand that bounties of carefully considered detail will work toward achieving the overall aim of the piece: to transport the reader to a place that they cannot visit or do not yet appreciate, and to persuade them of its specialness or magic. In essence, students will be able to connect semi-colons and sentence structure with descriptive power and, in turn, descriptive power with persuasive writing. These lessons guide the students to understand, appreciate, and take advantage of the sinews which connect all the layers of a piece of writing, telescoping outwards from a micro- to a macro-scale: word choices and parts of speech, sentence structure and punctuation, imagery, persuasion.

A second strength of Anderson's work is its dedication to a constructivist approach to grammar teaching. Specifically, he carefully selects model texts and then, to use his apt word, "invites" students to notice grammatical patterns in them, which they then can practice and use in their own writing. When Anderson writes that, at a particular moment in his classroom one day, he realized that his model text was "leading the lesson" (2007, p. 28), he was coming to understand the power of a constructivist grammar lesson, in which the instructor prepares an experience with a text and the students construct meaning from it. Anderson exposes his students to an apt model text and then he asks the open-ended question: "What do you notice?" (2007, p. 28). From there, he listens to students' noticings and then, through discussion, guides them towards an understanding of the grammatical pattern that they are noticing (2007, pp. 28-9).

Anderson also advocates for using subsequent writing periods to invite students to collect their own examples of a particular grammatical pattern—in essence, collecting their own models in an on-going fashion (2007, p. 36).

As in Anderson's approach, model texts also form the core of the new Constructivist Grammar Curriculum. Units of study, on a macro-level, and individual lessons, on a micro-level, both tend to begin with a model text and an "invitation to notice." As the "Sample Unit Plan" states more than once, "the model text is the hook." Students, especially older elementary students, want to engage with a model text right away. The instructor should be careful to avoid frontloading these sessions with too much information; this choice may lead to a lecture-style or banking method approach without the instructor fully realizing it and, in turn, will lead to student disengagement. Nothing kills a lesson before it begins more thoroughly than the instructor stating, "Today we're going to study…"

The instructor must simply begin, and begin briskly. In some sessions, this approach will mean beginning immediately with the model text and an "invitation to notice." If the instructor has selected to model text carefully, it will guide the students to the patterns that the instructor has planned for them to notice. If they do not, the instructor easily can direct them to those patterns with thoughtful questioning. As suggested above, one might think of the model text as a kind of two-dimensional, prepared environment. Montessori and Dewey both argue that the instructor must labor carefully to prepare a learning environment for the students before the students enter the space. Then, the instructor must get out of the way of the students (Mooney, 2000, pgs. 7, 29). If the environment has been prepared thoughtfully, carefully, and rigorously, then

it will lead the students towards understanding. The instructor will be there to help guide them towards it. The same exact process applies to student engagement with model texts in order to construct understandings of grammatical patterns.

Departures from Jeff Anderson's work. While I certainly agree with Jeff Anderson's general tendency to discuss grammatical patterns, craft, and impact on audience all together, as intrinsically connected phenomena, I believe that his approach often tends to lack sufficient intention behind it. When he writes about "slapping a good sentence on the overhead" and making sure that the students notice "at least one key point about the patterns in a sentence" but not "try to cover all of them" (2007, pp. 28-9), I sense that Anderson does not always design his lesson and model text to target a particular grammatical option that he wishes to teach. In this sense, he would fail to be the excellent progressive educator that Montessori and Dewey envisioned. The theories of these two educational titans often have been misunderstood—both in their own time and now, and in every time period between—as being unstructured. What critics always have misunderstood is that the progressive educator carefully builds structure into the learning experience, so that she does not have to structure the children's experience with a heavy hand in the moment of learning.

To me, Anderson actually appears to fail to build a sufficiently thoughtful structure into the learning experience; no Montessorian or Deweyan ever would "slap a sentence onto an overhead" or slap anything together, for that matter. In a similar fashion, while the constructivist approach is the most potent approach in the teaching of grammar, this fact does not mean that students should be invited to notice *anything* about a sentence and that that could satisfy a learning objective. The educator must select a

model text with a particular learning objective in mind ahead of time, and then lead the students to an understanding of that *particular* learning objective. As well, the educator should have multiple models prepared, all of which address that very same objective. The new Constructivist Grammar Curriculum seeks to present several models, in succession, of a single grammatical pattern that the students should learn. For instance, the "Sample Unit Plan" provides both *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, by Cynthia Rylant, and *also* a teacher-generated model, in order to target introductory dependent clauses.

I also take rigorous issue with the kinds of models that Anderson chooses for his lessons, as well as some of his other instructional approaches outside of the use of model texts. Almost all of Anderson's model texts are one sentence long. They are pulled from anywhere, mostly his own personal reading, and the majority of them do not come from books, stories, articles, or essays, that his students actually have read. He argues that a single sentence is "a small chunk of context" that allows "the students *and me* to focus" (2007, p. 21). This argument, to my mind, falls apart before it even begins. How can a single sentence be a context, especially if it is pulled from a larger piece of writing that students have not heard or seen and never will? I suppose that I can understand that the presence of a dependent clause and an independent clause might give a small amount of context for the choice to place a comma between them. However, the content, stylistic choices, voice, and indeed, ultimately grammatical choices, will mean nothing to students if they never see the sentences that surrounded it. They will not know anything of the author's purpose. They will not know why the author chose to create a sentence with a dependent clause and an independent clause if they do not know what types of sentences

preceded and flowed from that one sentence. Our sentence construction choices always are informed by the kinds of sentences that surround a given sentence. Anderson's approach of collecting single sentences, writing them on strips of paper, and plastering the walls with them (also very un-Montessori and a bit slapdash and lacking in careful preparation of environment), cannot be very different from encountering a litany of single sentences in the page of a workbook.

I take equally rigorous issue with some of Anderson's other approaches to grammar instruction, which frequently borders on the highly traditional. The model lesson that he uses in many of his publications (2005, 2007) to illustrate his approach includes an absurd mnemonic device, which he himself calls "ridiculous," as a way to memorize ten subordinating conjunctions (2007, p. 37). He also fondly channels a teacher from his own childhood who required the children to chant the subordinating conjunctions as a way to memorize them. He even advocates for the use of the FANBOYS mnemonic device. To me, these approaches are blatant traditional rote memorization of grammar terms; this kind of approach is precisely what the Dartmouth Conference found to be completely ineffectual, almost 50 years ago, and which divided the world of English language education into two rigid camps, none of which produced any student learning in grammar. If this educational approach, embodied by Mr. Anderson, represents America's best and most recent entry into the discussion of teaching grammar in the context of writing, then we are woefully behind and desperately in need of a new voice. When the British camp of researchers critiques Weaver and Anderson's approaches as being incompletely theorized, they are absolutely correct. How can our most notable advocate for constructivist grammar instruction be advocating

for the use of mnemonic devices, chanting, and rote memorization, let alone the subtler failures of his approach, such as the use of single sentences as mentor texts?

Resonances with Constance Weaver's work. I tend to agree with Constance Weaver's overall philosophical positioning—and indeed, feel grateful for the philosophical trailblazing that she achieved in the American educational landscape. To describe the teaching of a grammar within the context of writing as "the third way" is perfectly apt (2007, p. 1). For far too long, many of us educators in the world of English language grammar teaching have been blinded by the binary presented to us again and again: traditional grammar teaching or none at all. As Weaver argues, it does not have to be this way—far from it. She was perhaps the first to state this position so explicitly and repeatedly, at least from 1996 until 2008.

I also align my Constructivist Grammar Curriculum with her belief in the pragmatic approach to the teaching of grammar: that is, teaching the concepts that students will need the most as writers, teaching them meaningfully and usefully rather than attempting to "cover" or get through them, and teaching the terms for these concepts sparingly and on an as-needed basis. Weaver advocates for "teaching options and skills *as we help students use these tools* to enrich and enhance their writing can generate stronger and more interesting writing, as well as writing that meets the conventional expectations of the marketplace" (2007, p. 71). She deems this approach to grammar teaching as "a grammar of possibility" (2007, p. 10)—an apt phrase indeed, and one which I choose to take up. By this phrase, Weaver first means that grammar should not be viewed by students and teachers as the correction of errors or mistakes, as it so often sadly is (2007, p. 8, 60). Rather, it must be viewed as the process of equipping student

writers with tools, options, and choices in their writing. In fact, what may look to some instructors like a grammar error often is a sign of grammatical risk-taking and learning and should be encouraged instead of discouraged. That student should be guided towards using the grammar with increasing power and correctness over time rather than being told that they have done something wrong (2007, p. 59).

Weaver even makes some subtle intimations that she believes in the rather direct connection between grammatical choices and the overall achievement of authorial purpose and the impact of a piece on a readership. For instance, she writes that "participial phrases … occur frequently in all genres: description and narration, biography and autobiography, informative and persuasive prose, and … creative nonfiction… I believe that learning to use modifiers in [the narrative/descriptive genre] lays the groundwork for using details … in informative and persuasive prose" (2007, pp. 47-8). That Weaver considers the suitability of particular sentence structures for particular genres of writing indicates to me an awareness of the connection between grammar and authorial purpose that would be fitting indeed with her general philosophy. However, I find that Weaver fails to make this essential connection into a pivotal part of her curricular recommendations—a point that I will explore further in the section below. By contrast, this connection forms a central part of the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum being rolled out here.

I also agree wholeheartedly in the power of excellent models as a strategy for teaching grammatical concepts and reinforcing them for student writing projects (2007, p. 48). As argued extensively in other parts of this thesis, model texts should be used as constructivist learning environments for grammar learners and student writers. Weaver

also correctly advocates for the use of multiple models for a given grammatical concept and its uses and purposes in the context of writing (2007, p. 48, 57). Indeed, if we truly believe in a grammar of possibility—which includes the belief that grammatical concepts are tools that can be wielded powerfully and uniquely by the individual writer and that can be bent to that writer's particular purpose in a particular piece of writing—then we cannot expect authors to use these grammatical concepts in the same exact way as one another. As such, model texts are not interchangeable with one another; each one, if they are models of quality, offers a unique perspective on the use of a grammatical option. Therefore, with every model we offer the students, they will develop a more nuanced picture of the grammatical concept being modeled and a greater awareness of the options that are available to them—and in turn, the more powerful and well-equipped they will be as writers.

Departures from Constance Weaver's work. While I most certainly agree with Weaver's general philosophical stance and express gratitude for her philosophical trailblazing towards a "third way" of grammar instruction, I find extensive faults and inconsistencies in her actual curricular and pedagogical and recommendations for teachers. Indeed, I believe that many of them directly contradict her own philosophical stance on the teaching of grammar. Nowhere is this more starkly evident than in her advocacy for, and critique of, the sentence combining approach. This approach asks students to link pre-existing simple sentences to create new, more complex sentences. Weaver states quite directly: "My books recommend sentence combining … before or while students draft their own pieces of writing" (2007, p. 7). Although she recommends the use of this approach and devotes a substantial amount of energy to it in her work, she

also writes the following: "[Sentence combining] requires the least independent thought and creativity on the part of the students and is therefore likely to be the least motivating" (2007, p. 48). I agree with this assessment of the sentence combining approach, and it is all that I need to know that I should avoid it at all costs. A lack of creativity and motivation already describes the typical current grammar classroom; perhaps what grammar teaching needs more than anything else, at this juncture, is the design of activities that will engage students.

Weaver advocates for other lesson and activity ideas that require a similarly low level of student engagement and thoughtfulness. She describes a lesson in which any sentence containing a form of "to be" can be turned into an absolute construction "simply by deleting the form of *be*" (2007, pp. 53-4). Simply deleting words cannot possibly lead to student understanding about these sentence constructions or the role of the forms of "to be" in them. Rather, simply deleting things causes student thinking to remain on the surface and causes grammar to seem as though it is fueled by magic rather than logic. The constructivist approach to education in general and the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum in particular highlights cause and effect, enables students to explore and understand the innerworkings of that cause and effect, and to draw deep conclusions from these explorations. In the constructivist approach, nothing happens by chance or by magic or—to use perhaps the most damaging phrase that can be uttered by an educator— "because that is just the way it is."

As well, for all of her arguments against the extensive teaching of grammatical terms, Weaver appears to use them extensively herself in all of her grammar lessons and activities. For instance, her entire summary of the value of a particular model text

consists of the following: "You [meaning the reader of her book, *The Grammar Plan Book*] may have noticed that I used an appositive, an absolute, several present participial phrases, and a bound postnoun adjectival" (2007, p. 45). This analysis of her model text is grossly contradictory with her general arguments for the pragmatic teaching of grammar without the over-use of terminology. Weaver herself states on the cover of her book *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*: "Few grammatical terms are actually needed to discuss writing" (2008). While this contradiction in and of itself may be concerning, it actually touches upon a much deeper flaw in Weaver's approach—one that runs to the heart of her work and might make the entire difference in the success or failure of a grammar curriculum. She foregrounds the teaching of grammatical concepts while the writing curriculum remains in the background. While Weaver advocates for the teaching of grammar in the context of a writing curriculum and for the pragmatic and rhetorical teaching of grammar for writers, she fails to foreground the act and process of writing again and again. Nowhere in her work does she truly focus on the content and purposes of actual writing projects for students. While one might attempt to argue that, as books about grammar teaching, the writing process lies outside of the scope of her work, such a statement would fly against the very essence of teaching grammar in the context of a writing curriculum. The point is that grammar teaching and the act of writing cannot be separated from one another; separating them kills the life in grammar usage and grammar teaching and eliminates the meaning and usefulness of the grammar being learned. The Constructivist Grammar Curriculum, by contrast, foregrounds the act and process of writing, and all grammar lessons, explorations, activities, and discussions, serve to enhance the writing projects described in the curriculum.

What is perhaps even more concerning is that, if grammar lessons become divorced from the practical art of writing, students will not be able to see the innumerable connections between their grammatical choices—which they make constantly, whether they realize it or not—and the fulfillment of their overall purposes for writing. That is, they will miss the connections between the micro-layer of word- and sentence-level choices and the macro-level of the overall piece and its impact on a readership. Weaver also makes other pedagogical choices that may interrupt the students' ability to see and understand these connections. Like Anderson, Weaver often advocates for the use of single sentences as models, many of which come from her own reading in adult texts and not from texts that the students know and understand (2007, p. 54). Relatedly, she argues that students should imitate grammatical concepts in single sentences themselves (2008, p. 48). Without the context of a complete, closed text, the students cannot possibly come to understand the connections between the grammatical concept being studied and its possible relationships to the meaning, content, and stance of a piece of writing. Indeed, when models and student writing are limited to decontextualized sentences, the *possibilities* in the "grammar of possibility" become obscured. The Constructivist Grammar Curriculum always strives to use complete, closed—albeit often brief—model texts in order to provide a true constructivist environment where students can explore concepts meaningfully and develop deep, lasting understandings. As well, it always strives to invite students to imitate and practice grammatical concepts within the context of a complete, closed piece of their own, so that they always will be able to see the effects of the grammatical choices that they make.

Lastly, it is crucial to note that Weaver neither offers an actual curriculum, nor can any of her work be construed as an attempt to do so. In this way, the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum offers something entirely additional that Weaver's work does not offer. Not only does it create a cohesive, fully-theorized philosophical stance on the teaching of grammar, but it also seeks to provide the actual day-to-day tools that any classroom teacher can and should use. An actual grammar-in-the-context-of-writing curriculum does not yet exist; the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum will be the first. What is particularly problematic about Weaver's work is that she actually appears to believe that such a curriculum cannot be created successfully. She writes that teaching from any grammar book cannot improve writing, including her own grammar books like *The Grammar Plan Book* (2007, p. 71). She fails to take into a consideration, however, the possibility for a book that also includes a writing curriculum, in which the grammar lessons and activities are seamlessly and organically incorporated with the act and process of writing, as well as real writing projects. A widely applicable writing-and-grammar curriculum, reproducible in many diverse classrooms anywhere that English grammar usage is taught, is precisely what is needed.

