

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF GRAMMAR

A CASE STUDY OF AN EARLY-CAREER SECONDARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER

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This article reports a study of coauthor Laura Wright as she learned to teach secondary school grammar in four settings: university teacher education program, student teaching, her first job, and second job. Data for her university program came from Laura's journals and projects from her course work. Data from student teaching and her first job included interviews and field notes from observations and interviews and self-reports by Laura of teaching conducted on other occasions. Information from her second job came from self-reports by Laura. The data were analyzed using a system that identified the pedagogical tools Laura employed and the attributions she made for learning how to use them. The data suggest that Laura sought to teach in ways that students found engaging, meaningful, enjoyable, and relevant. How she was able to make grammar instruction fit this goal varied according to the setting in which her instruction took place.

Keywords: *concept development; grammar; student engagement; teacher education*

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I don't think [a teacher I observed] really looked to see if the kids were interested in what they were doing or not. . . . They were bored. I felt like I was watching the scene out of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* [Hughes, 1986] when the history teacher is lecturing, and all of the students are in a dead stare, sleeping, or writing notes. The class did not care.

This entry is taken from the journal of case study teacher and coauthor Laura Wright, who wrote it in relation to a practicum prior to student teaching. Her observation voices the dilemma that drives our analysis of her early-career efforts to develop a conception to inform her teaching: how to engage students with the high school English curriculum, particularly the "language" strand most commonly taught as formal grammar. Laura's account of this class reveals the conundrum that many early-career teachers face as they address aspects of the curriculum that have historically proven to be difficult to teach.

Observers of schools have long noted the lack of affect that characterizes most students' experiences in most of their classroom studies. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) argued that

Schools apply methods of mass production and industrial efficiency to the socialization of youth. They try to change attentional structures—goals, habits, cognitive skills—by coercing youth to attend to standardized, sequential information. The curriculum is an assembly line that pushes ideas and activities in front of the student at a fixed rate, ready or not. What is manufactured, however, is a great deal of internal discomfort. (pp. 256-257)

Goodlad (1984) concurred with this characterization of school, finding that "the emotional tone [in classrooms] is neither harsh and punitive nor warm and joyful; it might be described most accurately as flat" (p. 108). In the current study we investigate Laura's effort to teach a strand of the English/language arts curriculum that Weaver (1996) and others have found students consistently experience as drudgery: language, usually interpreted as instruction in English grammar. As Weaver noted, grammar instruction typically comprises the sort of seatwork that Goodlad found pervasive in classrooms: "listening, reading textbooks, completing workbooks and worksheets, and taking quizzes" with "a paucity of activities requiring problem solving,

the achievement of group goals, students' planning and executing a project, and the like" (p. 213). These latter, less frequently occurring activities presumably would result in student engagement, a condition that has received considerable attention from observers and practitioners interested in English/language arts instruction.

We study Laura's teaching in relation to the following question: In the four primary settings of her learning to teach—her university course work and practica, her student teaching, her first job, and her second job—how did Laura endeavor to teach grammar and usage as part of her broader goal to teach in ways that were engaging; that is, in ways that her students found enjoyable, interesting, and relevant?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To frame our investigation, we review literature in two areas: students' engagement with the school curriculum and the teaching and learning of English grammar.

Engagement

Various conceptions of *engagement* have focused on factors ranging from the learner's internal disposition to the setting of learning. Taking an individualistic perspective, Helm and Gronlund (2000) were interested in learners' skills and dispositions to acquire information, suggesting that engagement is something that individual students develop as they work toward meeting educational standards. Wilhelm (1997) focused on the individual student's use of "strategies to enter and involve herself intensely in worlds of meaning" (p. 144), helping to build confidence and competence with literary reading and thus contributing to engagement.

Others take a more social view of educational engagement. To Lensmire (1994), the instructional practices through which students become engaged have a strong interpersonal dimension, requiring "the participation of *all* children in the community's important activities" (p. 147) so that each has a voice, contributes to the classroom, and is heard by others. In this sense, engagement follows from the relational frameworks

(Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 2000) that students establish with their teachers and among themselves. Smagorinsky and O'Donnell-Allen (1998) argued further that such engagement cannot be disconnected from students' broader and more extended experiences with school, asserting that learners' relationships with texts must be viewed in terms of the vast web of experiences over time, in and outside school, that they bring to particular classroom episodes.

From this sociocultural perspective (e.g., Cole, 1996; Vygotsky, 1987), the challenge for a teacher is to create settings and activities that students find engaging and that advance their proficiency in abilities that they find useful. Such instruction helps learners find the curriculum comprehensible and stimulating, is inclusive and promotes a supportive classroom environment, and takes into account the possibility that students may have had years of numbing educational experiences that cannot simply or easily be overcome. The qualities of such instruction have been described by a host of educators. Nystrand (1997), for instance, promoted the idea that the questions teachers pose to students should be authentic—that is, open ended and amenable to multiple plausible responses—in contrast to the recitation scripts that involve the reproduction, but not reconstruction, of knowledge.

