Living Un/Grammatically in a Grammatical World: The Pedagogic World of Teachers and Students

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ABSTRACT: In my work with preservice teachers I face daily a dilemma. My student teachers come to me with an urgent practical agenda: What do I need to know in order to survive in the world of schools? In effect, they want me to tell them how to fit into a world that they assume is structured like a grammar, with traditions and conventions and rules and patterns. They are seeking ways to conform to the pedagogic world as it has been written, but I hope they will seek ways to transform the pedagogic world, always written and always in the process of being written. I hope my student teachers will seek ways to write, actively and deliberately and imaginatively, the pedagogic world of students and teachers. I want them to learn to live un/grammatically, to challenge the ways in which the world has been written for them, to know that they are not only written by the world, but that they also write the world. I invite my students to write the unwritten sentences, the sentences that interrogate and subvert syntax and semantics, the sentences that create spaces where my students can live un/grammatically.

KEYWORDS: language, poetry, writing, lived experience, narrative, teacher education, curriculum, critical pedagogy, postmodernism, grammar/grammar.

Knowing has two poles, and they are always poles apart: carnal knowing, the laying on of hands, the hanging of the fact by head or heels, the measurement of mass and motion, the calibration of brutal blows, the counting of supplies; and spiritual knowing, invisibly felt by the inside self, who is but a fought-over field of distraction, a stage where we recite the monotonous monologue that is our life, a knowing governed by internal tides, by intimations, motives, resolutions, by temptations, secrecy, shame, and pride. (Gass, 1994, p. 44)
Nobody, whether scientist or priest or philosopher, knows better and has a right to call the tune. None of them can hope to do more than to produce new metaphors and new angles of vision that open up new life-possibilities. (Cuppitt, 1987, p. 90)

We are being asked to consider identity not so much as something already present, but rather as production, in the throes of being constituted as we live in places of difference. For example, according to this understanding, our identities as teachers or curriculum supervisors are not so much in our presences; rather, our identities, who we are as teachers and as curriculum supervisors, are ongoing effects of our becomings in difference. (Aoki, 1993, p. 260)

A while ago one of my Bachelor of Education students, Brendan, an exemplary student-teacher who had been quickly hired by a school board, visited me. He said, "I learned a lot in your courses, but now that I’m in a school, I realize how much I was not taught. For example, you need to teach your students how to use the photocopier." I smiled. I had a vision of Charlie Chaplin caught in the wheels and cogs of a machine he could not control. I sympathized with Brendan. I have struggled with recalcitrant photocopy machines all my life, but I was disappointed with his attitude, too, because his words suggested that he was seeking ways of control and order and management in his pedagogic world, ways of mastering the wildness of the lived and living experience(s) of the classroom, the staff room, the school hallway, the playground. I suggested to Brendan that learning to use the photocopy machine was a useful skill, but not nearly as useful/full as learning to interrogate the uses of the photocopy machine. I suggested he read the manual for the photocopy machine and gave him my poem, "Writing the Unwritten Sentence." He left. I continue to wonder if he understands my eagerness to enter the places of chaos where I seek to live un/grammatically in a grammatical world.

Writing the Unwritten Sentence
(Return to J.C. Tressler & C.E. Lewis, Mastering Effective English,

if I still believed
the Blue Book
of Tressler and Lewis
masters of effective English
my unrepeatable guides
through senior secondary