To return to the example of the world of mathematics education: problem-solving is similarly highly situational and dependent upon its context, yet constructivist math educators and researchers have been able to create highly successful, widely applicable curricula that include the context that the students need in order to make sense of math problems and to become truly excellent problem-solvers. As discussed in the upcoming section of this thesis, one of the great ills of the world of Language Arts education is the belief that every classroom must be a singular learning environment and that, therefore,

instructional strategies cannot be broadly replicated. Weaver herself recommends extensive lists of books that, in her words, offer "teacher narratives about their smart teaching of grammar" (2007, p. 9). She also writes: "as any teacher knows, what works well with one class may not work well with another, so we have to keep trying new things to learn what works in our own classrooms" (2007, p. 47). Weaver fails to realize, here, that a quality, fully-theorized constructivist grammar curriculum offers a standardized framework within which individual teachers can and must experiment endlessly. Indeed, throughout her work, Weaver often refers to individual experiences with particular students or particular classrooms as if these offered adequate evidence for her philosophical arguments and for the recommendations that she makes to the teachers who read her books—as if these personal vignettes could possibly help a teacher to know what to teach in her own classroom tomorrow and for the coming weeks (2007, p. 56). The Constructivist Grammar Curriculum, by contrast, offers a tool that teachers actually can use; it also offers a philosophical stance to these teachers which they may choose to absorb for themselves.

When educators believe that curriculum cannot be widely applied and reproduced, it results in an anecdotal approach to pedagogy and curriculum development, a homespun approach to educating children, and a failure to achieve a cohesive, best-practice approach across the nation. A widely applicable and reproducible curriculum does not necessarily mean standardization in a traditional sense, nor does it mean a traditionalist or conservative curriculum in general—not at all. As constructivist math curricula like *Investigations in Number, Data and Space* have proven, it is very much possible to create a widely applicable and reproducible, somewhat standardized curriculum that offers a

highly progressive, constructivist approach to education. In fact, the work of the TERC

group to create Investigations and the vision here for a widely applicable grammar

curriculum bear a great deal of semblance, which will be explored more deeply in coming

sections of this thesis. As the Sample Unit Plan section, and the related Philosophical

Stance section, of this thesis begins to prove, it is no less possible to do so for grammar

education—and to do so in a cohesive, fully-theorized manner that responds actively and

intelligently to much-needed, new research in the field.

The Face of the Movement in the United States

One of the most resounding claims from the American side of the movement is

that nobody possibly could propose a coherent curriculum to support the teaching of

grammar in the context of writing because every classroom dynamic is different and each

teacher must create original material that responds to the particular learners in their class

(Weaver, Bush, Anderson, and Bills, 2006, p. 87; Weaver, 2007, p. 9, 47). That every

classroom dynamic is different is obvious; that every educator must be responsive to the

particular learners in their class is the base-line of good practice. However, the belief that

teachers therefore must craft original material for the particular learners in their

classrooms is a major contributor to the failure, thus far, of the movement: that is, both its

failure to alter the classroom practices of most English teachers in the United States, and

its failure to establish a presence in the national consciousness, policy-making, and the

press. I want to be clear here: I am not arguing that teachers never should create their

own materials; many site-specific, teacher-created materials are invaluable, well-crafted,

and rich in learning opportunities. I am arguing that the entirety of the movement cannot

consist of such thinking; it results in a highly fragmented movement, cobbled together of anecdotal evidence and homespun wisdom and methods. I believe that this approach, which I will describe in greater detail below, is partly responsible for the lack of cohesive theorization that Jones, Myhill, and Bailey notice in the American literature and that they seek to rectify in their own work (Jones, Myhill, and Bailey, 2012, p. 1244).

Countless materials for Language Arts teachers in the United States rely solely on classroom anecdotes to communicate about pedagogy and curriculum, rather than empirical studies and efforts at cohesively theorized curricular materials. For instance, a recent article by Moran, Fahey, and Greenberg on grammar investigations begins: "We've found that it is possible to motivate students (and other teachers) to *enthusiastically* explore grammar as inquiry into language. This is our story" (2012, p. 21). They embark upon a worthy goal—to drum up enthusiasm amongst students through the use of constructivist approaches to grammar learning—but their exploration never leaves Fahey's own classroom. It may seem trivial, but I think it is actually significant that the authors refer to one another by first name within the article. This absence of formality bespeaks a greater lack of rigor and seriousness in the scholarly work. Or for example, in another recent article on constructivist grammar teaching, Penny Kittle titles one of the final sections of the article "One Writer" and proceeds on a page-long discussion of single student named Sam, whose story is supposed to emblemize a greater need for inspiring our students to learn about grammar (2014, p. 39). While I believe that there is a place for inspirational anecdotes about particular students or classrooms, it cannot compromise the whole of our scholarly tradition on the subject of grammar education in the United States. These two articles simply provide two very

recent examples of this tradition in our country; to describe all of the available examples would fill a book on its own.

As the work of Jones, Myhill, and Bailey (2012) and Myhill and Watson (2014) suggests, without any empirical evidence supporting the belief system, how could the members of the American side of the movement do little more than share their own individual experiences in the classroom? One must follow from the other. The empirical study conducted by Jones, Myhill, and Bailey in 2012, which proved that teaching grammar in the context of writing significantly benefits some students, should be instrumental in garnering support from education professionals, policy-makers, the press, and the public, and there is an obvious need for more studies like it, including ones conducted in the United States. From there, it will become possible to create fully theorized, widely applicable curricular materials for classroom teachers in the United States. The vision for the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum includes precisely this kind of curricular tool, which can be used easily by many classroom teachers around the nation with similarly successful results.

An Unlikely Model? The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and TERC

In contrast to the anecdotal, fragmented, and unscientific approaches to constructivist grammar teaching described above, the advocates for constructivist math education in the United States have been moving their field forward forcefully, cohesively, and convincingly for several decades now. Our fledgling movement stands to learn a great deal from this model. With the creation of its standards in 1989, 1991, and

1995, and then again with the *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* in 2000, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) became the first professional organization to produce "explicit and extensive goals for teachers and policymakers" (ix). These principles and standards are the result of exhaustive research, much of which included empirical studies on effective mathematics teaching. According to the Preface of the document, "extensive efforts were undertaken to ensure that the Writing Group [for the 2000 *Standards*] was informed by the best of research and current practice. The writers had access to collections of instructional materials, state and province curriculum documents, research publications, policy documents, and international frameworks and curriculum materials (x). As a result, NCTM has been able to create documents that give "focus, coherence, and new ideas to efforts to improve mathematics education" (ix).

Because of this extensive, coherent research, fully theorized constructivist mathematics curricula have become possible—and widely embraced in the field. Indeed, the creators of these curricula similarly have done their due diligence by conducting exhaustive research and field testing and by aligning their work with the *Standards* provided by NCTM, thus ensuring a cohesive vision for constructivist math education in this country. For instance, TERC—the developer of *Investigations in Number, Data, and Space*—won grants from the National Science Foundation, which enabled it not only to develop the curriculum but also conduct field tests for eight years for the first edition and another four years for the second edition of the curriculum materials. A string of four studies have proven that students using these curricular materials "do as well as or better than students in classrooms using more traditional approaches" (Russell, 2001, p. 10). As well, the effectiveness of the curriculum continues to be assessed after its publication and

implementation in many schools. For example, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES),

a branch of the US Department of Education, has identified at least 44 research studies

that examined the effectiveness of the curriculum and, focusing on two of these studies in

particular (they met its stringent standards in terms of reliability), it determined that

Investigations very likely impacts student achievement positively (2013). According to

the IES report, in one of these studies, conducted by Gatti Evaluation Inc. in 2010, the

researchers employed a longitudinal, randomized controlled trial design with the random

assignment of teachers to treatment and comparison groups.

Considering the care, attention, and exhaustive research devoted to developing,

improving, and supporting constructivist approaches to math education in the United

States, the dire situation of grammar teaching in this country becomes starkly clear. As

previously mentioned, the debate largely has not changed in more than 50 years, and its

most significant overall impact on grammar education has been to cause many schools to

ignore grammar teaching altogether. No significant research studies on effective

grammar pedagogy have been conducted in this country. In its most recent seminal

publication on grammar teaching, *Grammar Alive!*, the National Council of Teachers of

English (NCTE) wrote that "grammar is the skunk at the garden party of the language

arts" (Haussamen, 2003, p. xi). Indeed, the lack of serious research and the lack of

serious funding for serious research about effective grammar teaching in the United

States reflects precisely this attitude.

There is a need for professional organizations, such as NCTE, to take an interest

in researching best current practices in grammar teaching and codifying them as

standards. Such standards may assist in creating the focused, cohesive vision needed for

constructivist grammar teaching to win adequate attention from financial sponsors, researchers, curriculum developers, policymakers, and the public. At present, there appears to be a chasm between the best practices of constructivist grammar educators and the Common Core Standards for grammar instruction, which continue to focus on correctness and terminology rather than rhetorical use. It is indicative that the language standards are listed separately from the writing standards; it suggests that the language (or grammar) standards be treated as a discrete body of knowledge of its own. Such a chasm does not exist between best practices in constructivist math teaching and the Common Core Standards in the mathematics. I posit that the difference can be explained by the lack of substantial research and cohesive vision in the field of constructivist grammar teaching versus the abundance of it in the field of math education. Funding, empirical research, a cohesive vision from high-powered professional organizations like NCTE—these are a few of the major steps that must be taken in order to bridge the gap.

Chapter Two: Sample Unit Plan for the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum

BASIC INFORMATION

Title: Fourth Grade Writing and Constructivist Grammar Curriculum

Unit Plan: Literary Non-Fiction Piece

Summary of Unit Plan: When we travel to a unique place that is special to us, often the members of our learning community (classmates, teachers) have not traveled there themselves. This situation sets up a natural need to *explain*; to make a readership understand deeply about something that matters to the author; to communicate vividly and persuasively about something highly specific. We write in order to explain something about our inner-experiences and inner-selves that cannot be explained deeply enough in an ordinary conversation. This task invites the students to use writerly tools—such as vivid, and even poetic description, and narrative—in order to convey their inner-experience of this place and their inner-feelings about it. So, the writer must position themselves conspicuously in this piece. The reader will view, and understand, the place through the author's particular experience of it. Not only will the lens be narrowed to the author's experience, but it will be narrowed to her or his experience of a very particular place at a particular time. The writer's goal will be to take their readership to that place, in that very particular moment. I have avoided, until now, calling this writing task a memoir and a "small moment" piece of writing. Certainly, these genre labels describe the task with some accuracy—I just find that once these labels are used, we sometimes cease to think deeply about the reasons for writing and the exact parameters of the task.

One of the most crucial elements of this (and any) writing unit will be a diversity of models—presented both at the beginning of the unit and used throughout the writing process. These models may be derived from excellent literature as well as the writing of students and teachers. Not only will these models be used to clarify the expectations for the writing task, but many of them also will serve as models for grammatical options throughout the writing unit. As will become evident from this unit plan, certain grammatical options will become useful in the successful writing of this particular kind of piece. Of course, we cannot address all possible grammatical options in a single writing unit. What is more, our goal is not "coverage" (that is, the attempt to cover as many topics as possible); instead, our goal is to create for the students a deep and lasting experience of a few grammatical options that will be especially useful to them as they write this particular essay.

Rationale: I have taught 9's and 10's for six years now, and I have never been satisfied with the way in which I have taught grammar to them. When I first arrived at my school, I was handed Writer's Express workbooks and handbooks, and I was told to use them because "that's what has always been used here" and because "it's the best of all evils." The handbook is chock full of facts that are listed out of context; the layout is busy and difficult to follow. The workbook demands rote practice, also outside of a meaningful context. When I implemented these materials, the students groaned. They dreaded the appearance of grammar on the daily schedule. It did not take me long to decide that I would refuse to use these materials. Next I signed up to be a member of the Language Arts committee at my school, and I charged us with the task of locating a meaningful,

constructivist grammar curriculum that could be introduced at our school. I was

envisioning something like the excellent Investigations math curriculum, but for

grammar. No matter how hard we tried, we could not find the type of materials we

sought. After a year of searching, I retired my search and began to create my own

constructivist grammar lessons. These proved to be highly engaging and rich for my

students. I believe that a constructivist approach could lend itself perfectly to the study of

grammar. Like mathematics, the study of grammar is the study of patterns. I know that

children are fascinated with, and engaged by, patterns, and I believe that this natural

tendency should be harnessed in the service of a more meaningful and more enjoyable

grammar curriculum. It is my hope that, through the curriculum that I work to develop,

educators will be able to artfully lay the patterns before the students and guide them

through the process of extracting meaning and understanding from them.

DESIRED RESULTS

Established goals:

Common Core Standards: Language: Grade 4

Conventions of Standard English:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.1
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.1.d
Order adjectives within sentences according to conventional patterns (e.g., *a small red bag* rather than *a red small bag*).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.1.e
Form and use prepositional phrases.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.1.f
Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting inappropriate fragments and run-ons.*
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.1.g
Correctly use frequently confused words (e.g., *to, too, two; there, their*).*
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2.a
Use correct capitalization.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2.b
Use commas and quotation marks to mark direct speech and quotations from a text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2.c
Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction in a compound sentence.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.2.d
Spell grade-appropriate words correctly, consulting references as needed.

Knowledge of Language:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3
Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3.a
Choose words and phrases to convey ideas precisely.*
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3.b
Choose punctuation for effect.*
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3.c
Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion).

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 4 reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4.a
Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4.b
Use common, grade-appropriate Greek and Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., *telegraph, photograph, autograph*).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.4.c
Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation and determine or clarify the precise meaning of key words and phrases.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.5
Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.5.a
Explain the meaning of simple similes and metaphors (e.g., *as pretty as a picture*) in context.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.5.c
Demonstrate understanding of words by relating them to their opposites (antonyms) and to words with similar but not identical meanings (synonyms).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.6
Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal precise actions, emotions, or states of being (e.g., quizzed, whined, stammered) and that are basic to a particular topic (e.g., *wildlife, conservation,* and *endangered* when discussing animal preservation).

Common Core Standards: Writing: Grade 4

Text Types and Purposes:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1
Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1.a
Introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which related ideas are grouped to support the writer's purpose.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1.b
Provide reasons that are supported by facts and details.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1.d
Provide a concluding statement or section related to the opinion presented.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2.a
Introduce a topic clearly and group related information in paragraphs and sections;

include formatting (e.g., headings), illustrations, and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2.b
Develop the topic with facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples related to the topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2.c
Link ideas within categories of information using words and phrases (e.g., *another*, *for example*, *also*, *because*).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2.d
Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.2.e
Provide a concluding statement or section related to the information or explanation presented.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.a
Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.b
Use dialogue and description to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.c
Use a variety of transitional words and phrases to manage the sequence of events.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.d
Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.e
Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.

Production and Distribution of Writing:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.4
Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.5
With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, and editing.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.6
With some guidance and support from adults, use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing as well as to interact and collaborate with others; demonstrate sufficient command of keyboarding skills to type a minimum of one page in a single sitting.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.8
Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; take notes and categorize information, and provide a list of sources.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.9
Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.9.a
Apply *grade 4 Reading standards* to literature (e.g., "Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text [e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions].").
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.9.b
Apply *grade 4 Reading standards* to informational texts (e.g., "Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text").

Range of Writing:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.10
Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Common Core Standards: Reading: Literature: Grade 4

Key Ideas and Details:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1
Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.2
Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3
Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).

Craft and Structure:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.4
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text…
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.5
Explain major differences between poems, drama, and prose, and refer to the structural elements of poems (e.g., verse, rhythm, meter) and drama (e.g., casts of characters, settings, descriptions, dialogue, stage directions) when writing or speaking about a text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.6
Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.7
Make connections between the text of a story or drama and a visual or oral presentation of the text, identifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.10
By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, in the grades 4-5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Common Core Standards: Reading: Informational texts: Grade 4

Key Ideas and Details:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1
Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2
Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.3
Explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text, including what happened and why, based on specific information in the text.

Craft and Structure:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.4
Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words or phrases in a text relevant to a *grade 4 topic or subject area*.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.5
Describe the overall structure (e.g., chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution) of events, ideas, concepts, or information in a text or part of a text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.6
Compare and contrast a firsthand and secondhand account of the same event or topic; describe the differences in focus and the information provided.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.8
Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.9
Integrate information from two texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

DESIRED RESULTS continued…

Essential understandings:

- Students will come to understand that the purpose of literary writing is to explain an aesthetic, emotional, and/or social experience to themselves and/or to others.
- Students will come to understand that identifying and using the most fitting language choices delivers joy, feelings of recognition and connection, and understanding to the author and the readers (if any). These language choices include vocabulary and word choice, grammatical-syntactical choices, and punctuation choices.
- Students will come to understand that the close reading of excellent literature offers an invaluable resource for discovering potential language choices that can be applied to their own writing.
- Students will come to understand that language choices are connected inextricably to the overall impression and success of a piece of writing, as exemplified by literature that they love.