Although engagement is of great interest to many who work in Dewey's progressive tradition, it is not endorsed as a central educational goal by all. Indeed, for those to whom Dewey is a threat to educational quality (e.g., Hirsch, 1987; the Human Events National Conservative Weekly, 2005; and many more), educational engagement suggests frivolity more than learning. Sykes (1995), for instance, argued that when students' noses are removed from the educational grindstone by such methods as whole-language approaches to reading, students not only suffer academically but also are likely to become deficient in character because their reading experiences have been predicated on interest and enjoyment, rather than the utilitarian labor of learning phonics. Such attitudes, although rare in colleges of education, are common among K-12 practitioners and no doubt contribute to the

sorts of drab and dispiriting environments found by Goodlad (1984) and Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) and resisted by Laura in her early efforts at teaching.

Grammar Instruction

Similar to phonics, grammar instruction has often been questioned as an effective—and surely as an engaging—approach to teaching students fluency with their spoken and written language. Hillocks (1986), Weaver (1996), and others who have reviewed research on grammar instruction found that there is a strong consensus from more than a century of empirical studies: Traditional grammar instruction—that which isolates the teaching of grammar from language usage—is, at best, simply ineffective in changing students' language use.

More extraordinarily, Graham and Perrin (in press) found that, of all teaching methods available to teachers of writing, traditional grammar instruction is the only one that has a negative impact on students' writing, and to a compellingly significant degree. These findings have raised the question for many educators: If grammar instruction doesn't work as widely practiced, why is it such a staple of the English curriculum?

No one has yet provided a satisfactory, empirically documented answer to this question. In studying a different, equally reviled warhorse of the English curriculum—the five-paragraph theme—Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thompson, and Fry (2003) identified six reasons for its persistence in the face of near-universal vituperation among composition theorists: teachers' enculturation to the traditions of schooling through their apprenticeships of observation (Lortie, 1975); the limitations of teacher education programs, which emphasize the teaching of literature to the neglect of writing and language; shortcomings of teachers, who employ methods such as disembodied grammar instruction in spite of students' annual inability to learn it; poor work conditions (too many students, too little planning time, etc.) that limit teachers' ability to teach in more adventuresome ways; institutional pressures such as testing mandates; and the five-paragraph

theme's potential as a useful genre to learn and reapply to new situations.

Of these explanations, those related to the environment of teaching—particularly, poor work conditions and institutional pressures—help to explain the dogged perseverance of traditional grammar instruction in most U.S. schools. Johnson et al. (2003) rejected the idea that teachers' shortcomings account for their instruction in five-paragraph themes, arguing instead that institutional pressures and poor work conditions often make it difficult for teachers to break out of traditional patterns or find time for alternative methods. Other explanations have their correlates—for example, the staffroom wisdom that grammar instruction is foundational and a prerequisite to effective speaking and writing, which roughly corresponds to the belief that learning to write five-paragraph themes provides students with useful, transferable genre knowledge. We imagine that teachers' own apprenticeships of observation contribute to their use of traditional grammar instruction, given that they appear to be exposed to very few alternatives; and if teacher education programs do not address language instruction, particularly in identifying alternatives to methods consistently found by research to be ineffective, then they could further handicap teachers in their efforts to teach the language strand of the curriculum effectively.

To these factors, we would add the problem that there is widespread disagreement on the purposes of language instruction. Teachers may agree with Safire (1984), who argued for a pristine version of the English language such as his own; or with Delpit (1995), who maintained that although language variation is inevitable, students must learn the codes of power that give them access to the benefits of the economy; or with Smitherman (2006), who found the notion of standard English to be discriminatory; or with Noguchi (1991), who believed that errors carry different degrees of status for their users, and that the trick to language instruction is to eliminate errors that well-educated readers find most egregious (e.g., subject-verb disagreement); or with Shaughnessy (1977), who believed that deviations from textbook English are developmental and suggest that writers are

taking risks; or with Hymes (1974), who argued that all language use is situational and that the key for speakers is to develop communicative competence; or with others who have opined on the topic in many and varied ways. The lack of consensus on what should constitute language instruction, and the absence of teaching methods that effectively teach the English language no matter how construed, leave the grammar textbook as the default means of addressing the language strand of the English curriculum.

Laura was not a neat fit for most of these explanations. She positioned herself against the drab experiences she'd had as a student; she took a Theory of English Grammar course during her teacher education program; she was a top student at her state's most selective public university; and she did not regard traditional grammar instruction as useful. She did, however, work in a variety of institutional contexts with particular work conditions and imperatives. We look, then, to these settings to help account for her developing a notion of how to teach grammar.

METHOD

Participant

Laura was a traditional college student, that is, one scheduled to graduate from college within 4 years of graduating from high school—an unusual accomplishment at her university, where the average undergraduate student was age 28 years and took 7 years to complete a bachelor's degree. She had grown up in a small rural town in the southwestern United States about 15 miles from the city in which she attended college. Her home town was populated by about 5,000 people at the time of Laura's high school graduation, 88% of whom were White and 8% Native American. Her 4-year high school enrolled about 350 students. Immediately following graduation, she got married and followed her husband's job to a city in her home state several hours from campus.

Throughout the interviews and journals we studied, Laura stated that her classes needed to be interesting for her students. Mary Ford (a

pseudonym, as are all names of people and places besides Laura), Laura's cooperating teacher during student teaching, wrote that Laura

easily built rapport with the students, and they enjoyed having her as their teacher. . . . Laura is very creative and adept at planning lessons that are concrete yet challenging for the regular students. . . . Laura's teaching was naturally fun and creative, but more importantly, she found ways to help kids use their higher order thinking skills. Another thing she excelled at was helping kids understand why they were learning what they were learning and its importance in their lives, especially with teaching grammar.

Mary herself emphasized "H.O.T." instruction, her acronym for higher order thinking skills, and encouraged Laura to do the same. We infer that Mary saw engaged instruction as a vehicle for promoting higher order thinking, while Laura saw higher order thinking as a by-product of engaged learning. We argue that, as conventionally taught, grammar instruction involves little higher order thinking because it works primarily at the level of labeling parts of sentences written by someone else—the nameless and faceless authors of sentences found in grammar books. Although our data do not enable us to make claims about the level of order at which students thought in relation to her instruction, we believe that we can identify a relation between Laura's stated goals concerning students' learning, the teaching methods she practiced, and the degree of engagement that we identified in her students through our observations of her classroom.

Data Collection

Artifacts from course work. Laura was very systematic in terms of saving her notebooks, papers, syllabi, and other work produced for her teacher education courses, and provided them for the current study. Furthermore, the current study's first author was her instructor for her teaching methods and Theory of English Grammar classes and was able to provide first-hand information on the content and process of those courses.

Observation cycles. Laura provided an interview before her student teaching and her first year of full-time teaching. The first of these gateway interviews was designed to elicit background information about her experiences and conceptions of teaching; the second was designed to gather from Laura an account of her teaching situation and the sorts of orientation or mentoring her district provided for her at the outset of her career.

During her semester of student teaching, Laura was observed and interviewed by the fourth author in what we called *observation cycles*. Each observation cycle ideally consisted of a preobservation interview, an observation of at least two classes that produced field notes, and a postobservation interview; scheduling conflicts produced some gaps in the data (see Table 1 for a timeline that details the data collection). The preobservation interview was designed to obtain information about Laura's experiences leading up to and her plans for the upcoming observation, with particular attention to understanding the pedagogical tools she employed and the source to which she attributed her understanding of how to use those tools. The postobservation interview's purpose was to verify what the researcher had observed and extend the line of questioning initiated in the preobservation interview. Interviews were also conducted with Laura's mentor teacher and university supervisor about the guidance they were providing for Laura.

The observations and interviews for Laura's first year of full-time teaching proceeded according to a similar design, with the first and fifth authors collecting the data. Our ability to conduct sustained observations was compromised by the great distance between campus and the community in which Laura taught, which was roughly a 3-hour drive from the university base and required an overnight stay in a community hotel to complete the observations and interviews. We scheduled a total of three observations at this site, each accompanied by interviews. Although we were not able to interview the colleague assigned to be Laura's mentor in her first year of teaching because of the limitations of our visits, we were able to consult the evaluations that she wrote of Laura's teaching.

TABLE 1 Data Collection Timetable

Year	Gateway Interview	Observation Cycle 1 Preobservation Interview	Observation Cycle 1 Classroom Observations	Observation Cycle 1 Postobservation Interview	Observation Cycle 2 Preobservation Interview	Interview With University Supervisor
1	June 7	Sept. 25	Sept. 25, 26, 27		Nov. 6	Nov. 6
2	October 5	Oct. 28	Oct. 28	Oct. 29	Dec. 9	
	Observation Cycle 2 Classroom Observations	Observation Cycle 2 Postobservation Interview	Observation Cycle 3 Preobservation Interview	Interview With Cooperating Teacher	Observation Cycle 3 Classroom Observations	Observation Cycle 3 Postobservation Interview
1	Nov. 6, 7, 8	Nov. 8	Dec. 10	Dec. 10	Dec. 10, 11	Dec. 11
2	Dec. 9				April 28	April 28

We remained in touch with Laura, even though the entire site-based research team relocated to new universities within a few years of the initial data collection. Through e-mail correspondence (but not observations, which were not possible given the broad national dispersal of the research team), we followed Laura’s instruction as she taught at a second school in a community to which her husband’s career took them.

Data Analysis

The data from Laura’s student teaching and first year of full-time teaching were collaboratively read and analyzed by the first and third authors. Rather than employing the reliability procedures of clinical psychology (i.e., coding the data separately and then comparing the codes to determine the consistency of the application of the scheme), we discussed the data as we coded and reached consensus through discussion of the case and each codable segment of data.

The interviews and field notes were analyzed to identify the pedagogical tools that Laura employed in her teaching. We use the term *tool* in the manner of Vygotsky (1978, 1987; cf. Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). A *tool* in this conception is any implement through which people act on their environments. Pedagogical tools thus include any means through which a teacher attempts to produce

changes in students—primarily in terms of their learning but also in terms of their behavior. A tool might be a concrete, practical object such as a worksheet or a kind of activity such as small-group work. It can also be conceptual, such as the principles, frameworks, and ideas about teaching, learning, and English/language arts acquisition that teachers use as heuristics to guide decisions about teaching and learning. These mediators might include a theory of or approach to teaching such as engaged learning, which itself could include practical tools such as particular kinds of learning activities, for example, having students teach one another grammatical concepts.