Essential questions:

- Why do human beings tend to exhibit an inherent and intense desire to write about their personal experiences and ideas with precision, verisimilitude, verve, and individuality?
- The flip-side of the same question: Considering the crucial human need to explain a personal experience, perspective, or constellation of ideas/beliefs to themselves and to others, what is the very best way to do so?
- How do writers—of all ages and levels of experience—enter into a relationship of tutelage with the existing body of literature and with the writing of their own learning community?
- What is the relationship between individual language choices in a piece of writing, and its overall effect?

Knowledge:

- Students will develop a greater knowledge of excellent literature at their developmental level, including non-canonical works as well as canonical.
- Students will come to know that there is no such thing as an exact synonym, that every word in the English language has a slightly different meaning, connotation, and tradition of usage, and that therefore, they must consider each of their word choices in an attempt to select the most fitting word for the occasion.
- Students will come to know the purposes and powers of the major punctuation marks, including commas, semi-colons, colons, and dashes.
- Students will come to broaden their knowledge of available syntactical options for a given occasion.
- Students will come to understand the purposes and powers of paragraphing and other structural elements.

Skills:

- Students will be able to conduct close readings of mentor texts—whether published literature or the work of other members of their learning community—in order to trace the connection between individual language choices and the overall effect of the piece.
- Students will be able to conduct close readings of mentor texts—whether published literature or the work of other members of their learning community—in order to glean useful strategies for their own writing, including the precise use of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and punctuation.
- Students will identify patterns in mentor texts in order to learn about the conventions of Standard English, as well as conscious, successful deviations from it.
- Students will train themselves to fine-tune their language choices—including word choices, grammatical choices, and choice of punctuation—as they write, revise, and share their work with others.
- Students will practice the best ways to explain to themselves and to others, as precisely as possible, about an experience, a place, and so forth.
- Students will practice the art of mimesis in writing, as they imitate the successful strategies of other writers.
- Students will be able to create a clear architecture for their writing, so that these explanations speak most clearly—without clutter and with emphasis in the right places.
- Students will be able to generate a specific and alluring title for their work.

Attitudes and values:

- Students will come to understand that they are authors.
- Students will come to understand that they belong to multiple communities of writers—including in their classroom, friend group, and the body of published work at their reading level—and that they can learn from the other members of them.
- Students will come to understand that all authors can find joy, feelings of recognition, understanding, and human connection when they explain an experience, image, feeling, idea, and/or belief in just the right way.
- Students will come to understand the act of writing as purposeful, organic, and inherently human and pleasurable. They will come to understand that all human beings can derive joy from the act of writing.
    - They will come to understand that it is not something unnatural that exists only in schools, but rather something that they will need in order to make sense of their lives and explain their experience to others.
    - They will come to understand that the *act of writing* is human, natural, and essential, and that it cannot be categorized into rigid phases of brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing—that all of these

phases, including publishing, are at the very least recursive, if not totally intertwined with one another.

- o They will come to understand that *pieces of writing* also are purposeful, human, and natural, and that they cannot always be categorized rigidly into types of writing or genres of writing; for instance, they may come to realize that all pieces of writing should be opinionated, literary, descriptive, poetic, and informational, each in its own way.

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

Culminating tasks: The culminating task will be the writing, revising, editing, and sharing of the piece itself.

The initial assignment follows: *Consider a place that feels special to you. It should be a place that feels intimate and that can feel as though it is all yours. It might be a place that other people do not know about, or that they do not appreciate in the way that you do, or that feels made just for you. It should be a place that you do not visit every single day, but it also should be a place that you know fairly well. It is best to choose a place that requires some travel to reach—anything from a place in your very own neighborhood to a place on another continent. You will be given many examples of topics.*

Your job, in this piece of writing, will be to express to others just how special this place is. All you have are your words to show this place to others, to capture your experience of it, your feelings about it, what it looks like. You will need to be persuasive, descriptive, and poetic, and you will need to express the truth of the place and your feelings about it.

It is expected that you will be editing and revising your work throughout the writing process, at times when it feels most right for you. There will come a time when you will share your work with your classmates in the form of readings and publishing in a class journal. You will be encouraged to edit and revise after this experience of sharing and publishing, as well.

You will grade yourself using a rubric that we have created. Your teachers also will use the very same rubric. You will discuss similarities and differences between the two assessments when they are complete. You will know the contents of the rubric before you even begin to work on your piece. Many of our activities and lessons will help us with specific items from the rubric. (See rubric below.)

Ongoing evidence: Ongoing evidence will be gleaned from written and spoken analyses of model texts; the mimetic writing activities which will follow the examination of model texts; the activities during which students play with new concepts in a brief, original piece of writing; and the transfer of new concepts into the main piece of writing for this unit.

Rubric:

	Approaching the benchmark (1)	Meets the benchmark (2)	Exceeds the benchmark (3)
Effort			
Voluntarily edits and revises work throughout the writing process			
Continues to edit and revise after sharing and publishing the work			
Attempts to play with new concepts in the main piece (completely acceptable to play with them 'incorrectly')			
Writes a substantial piece that abounds with details that attempt to capture a place			
Organization			
Leads the reader through the piece clearly and with intention. Never lets go of the reader's hand.			
Makes thoughtful choices about paragraphing			
Style and grammar			
Hooks the reader authentically (not with a gimmick)			
Provides closure and the desire in the reader to continue to contemplate			
Uses sentences that a reader can digest			

upon the first reading of them			
Takes the risk to use punctuation to enhance the meaning of sentences			
Description			
Uses very specific nouns			
Uses very specific verbs			
Uses adjectives thoughtfully and in moderation			
Uses analogy or similes			
Includes a title that captures the spirit of the piece and also stands on its own as a piece of poetry			

THE LEARNING PLAN:

Lesson 1

The hook is the model. There is no need to explain the assignment before the reading of the model at all. If the model is good enough, which it must be, the students will feel that it was worth hearing for its own sake—regardless of the fact that it will be used as a model for their writing project. The assignment can be explained afterwards.

The teacher creation of writing models is a powerful way to connect with students; it is a valuable opportunity for teachers to reveal inner-feelings, experiences, beliefs, and personal writing style and voice to their students. In other words, it is a way for the teacher to become more human in the students' eyes. For this reason, we recommend that each teacher create their own model. However, we also recognize the business of the teacher's life, and our model is available to be used in any Fourth grade classroom.

It is recommended that any model, like ours, is brief yet bursting with description, voice, experimentation with punctuation, and the other elements from the rubric. A long model will become too much for the students to digest. (As well, short models can serve as excellent test preparation for reading comprehension sections of standardized tests; the students will have the benefit of conducting test preparation with a piece that actually means something to them and which has yielded other important understandings for them, as well, in addition to test prep.) On the other hand, it is not recommended, at this juncture in the unit, to use an excerpt; it is essential to give the students a sense of a complete arc in the initial model. Otherwise, they may not know what is being expected of them.

As well, it is not recommended to use published/pre-existing models at this time; because they were not written in response to this particular assignment, they cannot give students a complete sense of what they are supposed to do to satisfy the assignment. However, this unit makes use of published texts extensively in order to highlight particular elements of the art of writing.

Our model follows. The instructor should read the model aloud to the students, and either the piece should be projected or each student should have a copy of the piece, so that they can read along.

"Lessons from the Bow"
by Tyler Crafts Jennings

Sitting on the bow of the *Passerine*—the sailboat that was my childhood home—I could experience just the right balance of danger and comfort, privacy and proximity to my parents, responsibility and carefreedom, for a child of six years. My parents scarcely ever sat there; I suppose they were too busy comparing the rust-stained charts and the tiny, metal needle of the compass with the actual sea around us. No, the bow was all mine, and I knew it. Every child needs her own kingdom—especially one that feels both intimate and, at the same time, expansive or maybe even infinite.

Sometimes we sailed for weeks at a time, steering into a safe harbor only to sleep and then setting forth again. I could sit on the bow for hours at a time, day after day. What did I do there? I did not occupy myself with anything other than what lay before me. I did not bring anything with me to the bow; I did not hold anything in my hands— they simply gripped the metal railing in front of me. I quietly looked out, or I quietly looked down, and felt blissful. And what was out there?

Sometimes a trail of sunshine lead across the water; it seemed to point directly at me, as if the sun had chosen me. It sparkled as the tiny peaks of the waves shifted in place. The waves, which I could observe for hours, did not seem to roll across distances as they do at the beach. Rather, they bobbed up and down, appeared and disappeared, with a new wave of the same size reappearing in the old one's place. Sometimes the wind would strike up, and the waves turned the color of a bruise. Then, even in the sunshine, my arm hairs would prickle with a chill. The wind would fill my ears until I felt almost hidden in my own private room.

Below my feet, the water peeled away from either side of hull. Even if the *Passerine* did not seem to be moving quickly, its bow always sent spray to either side of the hull when it cut through the water. Quite often, dolphins appeared there, just a few feet below the surface of the water. They loved to play alongside our sailboat and might travel with us for hours. And, nearly as often, manta rays would appear one layer deeper than the dolphins. They did not stay with us; they always seemed to be trying to get somewhere. Usually, I was the only person who saw the manta rays or dolphins; I developed a relationship with them that belonged just to me. I would tell my parents about them over dinner in the evening time, as we sat at the dining table of the cabin, with the night-time fish nibbling on the barnacles that the *Passerine* carries on the outside of its hull.

I also knew that I held an important position at the bow of the *Passerine*: from there, I always spied land before anyone else. In fact, my kneecaps were closer to our destination than any part of the sailboat itself; they extended beyond the bow and the anchor and dangled in the open breeze. Whenever land appeared on the horizon, first as a dark lip atop the water, then finally as a mass of wild palm trees, I would leap from my post at the bow and run back to my parents in the cockpit, announcing my sighting. I felt my own importance to our journey then. I felt it strongly. I realize, now, that every child deserves to feel needed, integral, responsible, and also not needed, carefree, bored, foot-loose.

End.

With a model text this long, and especially after only the first reading of it, it is important to ask only for general reactions. If more specific noticings surface during group discussion, they can be embraced and discussed. However, to expect students to dissect the series of minute choices that comprise the piece as a whole would be unfair at this juncture. Throughout this unit, students will be zooming in and out, between the overall affects of a piece and the individual choices that work together to achieve them. On the first day, it is a good idea to remain at the level of overall affect.

The instructor can ask the following questions to stimulate discussion:

1. Would you like to go to this place? Why?

2. What does the author say that makes you want to go there?
3. How does the author say it?
4. Tell us a part that made a picture in your mind.
5. What kind of writer is this? How would you describe his style?

Closing activities and assessments. After the discussion, students will be able to choose from the following menu. They should complete these tasks in their writer's notebooks.

- Choose one part that you pictured in your mind. Create an illustration of it.
- Imagine that you can interview the author (and if the model has been written by the instructor, the student actually can conduct the interview). Carefully craft a list of questions to ask them about their experience and their writing.
- Select a part of the piece and transform it into a poem. You may remove words and add words of your own. You may change the order of words and phrases that appear in the piece.

Lesson 2

Introduce the assignment. It is adapted from a learning experience designed by Kenneth Koch in his wonderful book on teaching poetry called *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* (1990).

You're going to write a piece very much like the one that I read to you yesterday. You will get to choose your own place to write about. It's going to be a kind of "small moment" piece, where you get to focus on one particular, intimate place that is special to you.

Either project the assignment or give a copy of the assignment to each student. Read the first two paragraphs of the assignment description together:

Consider a place that feels special to you. It should be a place that feels intimate and that can feel as though it is all yours. It might be a place that other people do not know about, or that they do not appreciate in the way that you do, or that feels made just for you. It should be a place that you do not visit every single day, but it also should be a place that you know fairly well. It is best to choose a place that requires some travel to reach—anything from a place in your very own neighborhood to a place on another continent. You will be given many examples of topics.

Your job, in this piece of writing, will be to express to others just how special this place is. All you have are your words to show this place to others, to capture your experience of it, your feelings about it, what it looks like. You will need to be persuasive, descriptive, and poetic, and you will need to express the truth of the place and your feelings about it.

For a "small moment" piece of writing, the selection of topic is everything. We urge the instructor not to rush the selection process, but instead to engage the students in several exciting activities in order to refine their selection process. The first activity will engage the students with the poem "Between walls," by William Carlos Williams, as a way to encourage them to open their minds to choosing unlikely places as the subjects for a reverential piece of writing.

Already, you might have some ideas of a place that you would like to write about. Let's do some activities together to make sure that you choose the one that you *most* want to write about. It might not be the most obvious one, nor might it be the most beautiful or dramatic. To help us refocus our vision, we're going to take a look at a short poem called "Between Walls," by William Carlos Williams. It's about a place that most people would find very ugly, but which seems to be beautiful to the poet.

Ask a few different students to read this poem, so that the class hears it more than once without tiring of it and also so that they can hear several different interpretations of its voice. Preview the word "cinders" with the students prior to any of the readings. Ask the students to annotate a short definition next to the word in their copy of the poem. Then proceed with the readings.

"Between walls"

the back wings

of the

hospital where
nothing

will grow lie
cinders

in which shine
the broken

pieces of a green
bottle

       First, ask students what they picture in their minds when they hear and read this poem. Second, push them to visualize strongly by asking them to create an illustration of the poem. You may wish to encourage the students to draw their illustration on the very same page as the poem, as an "illumination." This can be powerful for many reasons: not only does it introduce the students to the concept of an illumination, it also allows them to reference the poem at close hand and also avoids the daunting feelings of a blank page. Here, instead, they can share a page with the poet; very likely, it will feel more organic and less precious this way. For obvious reasons, <u>colored</u> pencils should be available to the students.

       Because the details in this poem are so spare yet vivid, it is likely that they will appear in the students' visualizations. Be sure to draw attention to them for the class. As students complete their illustration or illumination, show them to the class—ideally on a document camera, if available—and simply point out the presence of these details. It is important to avoid any kind of value judgments whatsoever, even very positive ones. Simply comment on their presence. For instance, I notice that you include a bright green bottle, and that some of it has been broken into pieces or shards. If they seem to be ready and if you have modeled it for the class, you may invite the students to comment on one another's illustrations, as well.

Lesson 3

When the children enter the classroom on this day, their illustrations or illuminated texts should be adorning the walls in a prized position. It is important that they do not compete with a lot of other materials on the walls. Invite the students to conduct a brief gallery walk of the work. Afterwards, invite students to identify several exquisite details that they noticed and identify the part of the poem that it depicts.

Ask several new students to read the poem aloud to refresh everyone's memory of it. Now ask students to brainstorm aloud as a class about other places that might seem ugly to others but which feel beautiful to them. Record the list on chart paper or on a SmartBoard.

Now you will get to write your own poems about a place that other people might find ugly, but which you find to be beautiful or interesting. You may choose one from the list that we generated together, or choose a different one.

When you finish writing your poem, you will come see me for your next task. I'll tell you briefly what it will be. You are going to conduct an interview with a partner in order to determine the best possible topic for your piece. If, after careful consideration, you do not have an answer to particular question, you may say, "pass," and your partner will move on to the next one. So, when you finish writing your poem, you will come to me for the list of questions. You will write down your partner's answers for them on the sheet that I give to you.

The list of questions may include the following (reproducible available on the next page):
- Do you have a place where you like to go that other people don't know about?
- Do you have a place where you like to go that other people know about, but don't fully appreciate? A place that other people don't seem to recognize as special, beautiful, or interesting, but which you recognize to be special, beautiful, or interesting?
- Do you have a place that other people know about and could go to, but which really feels like *yours* more than anyone else's?
- Do you have a place where you go when you want to be on your own?
- Do you have a place where you go whenever you need or want to hide?
- Do you have a place where you go to find treasures?
- Do you have a place where you go that feels like its own little world?

During the poetry writing session, before the poems have been completed, invite students to share several lines of their poems. After each student shares a few of their favorite lines, ask questions that focus on 1.) the selection of place and 2.) the detailed language used to convey that place. For the former, depending on the lines, it can become an engaging guessing game: What place do you think this is? Where do you think the poet is taking us? You may want to consider this type of place for your "small moment" piece. These questions will help to open up the students' minds to considering unlikely places as topics of a writing piece.

As the students complete their poems, match them with other students who have finished, so that they may begin the interview process. Once a partnership completes the interview process, the interviewer gives the sheet to the interviewee. The interviewee

reviews the results and confirms a topic for themselves. They will confirm their topic on an organizer that the instructor should hand to the students at this juncture. The organizer may look something like the following. For today's session, students should respond simply to the first question only. They will return to the other questions in due time.