Each tool was coded in each of the following two categories:

- name of tool used in Laura’s teaching, including making learning relevant and/or enjoyable, literary terms, grammar instruction, study guides, discussion, and many others
- attribution by participant regarding where she had learned of the tool, including colleagues at site, her cooperating teacher, curriculum materials, mandates (e.g., state-mandated skills and objectives), herself, and teacher education course work.

Our interest in these two categories (tool and attribution) enabled us to understand Laura’s instructional emphasis and the relative influences of key factors in the settings of learning to teach that she experienced. From these categories, we found that her teaching of grammar

was a constant across our data from the four settings. Given that each setting appeared to promote, require, or enable a particular approach to grammar instruction, we decided to make Laura's teaching of grammar the focus of our analysis. We were particularly interested in the degree to which she attempted to make grammar instruction enjoyable, relevant, interesting, and engaging—a repeatedly stated value of Laura's and a challenge given the drudgery with which grammar is typically experienced by students and teachers alike.

We should stress that this work was conceived to study teachers' thinking about their instructional decisions and not students' learning in relation to that teaching. We also are limited in terms of the data available for collection following Laura's student teaching. The distance between campus and her job following graduation, and ultimately the departure of the research faculty from their institution of origin, left us with an eclectic data set for Laura's full-time teaching jobs. Although some might wish for more robust data from these years—as do we—we feel that Laura's self-reports are adequate for the kinds of claims we make about her full-time teaching jobs.

RESULTS

We trace Laura's approach to teaching grammar through four key settings in her development as a teacher: her university program, her student teaching, her first job, and her second job. Each context provided a different set of mediators to guide her approach to teaching this troublesome topic and helped to shape her conception of grammar as a school subject. We examine her approach to teaching grammar through the filter of her efforts to develop an umbrella conception of engaged learning to guide her teaching as a whole.

University Program

Laura attended her southwestern U.S. state's namesake university. The teacher education program had a content-area emphasis, with roughly 15 courses taken in the English

Department and only 1 required from the curriculum and instruction faculty, that being the methods class. Aside from an English Department course in Theory of English Grammar that was taught by the first author (who was on the Education faculty and volunteered to teach the course in the Department of English), secondary English education students took no additional courses from faculty in the curriculum and instruction department. The content-area courses at Laura's university had little pedagogical emphasis, instead being driven by English faculty members' own research interests (see Addington, 2001, and Marshall & Smith, 1997, for analyses of how English and English education faculty conceptualize their disciplines differently). The Theory of English Grammar course was the teacher candidates' primary orientation to language instruction prior to student teaching and relied on the following texts: Farr and Daniels (1986); Gere, Fairbanks, Howes, Roop, and Schaafsma (1992); Lee (1993); Noguchi (1991); Strong (1986); and Weaver (1979).

As a whole, these readings strongly critique "traditional" grammar instruction—that is, textbook exercises oriented to labeling parts of speech in clauses and phrases, choosing a correct word to use in a given sentence (e.g., *between* or *among*), correctly identifying whether a collection of words is a phrase or clause, and correctly parsing the language into its component parts without actually using language to generate ideas. The authors emphasize traditional grammar instruction's inability to move students' written or spoken expression toward the textbook version of the English language presumed to be optimal in language texts and standardized assessments.

In contrast, they recommend approaches that teach grammar and usage in the context of student writing, argue for a cultural understanding of language forms and vernaculars rather than insisting on a single "standard" version of English, encourage generative approaches to language study such as sentence combining, view students' own linguistic knowledge and practices (including those believed to be non-standard) as resources to build on in language study, and in general advocate attention to how

speakers and writers use language for communicative purposes in social contexts based on cultural knowledge and practices.

This emphasis often stood in stark contrast to what the teacher candidates observed in schools. During her practicum taken in conjunction with her Theory of English Grammar course, Laura wrote the following journal entry about a teacher she was observing:

I watch the class while she is teaching and I see nothing but boredom. They hate the class. I hear them say so all the time. At least once every time I have been there I have heard a student say, "I hate this class." I just wonder why my [practicum] teacher cannot see that. Maybe it is harder than the book [Gere et al., 1992] makes it sound to have a classroom that doesn't function on an artifact level [which Gere et al. associate with the formal study of grammar, New Criticism, cultural literacy, focusing on product over process, and an emphasis on the formal aspects of language].

How as a teacher will I be able to stay away from the ruts? I don't want to be stuck somewhere teaching the exact same thing every hour of every day for years and years. I don't want to have to teach what all the other 7th grade teachers are teaching. Is it possible to do that with all the restrictions placed on you by the school board and district and the parents, etc.? My [practicum] teacher this semester told me that she and all the other 7th grade teachers do the exact same lesson every day.

Laura's remarks prior to student teaching suggest much about the approach that she ultimately adopted for her own practice, one in which she sought to avoid boredom and disaffection by engaging students with the curriculum in meaningful ways. As she notes, teaching in engaging ways is harder than most textbooks imply.

Although her textbooks offered valuable critiques of traditional grammar instruction, they offered less in terms of sound, concrete methods for teaching grammar effectively (the exception being Strong, 1986, and his dedication to sentence combining, a method that builds syntactic complexity by having students combine given clauses and phrases into longer sentences). In another journal entry in response to Gere et al.'s (1992) *Language and Reflection*, Laura wrote that "The language as artifact method of teaching was what I experienced in my school career. I never really thought about the possibility that

language as artifact was only one of many ways to teach English."

Furthermore, teachers she observed in the field taught grammar in the way she had been taught. In response to one observation, she noted that "I never realized how unproductive that was until reading this chapter, then observing it in a real situation. It was horrible." Through her Theory of English Grammar course, then, Laura learned how to account for the boredom she found when observing students during grammar lessons but learned fewer alternative practices that would teach the subject in ways that students found productive and engaging.

With this preparation Laura entered the classroom to begin her own teaching. We next describe her approach to teaching grammar, one of three primary strands of virtually any secondary school English curriculum along with literature and writing, in her student teaching, her first job, and her second job.

Student Teaching: Willa Cather Mid-High

Laura did her student teaching at Willa Cather Mid-High, which included 9th and 10th grades. It was one of three mid-highs in the city's school district, all of which fed into the community's single high school for Grades 11-12. Laura's mentor teacher at Cather Mid-High was Mary Ford, a 23-year veteran with 15 years' experience at Cather. The units that she taught followed a typical fall semester 9th-grade curriculum of short stories, *The Odyssey*, *Call of the Wild*, and grammar. Laura's university supervisor made few appearances during her student teaching and provided little feedback on her teaching on those occasions when she did observe. Laura characterized her university supervision as "worthless" and devoid of "constructive advice." As a consequence of this limited and ineffectual university supervision, Laura's mentorship from Mary Ford served as a powerful influence on her development of an approach to teaching.

Laura's instruction in grammar during student teaching was shaped in part by testing mandates that required Laura to teach students how to label parts of speech. Laura and Mary

did not endorse the value of this skill yet taught it because students would be tested on this ability. In a city where test scores could affect real estate values and often reflected on administrators' competence, teaching to standardized assessments was a necessary part of life in the classroom.

Mary provided what Laura felt was a sensible idea by suggesting that Laura cover grammar by having groups of students teach their classmates particular grammatical concepts. Mary had developed this method by reflecting on the difficulties she'd had teaching grammar and realizing that she herself had only learned grammar when her career required her to teach it. It made sense, then, that having students collaboratively study, discuss, learn, and teach a specific concept would have the same effect on her 10th graders as it had had on her: Students would learn grammar by having to teach it to others.

Field notes and interviews with Laura revealed that students' performance on this activity was uneven. On one hand, a number of groups taught their grammatical concepts with apparent effectiveness. Students appeared to enjoy playing the role of teacher, playing the role of students in relation to their peers' instruction, and playing with language in doing the exercises. Students made up songs, incorporated grammar knowledge into a *Jeopardy* game, used a *Schoolhouse Rock* videotape, played musical chairs in response to grammar terms, and otherwise taught one another through enjoyable activities. Laura said, "It was interesting. They have done some fun stuff." The activity, then, appeared to be successful in terms of teaching a dreaded subject in ways that the students enjoyed.

Along with this fun, however, field notes reported that "During the presentations students were animated and creative, but they actually provided misinformation about the concepts at hand." Some groups misunderstood what they were trying to teach, as revealed in the following field notes:

One boy from the group announced that they were "doing verbs" and began by reading a definition and an example of a transitive verb to the class. Next, a girl from the group followed the same procedure in defining linking verbs (which are always

intransitive) and helping (auxiliary) verbs. When one student said he didn't understand "the transitive thing," the girl explained (incorrectly) that all action verbs were transitive while all linking verbs were intransitive. . . . Throughout the lesson, students continually offered incorrect definitions and examples of transitive verbs.

In this presentation the students were learning and teaching the grammatical concepts incorrectly. Among Laura's dilemmas, then, was attending to the quality of immediate experience—a central dimension of Csikszentmihalyi's construct of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984)—in service of appropriate learning. The students' immediate experiences were quite positive in that they participated extensively and enthusiastically in the activity. Yet the long-term goal of learning the concepts was achieved inconsistently—although perhaps no less so than would have occurred using the traditional method of having the teacher oversee students' completion of grammar worksheets. Laura made this point in the postobservation interview, saying that "I didn't really think that they would give that much misinformation. But I still think that a small portion of the class learns more by doing it than they would if I were standing up there trying to do it."