A Place that is Just Mine
Brainstorming for Topics

Interview Sheet

Name of interviewer: _____

Name of interviewee: _____

1. Do you have a place where you like to go that other people don't know about?

2. Do you have a place where you like to go that other people know about, but don't fully appreciate? A place that other people don't seem to recognize as special, beautiful, or interesting, but which you recognize to be special, beautiful, or interesting?

3. Do you have a place that other people know about and could go to, but which really feels like *yours* more than anyone else's?

4. Do you have a place where you go when you want to be on your own?

5. Do you have a place where you go whenever you need or want to hide?

6. Do you have a place where you go to find treasures?

7. Do you have a place where you go that feels like its own little world?

8. Interviewer! Create your own question here:

A Place that is Just Mine
Brainstorming Sheet

My Writing Organizer

Name of author: _____

1. What is the special place that you will be writing about? Describe it in a few brief phrases.

2. Who else knows about this place, if anyone? Who else appreciates its specialness, if anyone?

3. What do you need people to know, understand, or believe about this place and your relationship with it? (This is your argument.)

Lesson 4

Often, the mistake is made to teach semi-colons last, if at all. This punctuation mark tends to be viewed as something extraneous, somewhat ornamental, or only suitable for more advanced or older students. While sentences technically do not require the use of a semi-colon in order to be "correct" or "complete," the semi-colon nevertheless is a grammatical option that can be tremendously freeing and useful to the writer—including the Fourth grade writer. We advocate for teaching it early and often. Engaged writers tend to seem as though they are bursting at the seams with ideas. Sometimes this can result in what is traditionally termed as "run-on sentences," or what we refer to as sentences that the reader cannot digest with one reading. Traditional educators will view these sentences as errors that need to be corrected. We view these sentences as excitement that needs to be shaped and harnessed. What better tool to give to such a writer than a semi-colon, which inherently (amongst other things) allows the writer to extend or further specify an idea. As well, students who struggle to expand on their ideas in writing may find the semi-colon to be a useful scaffolding in order to push themselves to write more deeply about an idea that they already have raised. Of course, instructors who take this route may find that a few of their students then overuse the semi-colon; these students will find their balance or restraint in time—for now, they are experimenting and testing a new grammatical option, playing with grammar in an engaged way, and taking risks in their writing. All of these are habits to be encouraged.

For these lessons on semi-colons, it is important to build an organic engagement and line of inquiry with the students. Often, for example, it will be possible to pull a sentence or several sentences that use semi-colons to excellent effect from a current read-aloud or guided reading book. Highlight these examples; show them to the students on a document camera or copy them for the students. It is imperative that the example sentences come from excellent literature that the students already know and care about. They should not come from books that they have not read or that do not mean anything to them, and they certainly should not come from workbooks or textbooks. If opportunities do not present themselves during the reading of a read-aloud or guided reading book, the instructor may want to consider using sentences from the model piece for this unit. These sentences already have a context and a meaning for the students. They should be reproduced for the students, as they are here:

- "In fact, my kneecaps were closer to our destination than any part of the sailboat itself; they extended beyond the bow and the anchor and dangled in the open breeze."
- "I did not bring anything with me to the bow; I did not hold anything in my hands—they simply gripped the metal railing in front of me."
- "And, nearly as often, manta rays would appear one layer deeper than the dolphins. They did not stay with us; they always seemed to be trying to get somewhere."
- "Usually, I was the only person who saw the manta rays or dolphins; I developed a relationship with them that belonged just to me."

In a whole group discussion, ask students to describe how the semi-colon functions in these sentences. What does the semi-colon do in these sentences? What does it enable the author to do?

- Students likely will point out that the second part of the sentence describes the first part more deeply. They may say that the semi-colon allows the author to specify a thought more fully.
- Students also may notice some variation in how the semi-colon is used even in this small sampling. Only once the students seem to have a strong handle on the general functioning of the semi-colon, the instructor may want to prompt the students: Do you notice any differences in how the semi-colon works in these sentences? They might notice, for instance, that in the first two example sentences, the second part of the sentence gives more of an image to a statement that was made. Or, they might notice that, in the third example, the second part of the sentence answers a question set up in the first part of the sentence, which might leave the reader wondering: "Why?" In the fourth example, the second part of the sentence allows us to travel into the interiority of the narrator; in other words, it answers the question: "What did this mean to the author?"
  - If this points comes up, take an early opportunity to draw attention to the fact that semi-colons also can offer an opportunity to resolve a question that may have been raised in the reader's mind by the first part of the sentence. If this does not come up organically, do not worry; it will come up in later lessons.

Following this discussion, invite the students to enjoy some time with their independent reading books (which should be appropriate to their reading level). Give each student a stack of Post-It flags. The color of the flags, at this juncture, does not matter; it would be best if all of the colors are the same for this activity, as the students will begin to color-code types of semi-colon usage at a later date.

    All of us are now going to go collecting for semi-colons! As you read your independent reading book, flag any sentences in which your author uses a semi-colon. At the end of the period, we'll show each other what we found.

It is ideal if the instructor also has her/his own independent reading book that she/he reads from time to time in the classroom. It is important for students to see that their teachers also read and enjoy reading. If you are able to do this, you also should flag instances of semi-colon usage, to be shared with the class—as long as they would be able to understand it and it is age-appropriate in all ways.

Try to reserve 10 minutes at the end of the session to share the collections thus far. As students share, put the actual book under a document camera if possible, so that all students can see the sentences. If not, ask the student to read it aloud twice, stating where the semi-colon falls. After each share, ask the class to consider how it is being used and what it does for the sentence. Rather quickly, patterns should start to emerge; help the students to make connections amongst the example sentences. As you do so, it is important to name the author each time, to highlight the fact that a person—an artist and a practitioner of the semi-colon—consciously and thoughtfully made the choice to use this semi-colon in this very sentence. You might say, I notice that both Christopher Paul

Curtis and Pam Munoz Ryan use semi-colons when they lead into a piece of dialogue. Or, you might say, I notice that both Christopher Paul Curtis and Pam Munoz Ryan use semi-colons in order to create suspense. After the session, note down the types of semi-colon usage that came up in the class discussion. Create a chart or SmartBoard document with these categories, where students will be able to categorize their findings during subsequent collection times and all other reading times. Students likely will get into the habit of collecting all the time, and not just when they are asked to do so.

Some possible uses for semi-colons which may arise during this discussion and future ones follow:

- To lead into dialogue
- To create suspense
- To create an intricate list
- To explain something more deeply, with more detail or imagery, or to get more specific with an idea
- To answer a question in the reader's mind

Lesson 5

The students already have been focusing on detail—noticing it in model texts and generating it themselves. They experienced the use of intricate detail in their reading of the model text, and they also focused on detail and imagery during their engagement with the poem "Between walls" by William Carlos Williams and their subsequent creation of poems of their own. They will need to generate fine detail in their writing in order to create successful "small moment" pieces—in order to capture the unique magic of the place and, ultimately, in order to be persuasive in their argument about that place. In this lesson, the students will play with semi-colons as a way to generate more detail; they will practice the use of semi-colons as way to extend and deepen their ideas, to etch them more finely, to move away from the vague.

The instructor may want to consider using highly-detailed, engaging imagery as a way to stimulate these short writing exercises. Such imagery tends to enable students to create brief but self-contained writing pieces. It also allows student writers to focus solely on the noticing of visual detail and the translation of it into words that capture it as perfectly as possible; it removes the added exertion of brainstorming the data from scratch. For this unit, we often use a series of photographs of abandoned places around the world. We have reproduced a few of them here. The subjects of these images fit neatly with the assignment for the "small moment" pieces, the study of "Between walls" by William Carlos Williams, and the upcoming read-aloud and analysis of the picture book *Shortcut* by Donald Crews. The images depict visually stunning places that have been abandoned; while many of them technically might be considered ugly, they undoubtedly glow with an unexpected beauty, as well. In addition, they are secret, magical places that the visitor can enjoy just to themselves—or at least that the viewer of the photographs can *imagine* visiting and enjoying just to themselves.

All of the following images have been retrieved from: http://distractify.com/culture/arts/the-most-spectacular-abandoned-places-in-the-world/.
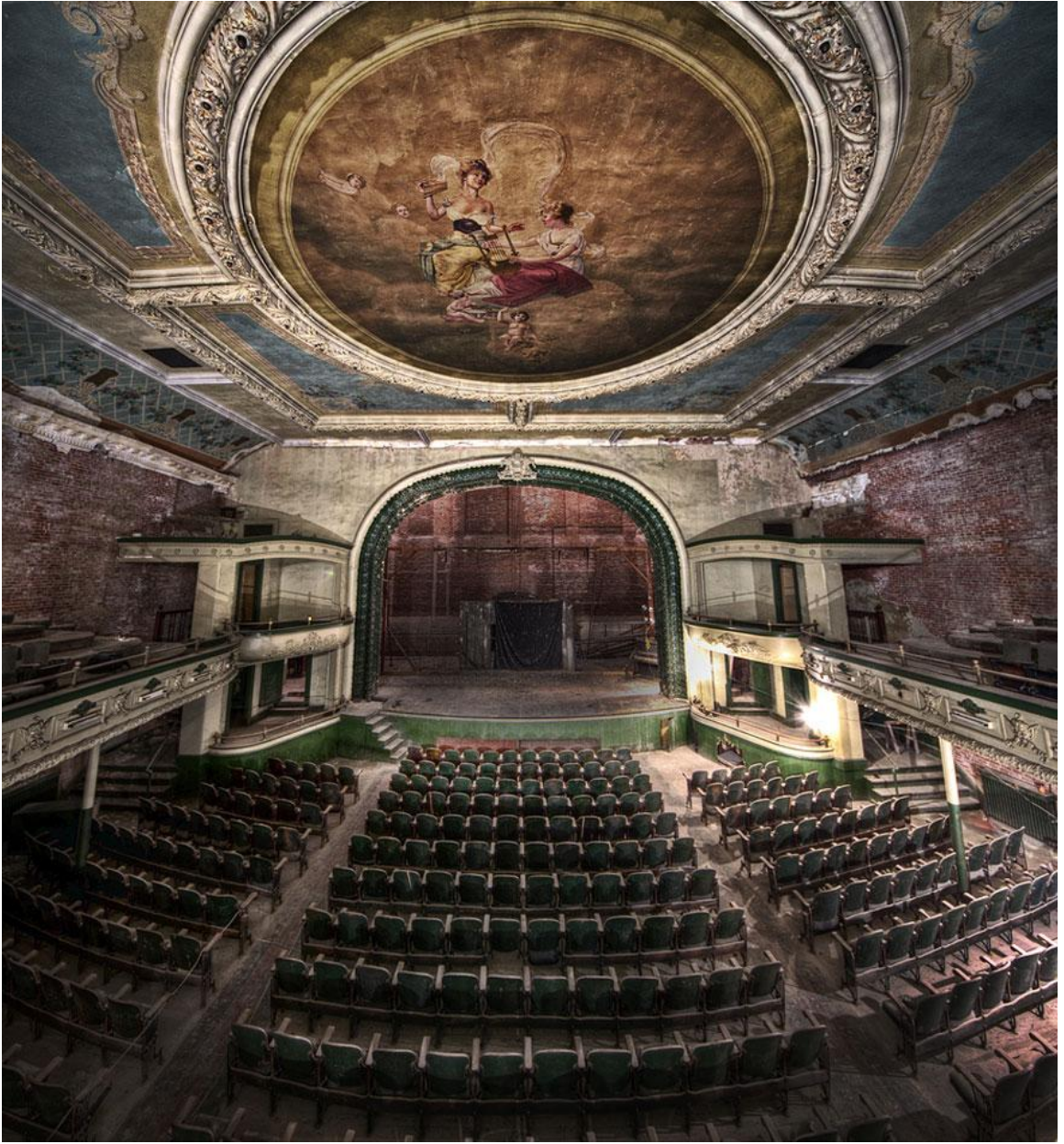
Lesson 5 continued…

The instructor should expose the students to all of the images first. Then, as a class, the instructor and students should collaborate to generate sentences that capture the detail evident in the imagery, the feel of the place, and/or what it might feel like to set foot there. At this point, simply generate single sentences. The end-goal of this lesson will be to work with the students to use semi-colons to extend the detail, description, and imagery in their sentences. The instructor will want to display the previously determined categories for the functions of semi-colons, for student reference.

The instructor will want to begin by modeling a couple of sentences of their own that use a semi-colon in this way. See the examples below.

Teacher model: The massive roots, each one like a tree trunk of its own, grip the mossy tiles of the ancient house; even just the look of it turns my stomach, as if it were a giant squid doing violence to some poor soul.

Teacher model: The bright green leaves form a tunnel that it just the size and shape of a train; there is an invisible train that continues as far as the eye can see.

In both instances, the use of a semi-colon allows the author to push the description further, deeper. After modeling these sentences, the class and instructor will work collaboratively to generate single sentences for several more of the images. After the class appear to have a feel for the activity, the instructor should tell the students to select one image with which they will be working more extensively. Once they know which image they want to use, individual students should open their writer's notebook and write a full paragraph-long description of the image; they should attempt to use a semi-colon, or several semi-colons, in this paragraph in order to extend a particular description. The instructor may want to make color copies of these images available to the students, so that they can study the image at their desk as they write.

The instructor should conduct brief one-on-one conferences with students as they write. Celebrate the students' risk-taking as they use the semi-colon. Even if a student technically uses a semi-colon incorrectly, do not discourage them at this juncture. Rather, try to determine what the student is attempting to do, and base comments on that observation. For instance, if a student writes – "The curved space of the abandoned subway station glows golden; exactly like a beehive." – then the instructor should deduce that the student is not a poor grammarian or writer, but instead that the student is ready to play with, and learn about, a different grammatical concept: the use of a prepositional phrase, set off with a comma, as a means to extending a description and/or inserting a simile or metaphor. The instructor might say something like the following: Wow, the comparison to a beehive really describes the shape and color and feel of the space even more precisely than any adjectives ever could. It's exciting to see this sentence because it shows me that you're actually ready to learn about a whole new type of sentence, which also allows you to extend description! Can I tell you about it?

As the instructor conducts the conferences, she should share student work in the midst of the writing process, so that student work can serve as model texts in the moment, during the actual writing activity. Doing so is an artform. It is important not to interrupt students' writing too frequently. However, it can be a powerful means towards guiding student work in the moment, when it feels most relevant and interest is high. As well, the more models that students can encounter early in the process of learning about a grammatical option, the better: they will feel more comfortable and increasingly aware of their options. As the instructor shares these examples, briefly work with the students to identify how the semi-colon functions in that particular sentence; place them (verbally for now) in one of the previously determined categories, or create a new one.

Once students have created a fully developed paragraph that describes one of the images and attempts to use semi-colons to extend that description, they next should apply the very same activity to the place that they have chosen for their "small moment" piece. The instructor should return the organizers with the children's selections on them, for easy reference.

Now you will repeat this very same activity for the place you have chosen to write about. At this point, you are not expected to create a draft, nor write descriptions in the order, necessarily, that you will use for your draft. Simply begin the process of collecting the most fitting words possible to capture certain details about your place and to make a picture appear in your reader's mind. Remember, your reader cannot visit this place; they do not know what it looks like, nor do they know what makes it special. Your words have to take them there. As you write these sentences, play with semi-colons as a way to

extend your descriptions. By the end of the period, you should have a collection of descriptions and imagery that you can use later in an actual draft of your piece.

Lesson 6

At the same time that the instructor teaches the introduction paragraph for this piece of writing, the lesson about semi-colons can be extended and reinforced. The two lend themselves well to one another, in part, because the introduction paragraph requires the author to present the all of the layers of their argument in a single, relatively constrained space. The student writers will be naming the specific place that will serve as the topic of their piece; developing their perspective or angle on the place (i.e. why it is special to them); and naming details that will illustrate its uniqueness or magic. In presenting these several, related layers, the student writers may find a semi-colon to be a very useful tool.

At the start of the Lesson 5, show the students the first paragraph from the model essay again. Ask a student to read the paragraph aloud:

"Sitting on the bow of the *Passerine*—the sailboat that was my childhood home—I could experience just the right balance of danger and comfort, privacy and proximity to my parents, responsibility and carefreedom, for a child of six years. My parents scarcely ever sat there; I suppose they were too busy comparing the rust-stained charts and the tiny, metal needle of the compass with the actual sea around us. No, the bow was all mine, and I knew it. Every child needs her own kingdom—especially one that feels both intimate and, at the same time, expansive or maybe even infinite."