We interpret Laura's teaching of grammar through this method in several ways. First, Laura herself was unclear on some grammatical concepts, as many English teachers are at the beginning of their careers; she admitted to being "rusty" on grammar, not having studied it since middle school. Like Mary, she had no need to learn grammar until she had to teach it, and by shifting this responsibility to the students, did not have occasion to learn the constructs as robustly as she might have if she had organized and taught the lessons herself. Second, we could regard the students' difficulties with learning transitive and intransitive verbs as a developmental problem; that their initial difficulties might be part of a longer term process of learning about syntax. Yet they would need correction to get on this developmental path.

Regardless of how we might explain Laura's experience with this approach to teaching grammar, we interpret it as part of her own effort

to appropriate and put into practice a constructivist, engaging approach to learning about language. At this early stage of her career, as might be expected, her development of a concept for engaged learning was still under formation, with engagement itself foregrounded at the expense of learning established conventions—the point of the activity.

Laura drew on her university course work for the final stage of this lesson. She designed an assessment that linked specific student grammatical errors to the quality of the presentations, using a diagnostic method that she had learned through a measurement course at the university. The assessment began with a pretest on grammatical concepts that identified areas of strength and weakness. For their class presentations, she then assigned student groups to concepts that they had performed poorly on in the pretest. The posttest allowed Laura to link students' performance on specific grammatical concepts to particular student presentations. She explained,

I will have to go back and cross-reference how they did on which sections and pretest and how they did on the posttest. To see if it was the lessons that helped or if they were just staying constant with what they knew. . . . If I go back and compare their scores on this test to the pretest scores, then I can try and determine if they just still know what they knew before, [or if] they have learned something. And if they have learned something, then I can go back and look at, OK, what group taught that subject in that class, and what were their activities? And why did those things work? Or maybe it is just an easier concept. . . . I need to go back and see if any class has improved and maybe look at why or why not. Compare scores then, and see who taught it, and think about what they did.

We found this diagnostic procedure to reveal an impressive grasp of the assessment procedure and an illustration of a detailed, systematic approach to reflective practice. Laura's teaching of grammar during student teaching, then, was influenced by four factors: the testing mandate that required attention to learning parts of speech; Mary's influence through her suggestion of having students teach one another syntactic structures; Laura's orientation to engaged

learning, which helped her to resonate with Mary's approach to teaching grammar; and her university course work through which she learned the assessment procedure. The lesson proceeded with mixed results, with students enjoying the activity, and the assessment procedure helping to identify strengths and weaknesses of the presentation; however, some concepts were taught and no doubt learned incorrectly.

The setting of student teaching provided Laura with relatively few restrictions on her approach to teaching, seeming to encourage experimentation with acceptable risks. In retrospect, Laura characterized her student teaching experience as follows:

I could not have had a more perfect placement for my student teaching adventure. It was a safe place to learn. My mentor teacher was smart, creative, energetic, and realistic—just what I wanted to be. The students were great, the grade manageable, and I was ready for the experience. I recall sitting through the first week of observation and fantasizing about how fantastic it would be and how much the kids were going to learn, and especially how much they were going to LOVE ME! (Looking back, I understand that I did not yet know what I did not know.)

I lulled myself into believing I was completely running the class, while in truth I only controlled a small part of it. I thought I was equipped with all the knowledge (since I had just finished 4 years of classes that said I had the knowledge) I needed in order to get started. I was going to have free rein to test myself and my notions of teaching. The fallacy lay in the fact that while I was assigning and carrying out lesson plans, they were never entirely my own. The reality is that you step into someone else's beautiful shoes that are already broken in and comfortable on *their* feet, and frankly, all *you* are left with at the end of the day are sore feet.

Sore footed or not, Laura taught grammar during student teaching through a method of Mary's that, at the very least, got her students involved; and that was assessed through a fairly sophisticated diagnostic method that enabled her to evaluate the instruction's effectiveness and develop a plan for further instruction. Although problematic in some ways, this approach avoided a number of problems that we have observed student teachers experiencing

while teaching grammar, particularly the obvious and pervasive boredom with which students endure the lessons.

First Job: Jacobsville High School

The summer after graduating from college, Laura and her new husband moved to Jacobsville, a city in another part of the state, where her husband had taken a job in the city's main industry, which was a primary source of jobs and tax revenues for the city. The city of Jacobsville was a prosperous community of 35,000 residents about 200 miles from the university she had attended. The demographics of the community were 82% White, 7% Native American, 3% African American, 3% Latino/Latina American, 1% Asian American, and 4% other. Laura began her teaching career at the palatial Jacobsville High School (JHS), which served Grades 11 and 12. At the time of data collection, JHS enrolled approximately 900 students and employed about 60 teachers. The graduate rate was more than 98%, and of these graduates, 65% entered 4-year colleges and 9% more enrolled in postsecondary institutions of various kinds.

Laura noted that Jacobsville was an affluent, conservative community that was "very supportive of education" and academic excellence. She said that she was "in a near-perfect environment for a new teacher. I was in a district that focused on academic achievement and supported innovation and engagement in the classroom." The district Web site boasted that it aspired "To be the best school system in the United States" and listed college entrance exam scores, grade point averages, the presence on the faculty of 14 National Board Certified Teachers, and graduation rates that confirmed that the district was advancing toward its goals. The school system's students achieved SAT and ACT scores that exceeded the state and national averages and had produced the highest number of National Merit Scholar semifinalists in the state (210 throughout the previous 20 years). The high school Web site attributed the school system's generous resources and high test

scores to its well-educated and affluent citizens.

The curriculum at JHS did not require explicit instruction in grammar for 11th- and 12th-grade teachers and students. Rather than teaching grammar apart from writing, said Laura,

The only way I "taught" grammar at Jacobsville was through essay edits, literature analysis, and journals/bell work. We were not required to "teach" grammar outright at JHS. It was more inclusion. I also taught a bit of grammar when we looked at poetry through discussion of word choices in particular poems. Other than that there was no grammar in my daily lessons.

Her mentor teacher, Carrie Hunt, reinforced this account, writing on Laura's evaluation that

Laura would teach grammar by covering usage, mechanics, and spelling rules as they cropped up in the students' papers. When she started seeing quite a few run-ons and comma splices, for example, she would do a minilesson on that topic. She also expected the students to revise their papers, fixing whatever errors she had marked on their rough drafts.

Because she covered grammar in situ, our observations were not able to capture Laura's actual instruction in the language strand of the curriculum; rather, we observed her teaching such lessons as a Pacesetter unit on film study. We gather, however, from her testimony and Carrie Hunt's evaluation that Laura taught grammar as recommended in her university Theory of English Grammar course: in the context of communication, primarily in response to student writing. Even though the community of Jacobsville relied on its students' test scores for prestige, at the high school level grammar instruction was not set aside for explicit instruction in the curriculum.

The absence of a policy mandate requiring isolated grammar lessons enabled Laura to teach in ways recommended in her course texts, and not through the rote methods so conclusively found in research to be ineffective. We were not able to ascertain the degree to which her students became engaged in this instruction or how effective it was in promoting student learning about using formal language. We infer, however, that the setting of Jacobsville provided

Laura and her colleagues with an unusual opportunity to address issues of grammar without resorting to textbook exercises or other stand-alone instruction.

Second Job: Rolling Hills Middle School

Following another career move by her husband to a suburb of a nearby city in the same state, Laura left JHS after 3 years and found a job teaching English at Rolling Hills Middle School (MS). She taught there for 1 year before taking a maternity leave from which she never returned. Like Jacobsville, Rolling Hills was a prosperous community, although more suburban in character than the independent city of Jacobsville. Unlike Jacobsville, Rolling Hills MS did not provide Laura a great range of latitude to teach what she felt was important. Rather, her assignment was divided into separate preparations for classes in Language (grammar and spelling) and Literature, a bifurcation that did not fit well with her emphasis on integrating the various parts of the curriculum (e.g., teaching grammar in the context of students' writing). She reported teaching in ways that might be expected in such a rigid curriculum:

My weekly instruction was divided by spelling, writing, and language. I gave a journal assignment each day to begin—freewrites, riddles, grammar questions, etc. On Mondays my language classes were responsible for completing their spelling assignment. We had spelling textbooks, so I had them work the lessons from the books. If they finished the assignment early they were to have something else to work on or read—often we had other projects going in my class they could work on. I also had available extra credit worksheets they could complete in their “spare time.”

Even within this restrictive environment Laura attempted to create opportunities for engaged learning. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, for instance, were “writing days” that had a particular focus (e.g., descriptive, expository, narrative). Students would produce a draft, and

I then had them peer edit—they had a rubric to follow and sign off on. After peer editing they were to complete a final copy. All three pieces had to be turned in together (draft, edit, and final). After I graded their papers they were returned and were

supposed to be put into their writing portfolios. At the end of each writing unit they were to go to their portfolio and choose their favorite piece from the unit to be revised one more time for a unit grade (this never worked since their papers never found their way to the portfolios).

Laura dedicated Thursdays and Fridays to grammar and spelling instruction and evaluation:

Thursdays were grammar days. We used the textbook and reviewed the topic of the day as a class. We often worked the lessons as a class—answering the questions aloud—sometimes for prizes, sometimes as a competition, sometimes just because. I usually had them work a short exercise after that. Fridays we started with a spelling test, which sometimes was multiple choice, sometimes traditional out-loud tests. After the spelling tests we would work on the grammar lessons from the day before—either grading or completing.

We were not able to observe Laura's teaching in Rolling Hills because we no longer lived in her part of the United States. Given, however, the close fit between her interview comments and the corroborating observations from the research period, we assume that her account is fairly faithful to her instruction at Rolling Hills MS. What we found interesting about Laura's report of her teaching of grammar is that it appears less constructivist than what she did during student teaching and less situated than what she did at JHS. Rather, in the more restrictive environment of Rolling Hills MS—whose fragmentation of the English curriculum into separate classes appears to be more likely in middle schools than in high schools or mid-highs—her instruction began to resemble the sort of grammar instruction that she'd hoped to avoid earlier in her career: derived from a textbook and treated as an artifact. Although she did make an effort to relate the different possible dimensions of the “language” strand of the curriculum—for example, including writing during which she attended to language use and grammar—the curriculum itself mitigated against extensive use of such strategies. Laura said about her teaching at Rolling Hills MS,

My second teaching position was not as utopian as my first. I taught 7th grade Language/Grammar

and Literature. The problem: Language and literature were separate courses with different groups of students in each class. It would be safe to say there was not as much freedom in the curriculum as I had been accustomed to at my previous job. I adapted my style as best I could given the parameters of the new environment; however, the student group and the policies and standards of the district caused me to shift my pedagogical model from the ideal.