In a whole group discussion, ask: What does the author achieve in this short paragraph? What do they get done? What are they able to tell the reader?
The students may respond with some of the following information:
- The author tells us that his special place is on the bow of his sailboat, which is his home.
- He explains that no one else really spent time there; that it's just for him.
- He says that children should have a place that is just theirs.
- He explains why he chose that spot as his special place. It sounds like it was the right distance away from his parents. He was pretty young—6 years old—so he couldn't be too far away from them. But at the same time, he got to have his own space.

If students do not bring up some of these points, the instructor should lead them there with questioning. She might ask the class some of the following questions:
- Can you picture where the child is sitting? What does the picture in your mind look like? Does anyone remember what part of a ship is called the bow?
- Does the author tell us why this place was special to him?
- Does the author have an argument about this place? What is he trying to tell us about this place or about children having a special place just for themselves? What does he want us to know or believe about it?

This last question leads into the next phase of the mini-lesson. If students seem unsure how to respond to it, move into the next phase for now and return to that question. After the next phase, students will be better equipped to answer such a question. Being

asked about an argument in a descriptive memoir is likely to be an unfamiliar experience for many students. Many students, even at the Fourth grade level, will be used to pieces of writing being sharply categorized into boxes by their school and teachers, and they might associate an argument only with obviously persuasive writing. This phase of the mini-lesson is designed to encourage students to notice that even "small moment" pieces have a persuasive element, an opinion, or an argument in them—that, indeed, all piece of writing have an opinion or argument, in that the author inherently takes a stance or an angle on the subject.

Move into a read-aloud of two short picture books: *Shortcut* by Donald Crews and *When I Was Young in the Mountains* by Cynthia Rylant. Both books exemplify the memoir genre—they are clearly based closely on their respective author's own childhood experiences.

Hold up the two books, show the covers to the students, and read the titles and authors. Like your own "small moment" pieces, both of these stories are true. They describe real experiences from each author's childhood. And, like your "small moment" pieces, these two stories focus on a place, or series of places, that feel very special to the author and which other people might not appreciate fully or know very much about. I should say that, in the case of these two stories, a few of the author's relatives also know and appreciate the place, which can happen in your "small moment" pieces, too.

In both cases, the author will use details to describe the unique magic of the place—what makes it so special to her or him. She or he also will take a stance on this place. That is, they will make an argument about it; try to tell you a way to think about it; or encourage you to believe something about it.

Keep these questions in your mind as we read. We will come back to them. The instructor should reveal these questions on the SmartBoard or chart paper:
- What is the special place? Or, what are the special places?
- Who knows about it/them?
- What details does the author give you in order to show how special this place is?
- What is the author trying to tell you about this place? What do they want you to know or believe about it? What is the author's argument about it?

We're going to begin with *Shortcut* by Donald Crews. You might have shortcuts that you use in your own lives. If you think of some, hold onto them in your minds, so that you can share them later.

As the instructor reads the book, she should highlight for the students the sense of mystery that Crews achieves in the first couple of illustrations in the book. In these illustrations, the characters linger at the mouth of the shortcut, and they peer towards it. When you look at the first major illustration, where does your eye land first and then where does it travel? (Students are likely to respond that their eye looks at the characters first, then travels along the tracks towards the mouth of the shortcut.) After your eye travels there, where does it want to go next? (Students are likely to say that their eye wants to continue deeper into the shortcut.) And what kind of tone or atmosphere does that create around the shortcut? (Mystery, danger, excitement, intimacy.)

The instructor can ask the first two questions on the list quite early in the reading.
- What is the special place? Donald's shortcut.

- Who knows about it/them? Donald's siblings and/or cousins. Maybe friends.
  Not Mama or Bigmama.

Midway through the book, the instructor also can ask for some examples of details to satisfy the third question.
- What details does the author give you in order to show how special this place is?
  o It was quicker to get home that way.
  o You could laugh, shout, sing, tussle, throw stones.
  o There are dangers like snakes, briers, and most of all, trains!

At the close of the reading, come back to the final, and most difficult and abstract, question:
- What is the author trying to tell you about this place? What do they want you to know or believe about it? What is the author's argument about it?

Students may respond that Donald Crews wants us to know how dangerous the shortcut is, and that they should not have taken it. Certainly, that is an important element of the argument that Crews makes. As well, urge the students to see that he makes other, subtler arguments, as well. Draw their attention to the final page—both the illustration and the text. Use leading questions to guide students to understand that this experience created a change in the children: it frightened them, silenced them, brought a harsh reality into their childhood dreamworld of shouting and tussling etc., bonded them together, and separated them from their Mama and Bigmama.
What do you notice has changed in the background of the illustrations over the course of the book? The instructor should flip through the story sequentially, so that they can track the change. Students will notice that the sky grows darker and that, by the end, it has become very dark. This might signal other changes in the book. For example, how has the narrator changed—and probably the other characters, too—from the start to the finish of the book? What has changed within themselves? What resolutions do they make at the end?
Next, draw the students' attention to the fact that, in many of the early illustrations, the characters are spread out across the pages, and that in the final one, they stand together. As well, students may notice that, in the final illustration, the group of children becomes a group of silhouettes, almost indistinguishable from each other. What do you think the author is trying to say here? Students are likely to realize that the author is arguing that the characters became bonded by the experience with the train. At this point, the students have explored much more deeply into Crews' subtler stance on the experience at the shortcut.
As a final activity, ask the students to bring to mind any shortcuts in their own lives. You are not required to think of one, but go ahead and raise a quiet thumb if and when they do think of one. Wait for most students to raise a thumb. Take two minutes now to turn and tell your neighbors about it. When the two minutes have ended, ask students to share what they heard one of their classmates say. Emphasize that they should share what kind of shortcut it is, where it is, and details about it that can help us to picture it, as if we were there. Now, go to your writer's notebooks, open them to the next

fresh page, write "Shortcuts" at the top, and either write about a shortcut in your own life, a shortcut that you just heard about, an imaginary shortcut, or one from literature or film. If you cannot think of a shortcut, use the image of the abandoned railroad tracks to imagine a story that incorporates it as a shortcut. I have extra copies of that image. As you write, use semi-colons, in a few places, to extend a description more deeply, or to achieve another effect, such as creating suspense. The instructor should reveal, once again, the list of the functions of a semi-colon, for student reference.

Lesson 7

The instructor should show the cover of *When I Was Young in the Mountains* by Cynthia Rylant to the class again. In this book, the author describes a general place that is special to her, from her childhood, and which many other people might not know, understand, or appreciate: the mountain settlements of West Virginia. Now, such a place might not be specific enough for our "small moment" pieces, but notice how Cynthia Rylant shows us a series of more specific special places within that larger place of mountainous West Virginia. At the end, I'll ask you to share what they are.

Reveal again the list of questions that students used in order to analyze *Shortcut*. Students should keep these questions in mind during the reading, and the instructor should ask the students to respond to the questions during the reading. Review the questions briefly with the students prior to reading:

- What is the special place? Or, what are the special places?
- Who knows about it/them?
- What details does the author give you in order to show how special this place is?
- What is the author trying to tell you about this place? What do they want you to know or believe about it? What is the author's argument about it?

Read *When I Was Young in the Mountains*. Hold off on the first two questions until the end of the reading, as they are more complicated to answer for this story than for *Shortcut*. Periodically throughout the reading, do ask the third question: What are the details that Rylant gives us so that we can picture the place and get a feel for its specialness, uniqueness, magic? Students might respond with the following:

- They get to eat food that sounds really good—the kind of food that they probably typically eat in West Virginia. It says that they eat cornbread and okra.
- They get to go swimming outside.
- The people who live nearby seem really sweet and friendly. It says that the shopkeepers "smelled of sweet milk," which makes them sound like nice people, like grandparents maybe.
- It seems like even their chores are fun. They get water from a well, and it seems, from the words and the pictures, like they enjoy that. Also, they seem to really enjoy shelling the beans for dinner because they get to do it together, outside under the stars.
- Everything seems to be really simple and beautiful. Like the words say that the tubs are round and made of tin. And I notice the house is made of all wood, but it looks really nice.
- They get to drink hot cocoa together.
- They have a lot of snakes, which seems really exciting. And the grandmother can kill them; she seems really brave, and it seems like she's used to dealing with snakes, because of where she lives. And there's other wildlife around, too, like special birds.

Although you might not have visited the mountains of West Virginia, let alone spent any time living there, you now might feel like you know, a little bit, what it is like

there and what makes it a unique special place. Cynthia Rylant took you there. She transported us; we traveled with her to this place. She chose specific details, and specific words to describe them, in order to do that. She chose a few particulars that capture the specialness of this unique place. That is precisely what you are going to be doing in your "small moment" pieces.

At the end of the reading, return to the first two questions on the list.

- What is the special place? Or, what are the special places? Students are likely to reiterate that the general place is the mountains of West Virginia, and that, within that place, Rylant shows us many smaller, special places, such as the swimming hole, the front porch of the house, the little store, the pump at the well, and more.

- Who knows about it/them? The students are likely to point out that, while there are several people who seem to be neighbors to the main character, it is mostly the narrator and her immediate family that know how special their spot in the mountains is.

This latter point will be a great segue into the final question:

- What is the author trying to tell you about this place? What do they want you to know or believe about it? What is the author's argument about it? Let's take another look at the final page of the story. Read it again to the students: "When I was young in the mountains, I never wanted to go to the ocean, and I never wanted to go to the desert. I never wanted to go anywhere else in the world, for I was in the mountains. And that was always enough."
  What is the author's point here? What does she want us to understand and believe? Students are likely to point out that Cynthia Rylant feels content in the mountains and that she does not feel the need to be anywhere else. The instructor may be able to guide the students still deeper into this analysis. Why do you think the author might feel the need to say this? Students may be able to recognize that people tend to feel that the ocean and the desert are more special or desirable than the mountains of West Virginia. Therefore, Rylant wants us to know that, to her, West Virginia is just as special as those other places, even if it might not seem like it at first to everyone. If students need further scaffolding, the instructor may want to guide them with further questions, such as:
  - Think back to your lists of more specific special places in West Virginia and the details that describe them. Also think about the ones that we might not have listed. Would you describe this place as glamorous? Would you say that it's obvious how special it is, and how special the activities are? Students are likely to point out that some of them are not obviously special at all, and in fact, are quite humble. They might point out the series of chores that the main character must do, the humble materials of the buildings and objects in their lives, the fact that the food is not fancy. They might point out that there are snakes in the pond. They might point out that the author chooses to include a scene with an outhouse. They also are likely to point out that, while these places and activities may not be glamorous, they are very special to the main

character—and that she is content with them and does not need more, does not want to live or travel elsewhere.

- o From there, the instructor can scaffold the students' understandings of the class dynamics inherent in Rylant's argument on the final page. Did you notice anything about the young characters' feet? Students will notice immediately that they do not wear shoes. Often we go barefoot at times when we want to—when we're at the beach, for instance. Why do you think these characters are not wearing shoes? Students are likely to point out that they may not be able to afford them and may not need them. The father needs boots because he works in the mine, but the children might not totally need them. The students are likely to realize that this family is poor. Did you think of them as being poor right away, when we were reading the story? The students will share that they did not—in part because they seem so content with their lives. Now let's look again at the final page. What is the argument that Rylant is making here? Students likely will be able to say that the main character still loves where she lives, even if it isn't fancy, even if the people who live there are technically poor. They might be able to say that the characters are actually rich, in a way, because they have each other and their land and their way of life, and this is ultimately the author's argument.

As a final activity in this session, return the students' organizers to them. Now they will respond to the second and third questions on it:

- Who else knows about this place, if anyone? Who else appreciates its specialness, if anyone?
- What do you need people to know, understand, or believe about this place and your relationship with it? (This is your argument.)

Read the second question over again together. As you respond, think about the two picture books that we have read together. In *Shortcut*, it is very clear, and meaningful, that only the children know about the shortcut—and that the adults (Mama, Bigmama) will never know about it, nor what happened there. In *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, it is equally clear and meaningful that only the narrator's immediate family knows and appreciates the pleasure of living in their particular spot in the mountains. The shortcut and the house in the mountains of West Virginia have a different meaning to the narrator of each respective story, in part, because of the difference in who knows about it and appreciates it. This question definitely impacts the meaning of your place, too. If you are the only person who knows about the place, that influences what it means to you. If you share it only with your siblings, that will lend a slightly different meaning to it. Reveal the original model text now. Who else knows about and appreciates the bow of the sailboat? Students are likely to respond that the parents know about it, but they do not spend time there—they are too busy—and so really only the child knows just how magical it is. Take just a few minutes now to respond to the second question in your organizers now.

Now read the third question over again together. Now consider your relationship with the place that you have chosen to capture; that is, consider your stance towards this

place. Rylant's stance is that the mountains are good enough for her; that she loves their simple pleasures. Crews' stance is that the shortcut was a dangerous place that remained a secret for those who knew about it; it brought the children together and separated them from the adults. Reveal the model text again now. What is this author's stance towards the bow of the sailboat where he lives? Students may respond that it allows the six year-old narrator to be on his own while still being somewhat safe near his parents. They also may point out that, as a result, he gets to see and experience the magic of life at sea that other people, including his parents, do not get to see and experience—they belong just to him. Take 10 minutes to respond to this third and final question on your organizers. This question will require more contemplation, planning, and descriptive writing than the other two; it will set you up for success before you begin your draft in earnest.

This task also will present the students with an opportunity to use the semi-colon as a tool for achieving an ideal degree of specificity and depth in their writing. For those students whose argument needs greater depth, the instructor can guide them to add a semi-colon to their argument-in-progress in order to open the way for them to extend it. For instance, a student might write: "When I play on tree trunk that has fallen across the creek behind my house, I get to play however I want." If a student is asked to replace the period with a semi-colon, it automatically creates a structure, a space, that asks to be filled with more description of that same idea: "When I play on tree trunk that has fallen across the creek behind my house, I get to play however I want; I enter my own fantasy world and the tree trunk becomes my forest home, more real than my regular house." Here, now, the student writer really puts forth a nuanced argument. Not only does she identify the fallen tree as a special place for her because she chooses how to play, but also that she finds a fantasy world there in which she feels more at home than her regular "real" life in the house where she presumably lives with her family.

Lesson 8

Draw the students attention to the repeating sentence structure in *When I Was Young in the Mountains*. Why do you think Cynthia Rylant chose to use this same sentence structure, and sentence beginning, over and over in her story? What do it do for you as the reader/listener? What does it accomplish in the story? Students will be likely to point out that it creates a predictable rhythm, as some poetry does, which feels pleasing to the reader/listener. Students also will be likely to mention that it serves to remind the reader/listener of the point of the story and the position or stance of the author-narrator: to tell an audience about this special place during a particular moment of time (the time of her childhood). They also may comment that it makes each of the scenes feel like examples of that larger point. Yes, it is a little bit like a thesis statement and supporting examples, which we will study during other essay-writing units.

Show the pages of *When I Was Young in the Mountains*—preferably on a document camera—so that the students can see the text clearly. There is a predictable pattern in all of these sentences. What happens, every time, after the phrase "When I was young in the mountains…" Students will identify the presence of a comma every time. And after the comma? This response may not be as clear—it is a challenging question to answer and, in turn, a challenging answer to put into words. Students may comment that the author finishes the sentence or thought that they started; or they may say that the author tells us something specific about life in the mountains at that time. Yes, the author extends the thought with a more specific description—not unlike the part of a sentence that might come after a semi-colon. Yet, this type of sentence structure is a little different. The first part of the sentence actually raises a question, although there is not a question mark. The phrase "When I was young in the mountains…" creates a need to know more, immediately. It is an incomplete thought; it is an opening up of an idea, without any closure—yet. What comes after the comma is the answer to the question raised. Sometimes a sentence with a semi-colon can raise a mystery in the first part, and satisfy it in the second (reveal, once again, the list of functions of semi-colons, and identify a few examples where this is the case), but always the first part could stand alone as a mysterious but successful and complete thought. It is not so with the sentence structure in *When I Was Young in the Mountains*. It would be unsatisfying and confusing to leave the question unanswered.