As a compromise I broke language/grammar down into segments. We worked on spelling from the text, and worked on grammar through writing. I pulled short essays and vignettes from my own library to illustrate writing styles and methods and to put into context all else we were currently studying. I conducted writing workshops 2½ days a week, focusing on implementing spelling words from the weekly lists. I designed peer-editing rubrics to focus the students on the grammar concepts of the week, and always directed my classes to look at and explore expression and meaning, word choice, and overall effect of what they wrote.

Example: During a unit on descriptive writing, I asked the class to write essays on how to construct a peanut butter sandwich. They were then put into peer groups and each group chose one essay to perfect. When all were turned in, I presented my props for the day: peanut butter, bread, and jelly. The kids read their essays aloud, and I followed instructions to the letter, more times than not creating quite a less-than-perfect sandwich.

This is just one example of how I tried to make language real; but the reality is that even with all of this effort, I was an island in the middle of their educational ocean. I was trying to teach 7th grade students a new way to function in a classroom. That alone is enough to make a person want to run screaming at the end of each day. In my moments of frustration I came to understand how easy it could be to get into the rut that I worried about in my college journals. It took a great deal of ingenuity and planning to keep myself and my students engaged while still adhering to the standards and policies of the position I had accepted.

Laura's remarks reveal that in the highly restrictive setting of Rolling Hills MS, she made an effort to apply understandings from her university teacher preparation and the settings of her first two teaching experiences. Although the curriculum required that she approach her subject in isolation, she attempted to include the communicative dimensions emphasized in her university program and practiced at JHS, and to introduce activities as she had done during student teaching. Her instruction in this setting, then, suggests that she was able to adapt the

approaches she had tried previously, if not in ways that she found entirely satisfactory.

DISCUSSION

We have traced Laura's knowledge of how to teach grammar through the idyllic setting of her preservice education course work, the mentoring she received in the mildly constrained environment of her student teaching, the seemingly unfettered curriculum of her first job, and the highly restricted and fragmented curriculum of her second job. Her grammar instruction did not follow a straight and predictable course; rather, it fit within the contours of the institutions in which she taught. In this sense, we see her development of a conception of how to teach grammar in engaging ways as following what Vygotsky (1987; cf. Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003) called a "twisting path." Her instruction was characteristic of much teaching at the nascent stages of a teacher's learning: Rather than being conceptually unified, her teaching represented what Vygotsky (1987) called a *complex*, which is a developmental stage that precedes the development of a *concept*.

Whereas a concept is unified, a complex appears unified yet includes internal contradictions. In young children (Vygotsky's primary population of study), a complex might occur when children learn from home that four-legged creatures are called "dogs" and then apply this term to cows, horses, and other quadrupeds because they share this distinguishing feature. In early-career teachers, a complex might occur when they learn through their reading and course work that "collaborative learning" involves people working together, and then refer to any group project as "collaborative learning" whether or not any collaboration or learning occurs.

Laura's experiences illustrate how this concept development is a function of the settings in which teaching takes place. Rather than moving in a linear fashion from inchoate to integrated, her conception of grammar began with a good theoretical grasp and then was modified as she moved through different institutional settings. As Vygotsky (1987) argued, theoretical knowledge is insufficient for concept development; formal or academic knowledge must work in

concert with practical activity to be refined and further articulated and practiced. The settings of the schools provided different forms of mediation for Laura. Willa Cather Mid-High included the close, careful attention of mentor Mary Ford and the ideas she had developed through her own teaching experience; JHS provided virtually unlimited latitude to experiment with teaching approaches; and Rolling Hills MS shackled its teachers with its fragmented and confining curriculum that limited the sorts of activity-based, experimental, interdisciplinary instruction that Laura had employed in her earlier teaching experiences.

Laura's twisting path of developing a conception of engaged grammar instruction raises interesting questions about the degree to which the notion of "development" maps on to that of "growth" or "change." Superficially, her instruction changed as she adapted to new situations, a sort of Darwinian evolution that led to her survival through environmental shifts. Indeed, on the surface, one might argue that during the 3 years of the study, her conception of engaged grammar instruction regressed toward the sort of teaching she considered primitive. Her comments, however, reveal that she was adapting herself to the environment and the environment to her own notion of effective instruction. She thus used her notion of engagement as a conceptual tool through which she chipped away at the confines of the middle school curriculum in her second job to allow space for herself and her students to grow. We therefore see the importance of emphasizing concepts in teacher education programs. Such attention involves more than just the explication of theory; it requires a dialectic between theory and practice that contributes to a teacher's capacity to adapt either or both to new circumstances. As such, concepts provide teachers with critical tools to shape their decisions and provide them with agency as they move through the multiple settings of learning to teach.

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