Next, the students will play a brief game with each other, in which they experience the two parts of this type of complex sentence as a question raised and a satisfying answer. It resembles an exquisite corpse game, in which students continue the sentence that their classmates began. Separate the class into two teams. Group 1 will have two minutes to come up with the first half of such a compound sentence. Once they have finalized it at the end of the two minutes, they share it with the other team and the instructor records it for all to see. The individual members of Group 2 then have four minutes to generate the second half of the sentence. They write it on a thin strip of paper, without names on them. At the end of the four minutes, the instructor displays the strips of paper together, ideally, on a document camera. The members of Group 1 then become judges; in a fashion similar to the game *Apples to Apples*, they vote for the strongest second half of the sentence that they had generated as a group. The criteria, which will be posted clearly and reviewed as a class, include the following:

- the one that connects most logically to the first half
- the one that most satisfies the question or mystery raised by the first half
- the one that is technically correct in terms of grammar rules (this is a good way to put a natural governor on run-on sentences)
- the one that is most interesting, exciting, engaging, descriptive, unique, and/or humorous
- the one that has the most specific word choices

The voting will be blind. The judges will have an opportunity to briefly explain their vote. The sentence with the most votes will win a point; the point will be recorded on the sentence. In this sense, the two groups are not teams; the members of each group compete with each other. As well, the points are not awarded to people directly; they are awarded to the sentence.

Next, Group 2 generates the first half of a complex sentence, and the process repeats.

Lesson 9

       Once again, the hook is the model. And while *When I Was Young in the Mountains* provides an excellent model, providing more than this single model is ideal. As previously stated, the more models, the better: the students will have a more nuanced understanding of the sentence type being studied and practiced, more comfortable with the task being required of them, and thus, more confident in their own powers as authors. And, as stated, if the instructor can find the time to create their own models, it will be a powerful opportunity for the students to connect with them—to understand them as human beings beyond the classroom and to see that their teacher is an author, too. If the time is not available, the instructor may use this model instead:

<div style="text-align:center">

"Living Aboard"
By Tyler C. Jennings

</div>

When you live aboard, sometimes you wake to find yourself already underway. Imagine: traveling in your sleep! Sometimes Mom and Dad want to get an early start. Somehow you sleep through all the racket of the anchor chains and main sheets and winches and the luffing of the sails. When you wake, though, the only sound is the soft hissing of the water as it peels away from the hull.

When you live aboard, the bow is the best seat. You dangle your bare feet high above the water. You might see porpoises weave and twist below you. They like the company of a sailboat. Or, you might glide right over a family of manta rays, which look like they are flying in slow motion. If you cannot see any sealife, you might look along the surface of the water towards the horizon. A trail of glittering sunshine will be pointing right at you. It seems to follow you wherever you go.

When you live aboard, you can have visitors in the middle of the ocean. A lost tern, blown off course by a storm, might rest on your deck before continuing his search for his home. You give the bird a name and wonder whether he keeps it once he has left you.

When you are sailing on the wide ocean, you can steer the sailboat yourself—even if you're not old enough to see very well over the steering wheel. You cannot crash into anything! Besides, Dad says, you are a fine sailor. You can *feel* where the sailboat needs to go. You can feel it in the pull of the steering wheel, the hum of the boards beneath your feet, the tilt of the boat in the water, and the breeze against your forehead.

When you live aboard, you can swim any time you want. You only have to throw the ladder over the side. You can swim in the harbor, in the bay, in the ocean. Sometimes, when you are swimming in the ocean, you remember how many miles of water extend below your toes and you consider all the sorts of creatures that miles of water can conceal and, having thoroughly frightened yourself, you clamor back up the ladder to the safety of the deck and Mom and Dad's smiles.

When you live aboard, you create your own entertainment. Sometimes, you sing together. You are free to sing as loudly as you wish, and it does not matter if you are out of key. There is no audience to judge you.

When you live aboard, life can be quiet. Often, you do not need words. It is enough to feel the forward movement of the boat. It can feel good to be silent with the ones you love.

When you live aboard, sometimes you might make the mistake of thinking that you possess the wind. But the wind always finds a way to remind you that no one possesses it. It can disappear altogether. Then the surface of the sea looks as smooth as a mirror. The sailboat stops moving forward and only drifts sideways. Sailors call this "the doldrums"—one of those words that sounds just like what it means.

When the winds kicks up again, you cannot believe your own speed. You shout to your Mom and Dad in the cockpit: "We're going so fast!" Everyone is in a good mood again. You promise the wind that you will never take it for granted again. You promise that you will always cherish it as much as love and salty air and swimming and barefootedness.

When you live aboard, you try to find a safe harbor before a storm arrives. Sometimes, a storm will arrive too quickly, and you cannot reach a safe harbor in time. You must cast anchors in all directions and ride out the storm. You huddle in your bunk, gripping Mom's hand. You can feel the sailboat riding over the massive swells, as if a whale had surfaced underneath you. You can hear the wire halyards pinging frantically against the metal masts. The wind screams like a banshee.

When you live aboard, sometimes you cannot see land in any direction. Dad sails by the compass at times like this. You wonder how that little metal needle can steer you out of so much empty ocean wilderness, but it always does.

Other times, you sail right along the coast. You wish you could visit the beaches that you see. The sunbathers in the distance look like gnats in the sand. You wave to them and shout your greetings, but they do not see you and do not hear you. They only notice the sailboat on the horizon. Sometimes the sailboat feels like your bigger self, your shell, your armor. It can be the only part of you that people notice.

When you live aboard, sometimes you pass other sailboats so closely that you feel you might be able to touch them with your outstretched arms. You thrill dangerously at the idea of colliding with them. You look out across the vast ocean and think, *All of this space out here, and here we are right next to each other*. These people always wave back.

When you live aboard, you look forward to arriving at the next harbor. Other sailboats will be arriving at the same time from all over the world. They fly two flags from their sterns: one flag from their home country and one flag for the country they are visiting,

this country. You see the flags of Bermuda, Argentina, France flying next to the American flag. Sometimes, they even will fly the flag of Florida.

When you live aboard, you must care for your sailboat almost as if it were a living thing. It needs your attention. After a storm, Dad sometimes repairs the top of the mast. He hoists himself the entire height of the mast, 60 feet, in a little leather sling called a Bosin's seat. Then he stays there all afternoon, sitting in his little leather seat and working on the mast in the hot sun. You beg him to let you hoist yourself in the Bosin's seat, but he does not let you. He tells you that it is dangerous, even for him.

When you live aboard, your parents are your teachers. Your classrooms are the beaches. You carry a book about seashells, its cover crusted in salt. You learn about seashells by rinsing them in the waves and examining them so closely that you feel you have stepped inside of a tiny room and the sights and sounds of the beach fade away.

When you live aboard, you adopt your pets from the wild—sometimes a sea urchin, other times a baby horseshoe crab. From the wet part of the beach, where the waves lick the sand, you harvest a hundred live coquinas, each with a different color on its tiny shell. Back on the sailboat, you keep them safe in a bucket of wet sand and carry them hundreds of miles from their homes. Later, in the heat and stillness of the doldrums, you give each coquina a different name and try to remember each name by the color of its shell.

When you come into a port, you always replenish your supplies. You might walk from the anchorage to a grocery store. A grocery store is a strange place for a sailor to be. The white lights inside are so different from the sunshine. The shelves piled with gleaming packages so different from a sailboat's small, locked cupboards.

When you live aboard, you do not have a television or computer or radio. When you reach a harbor, you can buy a newspaper to learn the news. A lot can happen while you are at sea for a week. And yet the news also always seems to be the same. Dad will stride down the dock with the newspaper in his hand and tell us: "The war is still on." He will look down at the photograph of the helicopter in the desert and shake his head. He looks sad. He looks like he needs to tell someone how he is feeling, but that someone cannot be me. That someone cannot even be Mom. I can tell it needs to be the someone who is in charge of the war.

When you live aboard, you do not have a refrigerator, so ice is your most valuable possession. You cannot value it too much, though, because it melts after a day or two. That is one of the great strengths of the sailor: if you cannot value your possessions too much, you value love and salty air and swimming and barefootedness instead.

When you live aboard in warm weather, you can sleep outdoors on the cabin top. The wood soaks in sunshine all day long, and, even at night, it still feels warm against your back. The canvas cushions, which you use for pillows, smell sharply of salt. You can

see so many stars that the sky looks positively over-crowded with silver lights. You try to remember the constellations that Dad taught you the night before.

When you live aboard in chilly weather, you spend the dark hours before bedtime in the cabin. The cabin is the coziest place you will ever know. The walls are made of glossy, caramel-colored wooden slats, and they curve around you like cupped hands. You curl up on the emerald, velvety cushions and lean into Dad's thick wool sweater or Mom's favorite sweatshirt worn soft with every-single-day wearing. All three of you share peaches from the can. Mom and Dad let you drink the syrup from the bottom of the can, warning you not to cut your lip on the tin.

If you sleep in your berth, you fall asleep to the sounds of fish nibbling the barnacles attached to the hull. It reminds you that you are actually sleeping below the surface of the water. Your home really is the sea.

<u>Glossary of Sailing Terms</u>

Aft – back of the sailboat
Anchorage – the part of a harbor where ships anchor
Berth – another name for bunk bed on a ship
Bow – front of the sailboat
Cabin – the interior of the **hull**, where people live
Cabin top – the roof of the **cabin**, where people can sit
Cockpit – usually the steering wheel (or tiller) is located here
Halyard – a wire or rope that helps to hold up the mast
Hull – the part of the boat that sits in the water
Living aboard – when you live full-time on a boat
Luffing – when the sails are not full with wind and they whip back and forth
Main sheet – the rope that helps you hoist the sail
Marina – a group of docks where boats can dock for the night or even permanently
Port – a place where ships anchor or dock in order to be close to a town or city
Stantion – a wire or rope that helps to hold up the mast
Stern – back of the sailboat
Underway – when the sailboat is moving or traveling
Winches – gears that make it easier to pull on the **main sheet**

End.

If available, give the students blank books that are formatted to become picture books, with blank space at the top and lines at the bottom. Invite the students to write a picture book about the place that they have chosen for their "small moment" piece. To be clear, this writing piece is not the actual "small moment" piece; it is an exercise to practice this particular sentence structure and also to continue the process of generating details and strong sentences that the student writers can transfer to their actual "small moment" piece if they so choose.

It is ideal for the students to have an audience in mind before they begin to create their books. Often, using the grade below (in this case, Third grade) as the audience works well: the students remember living that age themselves, and they do not have to worry about using vocabulary that a much younger audience could not understand.

Like *When I Was Young in the Mountains* and *Living Aboard*, each page of your picture book will begin with the same type of introductory dependent clause. It is up to you to determine exactly what it will say, but it should definitely include the name of the place. But, like these two models, you can use a kind of poetic name for the place. Practice your introductory dependent clause on scratch paper; when you think you have it, raise a quiet hand and show me. Then you can write it on the cover as the title of your picture book, and get started!

Naturally, the students will not complete their picture books in this session. It will become a perfect project for students to continue during writer's workshop and/or work-to-finish periods.

As students continue this project, the instructor should continually assess the level of detailed imagery that students use in their sentences and in their illustrations. Do the students have many details in their illustrations that do not appear in the writing? Could it strengthen their sentences to incorporate more of the details from their illustrations into the written story? Is there evidence in the illustrations that students are thoroughly and successfully visualizing their own story?

Lesson 10 and beyond

At this point, students should be well positioned to begin their "small moment" pieces from a place of strength and poise. They should possess a clear awareness of the expectations for the assignment:

- that it will describe a place that is, in some way, rarified or unique;
- that it will avoid the selection of a cliché topic and the use of cliché language;
- that the language will be characterized by fine detail and imagery, which will be generated not only from adjectives but also highly specific noun and verb choices;
- that the author will experiment with sentence construction (especially introductory dependent clauses and sentences that make use of semi-colons)
- that the piece will transport the reader to the place;
- that the piece will be poetic in its language and persuasive in its purpose, convincing the reader of the specialness of the place being written about.

These expectations should be made plain to the students before they begin to write. As well, these expectations match with the rubric for the unit. As students now embark on the process of writing the piece itself, it will be important to show them the rubric again now.

These are the qualities by which the success of your piece will be measured. We will read through it and discuss it before you begin your writing pieces. When you feel that you have completed your piece, you will fill out a rubric to assess your own work, and I also will fill out the very same rubric for your work. Then, we will conference one-on-one to compare and discuss the two completed rubrics. If, at that point, you would like to revise and edit the piece further, you will be allowed to do that. Now piece of writing is ever perfect or ever completely "finished"—there's no such thing as a "finished" piece of writing. Many authors have returned even to published works to revise them. What matters is whether it feels successful to you and to your readers. Your readers, for this piece, will be myself and your classmates, for starters.

At this point, it will be essential to unleash the creative force that has been building in the students over the past 9 days/lessons. The instructor will have done ample work up front, during these 9 lessons, to set the students on a course of success. Now the instructor's role should be a guide on the sidelines of the student writing process. Give the students plenty of uninterrupted time to write now. Remind the students to have their writer's notebooks at the ready, in case they would like to use any details, images, or sentences from their William Carlos Williams poems, their abandoned place writing, and other experiments, jottings, and exercises. They also should have their picture book at the ready, even if it is a work in progress; they may wish to use sentences from it, as well.

The instructor should not impose rigid periods or phases of the writing process for editing and revising, nor should the instructor require or expect students to pass through the phases of the writing process in the traditional sequence: drafting, editing, revising. Many writers do not work this way. Many writers pass in and out of these phases of the writing process recursively. Some writers revise and edit constantly as they write; others

draft profusely and revise and edit at the end of the process. The students will know that editing and revision is expected of them, and that they will be unlikely to deliver a successful piece to their audience and score well on the rubric without some editing and revising. If a student does not edit and revise their piece and asks for a final conference, the instructor of course should question their readiness and postpone the conference until the student completes satisfactory work.

The instructor should not expect perfect Standard English writing mechanics in a final Fourth grade student piece. Some instructors may feel that, at this point in their education, students should be able to use some *elements* of Standard English mechanics perfectly; for instance, they might reasonably expect all Fourth grade students to capitalize the beginning of a sentence and punctuate the end of it. If the instructor wishes, she easily can make this element into an important part of the rubric and reduce a student's score for a lack of attention to that element. It is essential that the instructor make it known as a criterion for assessment, of course.

In addition, the instructor should never correct a student's writing mechanics for them, nor should he ever mark a student's mechanical errors. Research abundantly proves that marking student's mechanical errors has no lasting impact on student learning whatsoever. Indeed, it only suggests to the student that "grammar" is the avoidance of mistakes, rather than the deployment of effective writing strategies towards a purposeful end.

If the instructor notices patterns in a given student's writing, which she naturally will, she should proceed thoughtfully. Rather than feeling the need to eradicate these "errors", the instructor should ask herself: how is the student using and experimenting with grammar? What do these so-called "errors" show me that the student is ready to learn? All student writers use grammar. There is not a grammar-less sentence in all of student writing. And what might seem like a mistake actually may be the student's way of experimenting with a new grammatical option. For instance, if a student writes—"I will sail towards the horizon. Which glimmers with heat."—then that student is ready to learn how to link these two thoughts with a comma. It was not an error; it is a nascent ability.

If the instructor notices such a pattern, then she may want to consider crafting a lesson that targets it. She might want to teach that lesson briefly in a one-on-one conference with that student, and then follow it with the recommendation of some model texts for the student to read on his own. Or, if the instructor notices a similar pattern in many student pieces, she might want to share that lesson with larger groups. Of course, she will not be able to target every pattern that she notices; she must prioritize. It will be far more effective to teach a few grammatical concepts deeply, in a given unit, than attempting to cover many of them in a hurried or superficial fashion.

Chapter Three: Philosophical Stance and Recommendations

For decades, many American educators, schools, and educational institutions have operated on the assumption that the direct instruction of grammar does not have an appreciable impact on student learning or student writing. In fact, many educational thinkers have argued that it negatively impacts student writing, if only because it takes away from time that could be spent writing. This notion about the teaching of grammar first emerged in a powerful way at the Dartmouth Conference of 1966; ever since, it has represented a significant philosophical stance of many educators. Indeed, it has represented one of two possible ways of thinking about the teaching of grammar; the other, in essence, has been a continuation of traditional approaches to grammar instruction—namely, the teaching of grammar concepts in isolation, with the use of textbooks and workbooks. If this traditional approach is presented as the only alternative, what is a progressive educator to do? Any sound progressive educator will know that rote memorization does not yield *understanding*, which is one of the primary aims of education. It perhaps makes sense, then, that given these two options, so many progressive educators unquestioningly have latched onto the argument that direct grammar instruction does not impact student learning and student writing. It delivers them from the requirement to use valuable instructional time to drag their students through the process of rote grammar memorization and grammar exercises in isolated workbook pages, all of which they may instinctually know does not work.

Yet, how can we have followed along with this philosophical stance so unquestioningly and for so long? How can we have excused ourselves from addressing

grammar directly, when it is *the* raw material from which all successful writing is made? An age of *intention* seems to be returning to Language Arts education generally— intention inscribed within the best practices that all sound progressive educators use, such as creating learning experiences within a meaningful context for the students and inviting the students to construct their own knowledge from a carefully laid learning experience. For instance, in the realm of vocabulary development, scholar-educators have been advocating for greater intention, explicitness, and directness in the teaching of new vocabulary words. They write that many educators seem to believe that vocabulary development only occurs through osmosis, through the acts of reading and conversing, and that it cannot be taught directly. Of course, this line of argument should sound strikingly familiar to the profession's conversations about the teaching of grammar. These scholar-educators argue correctly that vocabulary can and should be taught explicitly. Explicit teaching does not necessarily mean traditionalist teaching, and these scholar-educators advocate for sound, progressive pedagogical approaches to the teaching of vocabulary in context (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012; Neuman & Roskos, 2012). It is precisely this kind of shift that needs to occur specifically in the realm of grammar instruction. As progressive educators, we need to free ourselves from the unhelpful binary described above—rote memorization and practice in isolation vs. a total absence of direct grammar instruction. We need to teach grammar directly and with intention, and we need to do it within a meaningful context and using constructivist methods.

As described more extensively in the "Literature Review" section of this work, a few educational thinkers in the Anglophone world have been pushing for this third way. Constance Weaver, an American educator, appears to have been the first to offer a

cohesive argument for the teaching of grammar in the context of a writing curriculum

(1996), which is a torch that a few other American educators, such as Jeff Anderson, have

carried forward after her. However, as some of their British counterparts will point out,

there has been a woeful lack of substantial research studies on the practice of teaching

grammar in the context of writing; the first of such studies was not carried out until 2012.

These British researchers appear to be working quickly to make up for lost time; they

have won several grants recently in order to continue their work. However, this line of

argument—that the direct teaching of grammar within the context of writing does impact

student learning and student writing in a positive way—remains fledgling and

incompletely conceived. As the British team of researchers themselves have suggested,

much work remains to be done. Meanwhile, the last American publication on the subject

seems to have appeared in 2005, when Weaver and Anderson collaborated together.

     This thesis seeks to carry this crucial work forward. It feels especially vital to do

so at this particular moment in time, as it appears that the movement may be losing

traction in the United States. As well, in many significant ways, this thesis differentiates

itself from any previous work on the teaching of grammar in context. While it values and

affirms the general philosophical stances of some of its forebears, particularly Constance

Weaver and Jeff Anderson, this thesis also improves upon the work of Weaver and

Anderson in many significant ways. In part, it operates on the suspicion that their ideas

need to be represented more successfully in order to gain the traction that the movement

needs. As the British research team themselves argue, Weaver and Anderson's ideas—

although valuable—fail to be "fully-theorized." I would add that they tend to lack rigor

and theoretical grounding, cohesiveness, and universal applicability in classrooms.

Rather, like many other American literacy education texts, they tend to feel like litanies of homepsun advice about what has worked in their own classrooms.

This thesis also will recognize the importance of the British research of the past several years and currently underway, while also offering what their work cannot. That is, the impact of their work will be felt more immediately in the realm of policy—and especially British educational policy—and not nearly as directly in the daily practice of teachers—and even less so for American teachers. So, with the results of the British research studies as validation for its philosophical stance, this thesis then proceeds to elaborate on the ideas of Weaver and Anderson, update them, and codify them into a "fully theorized," theoretically-grounded, cohesive, professional and enticing, and universally applicable curriculum that teachers can use, wholesale, in their classrooms. The "Sample Unit Plan" section of this thesis provides a thorough illustration of this type of curriculum. In this section of the thesis ("Philosophical Stance and Recommendations"), I will outline in more theoretical terms the departure from Weaver and Anderson that I describe above, generally describe the theoretical underpinnings of the "Sample Unit Plan" and other curricular units that will be written in the future, and argue for the urgent need for this type of curriculum and its rightful place in our current educational landscape.

The Strengths of the New "Constructivist Grammar Curriculum"

The new Constructivist Grammar Curriculum builds from recent substantial research, led by Myhill et al. (2012), that firmly substantiates the positive impact of direct grammar instruction *when it is taught in the context of a writing curriculum*. While this

research may shape policy-making in Great Britain, it is unlikely that its effects will reach the average classroom in the United States. Taking this research as its queue, the new Constructivist Grammar Curriculum begins to provide what no other grammar curriculum ever has been able to accomplish. It is the first grammar curriculum to provide a cohesive design for the direct and intentional teaching of grammar within the context of writing; that is authentically and thoroughly constructivist; that consistently emphasizes the meaningfulness and purpose of grammar for writers; and that is "fully theorized," theoretically-grounded, professional and enticing, and universally applicable. What does this look like? In the following section, I will highlight particular elements of the curriculum, as exemplified by the Sample Unit Plan, that set it apart from anything that has existed thus far.

First of all, the units of the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum charge the student writers with an overall purpose; all other writerly choices flow from that very sense of purpose. While many of the educational thinkers considered in the Literary Review section of this paper espouse a rhetorical approach to the study of grammar, most of them actually fail to adequately connect writerly purpose and grammatical choices because their grammar tasks do not sit within the greater context of a substantial writing project with a clear purpose. By contrast, the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum employs a combination of approaches, particularly: substantial, long-term writing projects that all students complete, and single-day Writer's Notebook activities that support that long-term writing project and offer practice with grammatical concepts (for instance, Lessons 1, 2 and 3, 5, 6, and 8 in the Sample Unit Plan). Each long-term writing project has been carefully designed to give the student writers an authentic, powerful sense of purpose.

For instance, in the long-term project exemplified in the Sample Unit Plan section of this paper, the prompt requires students to use language as precisely and as potently as possible in order to describe something of tremendous personal value to themselves and which their audience will never be able to see and experience for themselves and about which, quite possibly, they harbor some doubts. This prompt inherently sets up a natural sense of purpose for the student writer: 1. they are writing about a topic about they care deeply; 2. they are addressing a real and important audience, their peers; 3. there are stakes involved—namely that their peers may fail to grasp the value of something special to them; 4. and thus, the student writer is charged with real purpose: to use descriptive language to prove the value of a place which only can be conjured successfully in words. If this kind of project is the context in which students learn about powerful vocabulary and grammatical choices, they will hunger to learn and use them. They might not always use them correctly as soon as they have been introduced to them; however, they will want to experiment with their usage in an authentic context and to attempt to understand and hone them. If the educator fails, however, to connect grammar lessons to such a sense of greater purpose, she will find that she does not achieve these same educative results with her students.

Not only does the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum directly link writerly purpose with the study of grammatical choices in general, but all of its lessons and activities consciously explore and reinforce the many layers that comprise the construction of a piece of writing. From the most micro-level to the most macro-level, they include: word choice, part of speech, the use of descriptive detail and imagery, syntactical choices, punctuation choices, sentence construction and the variation thereof,

the flow amongst multiple sentences, the construction of logical paragraphs, the

sequencing of paragraphs, the building of an argument, the thoughtful positioning of the

author's stance towards a topic, the need to persuade and convince a readership in any

genre of writing, an intentional and powerful impact on a readership, and the

achievement of writerly purpose. All of these layers hang together cohesively; they

inform and influence one another; and, ultimately, none of them can be considered

without also considering most of the others. They are linked by necessary sinews that

hold any piece of writing together. All of them represent choices available to the

conscientious writer. All students can, and should, be made conscious of them as choices

that are available to them at all times during the writing process. While student writers

will not operate on a conscientious level at all times during the writing process, the

student writer who has been taught grammar concepts directly within the context of a

writing curriculum will be able to apply that lens to a piece of writing at will. They will

be able to navigate the layers of a piece of writing with intention when they so choose or

when a teacher instructs them to do so. And so the teacher also must use highly

intentional approaches to the teaching of grammar.

     The conscious, direct, and intentional exploration and reinforcement of these

layers, and the linkages or sinews that connect them, has been worked deeply and

thoroughly into the units of study of the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum. The

student writers will experience the connections amongst all or most of these layers in

nearly every lesson and writing-and-grammar activity in every unit of the curriculum. In

turn, the long-term writing project in each unit intentionally will provide ample

opportunity for the students to experiment with and synthesize their understandings of

these connections. The criteria for the rubrics that will be used for assessing student success in each unit also will reflect this emphasis on the inter-connectivity of these many layers of a piece of writing.

In the following paragraphs, I will use the Sample Unit of Study to offer examples of this inter-connectivity as reflected in lessons, activities, long-term project, and corresponding rubric. In **Lesson 1**, the teacher offers a complete piece of writing as the first model text for the assignment. The use of a complete piece means that the students will experience a closed system of logic and the author's structural and organizational choices that create that system of logic. It means that students clearly experience the more macro-level layers of a piece of writing: the author's purpose, the full potential of the piece to impact a readership powerfully, the author's stance towards a topic, the author's capability to persuade an audience, and the author's gradual building of an argument over the course of a while piece. If they experience these layers clearly and fully, then they will be able to connect these layers to the grammatical choices that the author has made. Only then will the student be able to understand the true rhetorical power and pragmatic uses of grammar. Without the complete context of a full piece of writing, the students will not fully understand this essential connection. For this reason, I firmly argue against the use of single sentences quoted from texts that the students have not read, as well as excerpted passages from longer works. While in certain circumstances a teacher may be able to use excerpts or pull-quotes from longer works that the students *have* read, I warn against the use of such texts as the first model for a long-term project. The first model in itself should be a direct response to the same prompt that the students will be using. Of course, the more unique the prompt, the more

likely it will be that the teacher will need to create a model for this purpose, rather than being able to use a pre-existing one. As I recognize the time constraints that teachers experience every day, I have provided such a model that can be used universally. That being said, if the instructor uses her own model, she will seize an opportunity to bond with her students: they will learn more deeply about her, and they also will see that she, too, is a writer.

All excellent model texts are constructivist environments. That is, the educator must select the model text with the utmost care; then, she must invite the students to explore it and, with her guidance, draw conclusions and understandings from it. Lecturing is a way for teacher's to exercise complete control *during* the learning experience. Learners (of any age) do not tend to engage well with a learning experience that involves a complete absence of choice and control for themselves; that is, I take the view that, in most scenarios, the repeated and extensive use of lecture is equivalent to a failure to educate. As an alternative, I advocate strongly for a constructivist approach to learning in general and certainly for the implementation of this curriculum. For approximately a century, misguided critics of the constructivist approach in the United States have argued that the approach is too loose and does not involve enough structure and intention. What they fail to see is the extensive, careful work that the constructivist educator has done *before the children have entered the room*. That is, she has thoughtfully prepared the environment; *that* is one of the most important ways that the constructivist educator exercises control over the students' learning experiences. It is a way for the educator to exercise control without turning off the students to learning. Typically, when we describe the constructivist teacher's carefully "prepared

environment," we are referring to the *physical* environment of the classroom—especially in the lower elementary grades and including but not limited to Montessori classrooms. While even older elementary students often benefit from an engaging physical learning environment, I also argue that, because they are developmentally thinking on more abstract levels, they actually can be asked to treat two-dimensional texts—such as pieces of writing, photographs, paintings, film, advertisements, etc.—as constructivist learning environments. That is, they can be invited into the worlds of these texts in order to explore, experiment, and lead the construction of their own understandings. As such, the constructivist educator who teaches grammar directly and intentionally within the context of a writing curriculum must treat model texts as carefully prepared learning environments. The careful and intentional selection of such models is paramount. The decision to use complete texts is essential. And the educator also must be highly versed in that text and prepared to use excellent questions to guide the students to construct understandings that ultimately meet the learning objectives of the lessons and unit.

One of the most important learning objectives for any writing-and-grammar unit will be for the students to grasp the inter-connectivity amongst the many layers of a piece of writing, from the micro-level to the macro-level. During the discussion that follows from the reading of a model text, the teacher's guiding questions will be essential tools to assist the students in developing those understandings. Indeed, whether the instructor uses our guiding questions provided in the unit plans or creates her own, they must target that objective—they must help the students to see the sinews that hold a piece together, from grammatical choice all the way through to the author's purpose. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the guiding questions recommended for **Lesson 1** in the Sample

Unit Plan. These questions serve a dual purpose: to prepare students for the assignment that they will be completing—for instance, to stimulate brainstorming and to illuminate the expectations for the piece—and also, in a fairly informal way, begin to draw students' thinking towards noticing the layers of a piece of writing: from the more micro-levels of craft ("Tell us a part that made a picture in your mind." and "What kind of writer is this? How would you describe his style.") to the more macro-levels of impact ("Would you like to go to this place?") and the link between them ("What does the author say that makes you want to go there?" and "How does the author say it?").

Lessons 2 and 3 of the Sample Unit Plan introduce greater tension and drive into the development of the students' sense of authorial purpose. The lessons and activities around the poem "Between walls," by William Carlos Williams, require the students to contemplate places that might be considered ugly by many people but which actually hold exquisite beauty for the author. They encourage the students to consider selecting such a place as the topic of their own "Small Moment" piece (the long-term writing project for this unit), which would have the dual effect of steering the students away from cliché topics and also ratcheting up the stakes for reaching their audience and achieving authorial purpose. If they choose such an untraditional place, they must be exceedingly effective in persuading their readers of its value. Here, of course, authorial purpose connects directly with the more micro-level layers of the piece, including word choice and part of speech: with increasingly specific, descriptive word choices in all the right places comes a more exact capture of the place, and with a more exact capture of the place comes greater persuasiveness, a more powerful impact on the reader, and higher chances of successfully achieving the purpose of writing. Therefore, these lessons also

simultaneously elevate the importance of using highly specific, descriptive word choices and honing a careful attention to part of speech in order to capture a particular subject. They ask students to dissect, examine, and imitate William Carlos Williams' word choices in "Between walls." Here, once again, this poem offers a short but *complete* model text, and it serves as a constructivist learning environment, in which students explore a carefully selected two-dimensional environment and, with the assistance of the teacher's thoughtful, prepared questions, construct their own learnings from it. The instructor's guiding questions must lead the students to focus on the word choices that create images in the mind, that feel particularly specific, and on the part of speech of these words. She must lead them to understand that Williams chooses highly descriptive nouns and verbs just as often as he chooses descriptive adjectives. She also must lead them to see the connection between word choice and selection of topic: the topic will inform the register of words that the author will choose. An alley behind a hospital, for instance, necessitates a gritty register of words, but Williams makes this grit beautiful. The students will be encouraged to do the same in their own poems inspired by "Between walls" and also possibly in their "Small Moment" piece.

Lessons 4, 5, and 6 explore the uses of semi-colons, and at every stage of these explorations, students learn about semi-colons as they relate to other layers of the written piece. Using model texts as constructivist learning environments once again, the students develop an essential understanding that semi-colons do not have one or even a few uses, but rather that they can be used as an exceptionally flexible, nuanced tool by an author. A traditional grammar curriculum that pivots on the memorization of "grammar rules" will cause students to come away with the impression that semi-colons are a static entity

and that they can only be used in a few codified ways: for instance, to separate two independent clauses, to introduce dialogue, etc. However, these traditional curricula never will pick up on more rhetorical, pragmatic, and stylistic uses of the semi-colon that can have tremendous impact on a reader. Elementary students, when invited to explore a carefully chosen model text, immediately will begin to identify these more rhetorical uses, and the punctuation mark will resonate with them meaningfully, in a lasting way. For example, they will notice that often the first independent clause preceding a semi-colon will set up a question or mystery in the reader's mind, and the second independent clause following the semi-colon will answer it and satisfy the reader's curiosity. That is, it is a tool to create an instant of suspense and, thus, engagement for the reader. The suspense pivots on the punctuation mark. It is precisely this kind of understanding—the understanding of the rhetorical, pragmatic uses of punctuation and the corresponding sentence structures—that is highly useful to the effective writer. It is precisely the kind of understanding that the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum provides. By contrast, the traditional grammar curriculum will never share such an understanding with students— because the traditional grammar classroom trains memorizers of facts and not writers. By taking such a rhetorical, pragmatic, and nuanced approach to the study of semi-colons, the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum empowers students to explore the connection between powerful punctuation and sentence structure choices and the powerful impact of their writing on a readership—and, by extension, the achievement of their writerly purpose.

It should be noted that, as I created the lessons on semi-colons, I took some inspiration from the work of Anderson and Weaver in one particular area: the invitation

for students to collect examples of semi-colons from their own readings. Because

elementary students should be given time to read their own independent books each day,

they will live quite deeply in the worlds of their favored books throughout the year. I

view these story worlds as a particularly powerful context in which the students can learn

about grammar concepts: since the students typically choose their own independent

reading books, they tend to develop a particular love for the authors of these books. They

will be even more likely to consider these authors as artists who make unique and even

idiosyncratic choices. Once students have been asked to collect examples of a particular

grammatical concept in their books, they begin to view their favored authors through the

lens of that grammar choice. They will develop an understanding, for instance, that

Christopher Paul Curtis tends to use semi-colons to structure the set-up and punchline of

a joke. As the students experience how their favored authors use this writerly tool, they

share their findings, which the instructor aggregates in a central location. The

aggregation of collected examples should be organized into categories based upon usage;

the students can help to fashion these categories—it is part of the constructivist learning

experience. Eventually, students begin to see the many nuanced uses of semi-colons, as

well as the fact that different authors use that tool differently—and that they may do so,

too, in their own writing. Of course, while each sentence will be potently contextualized

for the individual who collected it, it will not be similarly contextualized for her

classmates. However, in a classroom that truly fosters a literary community, students

discuss, share, and recommend their books with one another; they know each other's

favorite authors and what makes them so enjoyable to read; and often they lend books to

one another and discuss them throughout the reading process, or even form informal book

groups around the same book. In this sense, these sentences do exist in context for all of the students; by contrast, when Jeff Anderson pulls quotes from a book that he is reading at home, which the students have neither read nor heard of, the possibility for context does not exist. Although he is showing the students that he lives the life of a reader, which is a powerful message to send, these quote exist entirely outside of the realm of meaning and relevance for the students.

Lessons 4, 5, and 6 also forge clear links between the use of semi-colons, the sentence constructions which accompany them, and the use of descriptive language. Through their ongoing collecting and categorization work, the students will come to realize that an important use of the semi-colon, and the accompanying sentence constructions, is to allow the author to extend and deepen her use of descriptive language. Even in the discussions of the initial model for this unit, in **Lesson 1**, students will be guided to notice and analyze examples of this particular usage of semi-colons in sentences like the following: "Sometimes a trail of sunshine lead across the water; it seemed to point directly at me, as if the sun had chosen me." Often, as in the prior example, the clause that follows a semi-colon telescopes more deeply into a description that the author began in the clause that precedes the semi-colon. In this way, the semi-colon can serve as an enabler of increasingly descriptive language. For students who tend to pour description onto the page, these sentence constructions can serve as a legible container for their words, so that they more frequently avoid the creation of run-on sentences and thus the risk of losing their reader. For students who tend to struggle with descriptive language, the use of semi-colon can spur their use of descriptive language;

often, it asks for the author to describe in further detail some element of the topic described in the initial clause of the sentence.

In a very similar fashion, the semi-colon can be used to extend and deepen an argument. While this use for the semi-colon might be more obviously relevant in a traditional persuasive essay, rather than a "Small Moment" piece, I firmly argue that all writing, of every genre, should involve persuasiveness. If the author knows her purpose, which she must, and she knows her audience, which she must, then she also must seek to persuade that audience to her purpose. The argument of "Between walls," for instance, is that even the alley behind a hospital can be beautiful. I believe that persuasive writing should be taught as a strand within every genre of writing, including poetry, and that "persuasive writing" should be defined more broadly than it has been in the past and certainly more broadly than it is being defined currently in the Common Core Standards, as its own discrete form of writing. Often, older elementary students will benefit from being pushed to deepen their arguments in any kind of thesis statement in any sort of essay, including creative and literary ones. In an initial draft, a student may write: "A major theme in this novel is friendship." An instructor can push a student to deepen this basic argument in a number of ways; encouraging them to use a semi-colon can be a powerful one. This thesis statement then can become: "A major theme in this novel is friendship; as the main character moves from Vietnam to Alabama, she has to gain acceptance in this unfamiliar culture and form new friendships." Suddenly, the statement evolves from a statement so vague as to be nearly meaningless to giving the reader a nuanced idea of the book being analyzed. In a more creative work, such as the "Small Moment" piece, this usage of a semi-colon might feel more subtle and nuanced, but

nonetheless will be equally effective. For instance, in the initial model text, students will

have encountered the following part of the author's argument that the bow of the sailboat

is his very own special place to sit: "My parents scarcely ever sat there; I suppose they

were too busy comparing the rust-stained charts and the tiny, metal needle of the compass

with the actual sea around us." The first clause of the sentence would be quite flat and

vague without the extension that occurs after the semi-colon. It is this extension that

positions the reader in a place of being able to understand the author's intended meaning.

The highest purpose of any piece of writing, in any genre, is to get the reader to

understand. The act of getting the reader to *understand* means that the author has taken a

stance or position on a topic that requires understanding—which, in turn, means that

there is an argument to be made. And a writer only has the tools of language—including

word choice, syntax, punctuation, etc.—to achieve it, so she must use them powerfully

and conscientiously.

In **Lessons 7, 8, and 9**, students explore this exact concept more deeply. In *When*

I Was Young in the Mountains, Cynthia Rylant works to get her readership to understand

the value of life in the mountains of West Virginia. To achieve this purpose, she must

use particular sentence structures, punctuation, and descriptive word choices in order to

deliver this argument successfully. For example, students will come to understand that

the repeating sentence structure in *When I Was Young in the Mountains*—an introductory

dependent clause beginning with the word "when"—can be used as a highly effective

vehicle for *explanation*. Or, in other words, when an author wants to speak from a place

of authority on a topic to an audience previously uninitiated to it, this sentence structure

can be highly useful. It is as though Rylant wishes to say, "Let me explain to you all of

the reasons that life in West Virginia is special." To use this sentence structure in this way also tends to open the way for descriptive language. The dependent clause sets up the expectation that explanation will occur; the explanation that follows the comma should take the form of highly detailed, vivid description because it will convey the explanation in the most specific, and thus most effective and potent, fashion. For instance, Rylant begins the book with the following: "When I was young in the mountains, Grandfather came home in the evening covered with the black dust of a coal mine." The independent clause in this sentence creates vivid imagery in the readerly mind, and as such, it achieves a powerful capture of what it means to live in this particular place in a few, deft words. In just the first sentence of the book, Rylant forwards her purpose powerfully. As the instructor guides students to notice this descriptive language and its connection with the sentence structure, she also will be illuminating the crucial connection between descriptive language and the persuasive achievement of authorial purpose. While in the first sentence of Rylant's book the students experience a highly specific description that transports them to a place that likely will be unfamiliar to them, many of her other sentences forward her purpose even more powerfully by revealing the humble beauty of the place. It becomes clear that, although it is not luxurious in the least, the mountains of West Virginia hold a particular beauty— perhaps even *because* it is not luxurious. For instance, that the local shop-keepers always "smell like sweet butter" captures some of the romance of this place, while other parts of the story ground Rylant's experience in quite humble places, including outhouses and muddy swimming holes filled with snakes. All of these descriptive passages serve to create a nuanced argument for the specialness of the place, and all of them are generated

from a position of explanation and a drive for readerly understanding. Through this study of a single sentence construction, then, students will be exploring the connection between sentence structure, authorial stance, authorial purpose, persuasiveness, and descriptive language, all at once. These layers *should be* studied all at once—because they inextricably inform one another and cannot be parsed or divorced from each other.

Texts like *When I Was Young in the Mountains* and *Living Aboard* provide ideal models for multiple reasons. First of all, picture books often serve well as models because they offer a complete, closed text while also tending to be a length that students can digest and analyze without becoming overwhelmed. Secondly, the authors of both texts speak from a position that requires a strong persuasive argument. In writing *Living Aboard*, I knew that I must use descriptive language and sentence structure to capture a lifestyle (living on a sailboat) that my readership very likely has never experienced. Rylant, for her part, must persuade her readership to understand the value of a place that, traditionally, is underappreciated or even looked down upon. Indeed, **Lessons 7, 8, and 9** make a point of guiding the students to notice the socio-economic class of the characters in *When I Was Young in the Mountains* and the final passage of the book in which Rylant contrasts the mountains of West Virginia with other places that might seem more special or potentially luxurious. Ultimately, Rylant is battling against classicism and a tendency to look down upon or pity rural communities, especially in West Virginia. The students can—and should—be guided to understand this more abstract layer of Rylant's purpose and argument, as well as its connections to the word choices that she uses and the images that they conjure. In the case of both models (*Living Aboard* and *When I Was Young in the Mountains*), the students experience a mirror to the kind of

position that the prompt for the "Small Moment" piece and the activities with "Between walls" encourage them to take: that is to say, a challenging one, one that requires hustle in the form of descriptive language, that involves high stakes to achieve readerly understanding.

Recommendations for Further Work

The work of this Constructivist Grammar Curriculum is not yet complete. In terms of the actual curricular materials, only one unit—called the Sample Unit Plan for the purposes of this thesis—has been developed fully. This unit, in which students ultimately create a "Small Moment" piece, represents only one of several units intended to be designed for the Fourth grade age group. In addition to the rest of the Fourth grade portion of the curriculum, it is intended that this Constructivist Grammar Curriculum will include similar, year-long curricula for the Third and Fifth grade age groups. Taken as a whole, the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum will offer a cohesive scope and sequence for Third through Fifth grades, in which the students' grammar studies, within the context of a writing curriculum, build upon one another over the course of these three upper-elementary years. Although it is possible to imagine an expansion into the lower elementary grades, I have chosen to draw the line at Third grade because the processes of learning grammar and of learning to write are much more foundational, and therefore may require a different pedagogical approach, in the younger years. It may be more sensible to expand this curricular approach into older age groups; in fact, much of Jeff Anderson's work, for instance, focuses on middle and high school students. However, in a fashion similar to other commercially developed curricular materials, particularly in the

world of math education, it seems prudent, manageable, and perhaps more commercially

viable to begin with a few related grade levels and then build upon that success in new

directions.

What will the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum for Third through Fifth grade

look like? It will be universally applicable and reproducible in classrooms across the

United States. It will be easy to use in content and in format. It will provide an essential

tool on a daily basis to teachers of all experience and skill levels—new and developing

teachers will be able to use the curricular materials in a more scripted fashion, while more

veteran or comfortable teachers of writing and grammar will be able to use it as a

foundation to ground and inspire their own ideas for lessons and projects. It will provide

detailed instructions for writing projects that lend themselves well to the empowerment

and growth of student writers, as well as to the contextualization of the grammatical

concepts that will matter the most to them as writers in the older elementary grades. It

should be stated explicitly that, while experienced teachers may supplement this

curriculum, the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum does indeed provide all of the

curricular materials that educators need in order to successfully teach grammar in the

context of a writing curriculum in these grade levels.

Weaver and Anderson both advocate for teaching grammar concepts "an inch

wide and a mile deep." I agree with their rallying cry against "coverage"—that is, simply

covering grammatical concepts rapidly in an attempt to "get through" all of the

grammatical concepts that could be appropriate to teach older elementary students. The

latter approach results in very little learning, nor does it result in an improvement in

student writing. The phrase "an inch wide and a mile deep," of course, exaggerates in

order to make a point. I actually believe that quite a few grammatical concepts can be explored deeply and meaningfully over the course of a year-long grammar-in-the-context-of-writing curriculum. The Constructivist Grammar Curriculum will reflect the belief that all grammatical concepts must be explored deeply, as well as a commitment to exploring a significant quantity of concepts in a given year—and certainly over the course of three years. It must be emphasized that, as Anderson and Weaver themselves caution, students cannot be expected to have mastered the grammatical concepts after a single study of them, nor can they be expected to apply those concepts perfectly and independently to their own writing after a single study. Even within the three year-long curricula of the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum, many of the grammar concepts will be explored in a recursive fashion, albeit with an increased degree of complexity appropriate to the development of the children through the years. These concepts likely—indeed, hopefully—will be revisited in the grade levels that follow Fifth grade. However, students will understand the grammatical concepts deeply; they will understand their purposes, uses, and benefits on an intellectual level; they will be able to identify and analyze their usage by excellent authors; and they will have developed the passion and confidence needed in order to experiment with grammatical concepts, to take risks with them, in order to produce writing of clarity, nuance, sophistication, and by extension, interest to and influence on a readership.

As the rest of the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum enters development, it will be essential that it remains sensitive to and parallels the research that finally has begun to be conducted on the educative value of teaching grammar directly within the context of a writing curriculum. Myhill's extensive study (2012) represents only the beginning of the

research that needs to be conducted in this area. That study certainly affirms, in a factual way, the philosophical belief that this approach to grammar teaching can impact many children positively. However, much remains to be explored, including the potential for a positive impact on students who already struggle as writers. Myhill's study (2012) found that this approach clearly improves student writing when the students already exhibit some strength as writers. It also found, however, that it did not result in notable differences in learning for students who struggle as writers. As Myhill herself points out, this single study cannot offer the definitive conclusion on this question; myriad factors could account for this particular result in the study, and further research is needed. Myhill and team already have won grants to conduct research on this question. Whatever the results of these research efforts, they must be considered and incorporated into the direction that the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum takes. In addition, there remains a complete dearth of research on the impact of teaching grammar directly in the context of writing curricula in the United States. Much of the research conducted by Myhill and team has been funded and designed specifically to shape British educational policy. I believe that it will be important for researchers in the United States to focus on this area. In sum, I believe that thinker-educators like Weaver and Anderson have laid the philosophical groundwork for an important revolution in the teaching of language. However, neither of them have conducted actual research, nor have they been able to use the research of others, as it did not exist whatsoever as of the time of their writing. Now, finally, research has begun to be conducted by Myhill and team. However, Myhill does not appear to be in the business of developing curriculum based upon that research, and Anderson and Weaver, for their parts, only have been able to offer homespun, partially

theorized ideas for lessons and activities that come nowhere close to a complete, effective, universally applicable, and broadly marketable curriculum. The Constructivist Grammar Curriculum seeks to provide the curricular materials that continue to be missing from the world of writing and grammar instruction and to base itself upon the research that exists.

There is a single, crucial element that neither this thesis, nor the Constructivist Grammar Curriculum, can offer in a comprehensive, ongoing manner: a commitment to excellent training for teachers in constructivist approaches to the teaching of grammar. While scholar-educators have been divided—indeed, usually sharply along the binary rift between traditional grammar education and no grammar education—on the issue of teaching grammar for decades, nearly all of them mention the dire need for teacher training in this subject area. Even as long ago as the Dartmouth Conference, and in spite of the uncertainty of that time, scholar-educators have advocated for linguistic education for teachers. Indeed, Marckwardt, in his summary of the Conference proceedings, phrases this point in no uncertain terms: "Nothing short of a proper professional training in linguistics will suffice" (1968, p. 74). In other words, while they do not necessarily advocate for the teaching of linguistic concepts and terminology to students, it is clear that educators will benefit from such a body of knowledge themselves. As ever, teachers must know considerably more than their students about a given subject, even as they learn alongside them.

Indeed, many decades later, the team of scholar-researchers from the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom describe the overwhelming lack of confidence that many teachers feel about their own grammar content knowledge. In some cases, this lack

of confidence may contribute to an avoidance of teaching the subject. As Debra Myhill of the Exeter team states in an interview with *The Times Literary Supplement*, "'Everywhere you go, grammar has a bit of a tendency to strike fear into the hearts of teachers…These are very, very good teachers. But there's a gap, because curriculum expectations change, and their own education didn't prepare them for it'" (Bloom, 2012). Later in the same interview, she elaborates: "'In grammar, teachers can feel they're being constantly caught out, because there's a right or wrong answer. That's intimidating. They can feel as if they're being exposed'" (Bloom, 2012). In addition to developing content knowledge, Language Arts teachers also must receive training in the pedagogical approaches to the teaching of grammar. While they might master a body of knowledge about linguistics, replete with the correct terminology, it would be a grave mistake for teachers then to attempt simply to transfer this content knowledge to their students. Rather, teachers must receive training in the constructivist teaching of grammar within the context of a writing curriculum. They must be provided, by their teacher training programs, with the values, pedagogical understanding, and curricular resources to teach their students successfully.

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