

Forum

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How to Teach Standard English

TO THE EDITOR:

To Anne Curzan in “Says Who? Teaching and Questioning the Rules of Grammar” (124.3 [2009]: 870–79), the important thing is not that students learn, for instance, to use apostrophes correctly but that they question where the rules for apostrophes came from. This skewed priority is part and parcel of Curzan’s commitment to “the kind of critical pedagogy that most of us espouse” (871).

Anticipating my problem with her work, Curzan writes, “None of this critical questioning of the ‘they’ behind usage rules of written Standard English is meant to imply that Standard English is not valuable and should not be taught” (875). Students, however, will glean exactly what their teacher means to imply: challenging the hegemony matters far more than writing Standard English with even minimal competence.

Suppose I’m a teacher of tennis. Here is what Curzan has me saying to students: “The rules of tennis say you get only two serves. Why is that, really? Who made up that rule? Some white patriarch, right? Some imperialist racist pig. Challenge that and all other tennis rules, or else you’re just a follower, complicit in the game’s and society’s evils. . . . Oh, and by the way, use your two serves effectively.” Why would anybody out to play better tennis come back for a second lesson?

Students are “empowered” in writing classes when they improve their prose at every organizational level. Compositionists committed to critical pedagogy, however, define improved writing as that which squares more fully with their own politics. Classroom work in their paradigm becomes a project of ideological habituation: today students will challenge the rules for apostrophes so that tomorrow they will challenge the powers, prerogatives, and perfidies of the ruling class.

Our rightful business as English teachers includes helping students learn to unpack vague, airy abstractions. Instead, Curzan crams politically convenient ones like “social justice” down students’ (and readers’) throats even while pressing students to challenge conventions that should be mastered as such. A standard is just that—in Curzan’s words, “a shared form”: stop at the red lights, go on the green lights, and get on with life’s business. No students are empowered by following their English teacher’s lead in challenging standards for punctuation, syntactic alignment, and word usage. In supposing otherwise, Curzan seems merely to be confusing privileged United States teenagers with Paulo Freire’s destitute, illiterate, passive Brazilians.

In our cultural context, at least, mastering prose standards as such suggests no general disposition to bow to authority and no commitment to the political status quo. Consider the following sentence: “The utterly horrifying tone of Kearney’s address should not conceal the fact that she invoked theories that had become quite familiar within the movement.” Hegemonic white male style, right? The oppressor’s language? The author, however, is a revolutionary black female communist writing from jail. Why does Angela Davis write this way? All razzmatazz about “prestige dialect” aside, Davis is serious about getting complex matters right and reaching out to a serious-minded audience whose assent and support she is eager to win. Unlike Curzan, Davis does not romanticize educational deficit, and she is simply above mispunctuating and miswording her sentences.

Students benefit from the systematic, whole-hearted teaching of Standard English grammar. Beyond helping them not make mistakes (as defined by every reader in a position to influence their public lives), such training gives them a self-aware command of the revision process as they come to know their syntactic options and appreciate wherein the beauties of the English sentence lie. When Curzan retards this process with ideological excrescences, she is derelict of duty, working against the interests of students, colleagues, and literacy itself. If she is right that

“most of us” similarly pervert our teaching, that goes a long way toward explaining why our students read and write as poorly as they do.

Jeff Zorn

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TO THE EDITOR:

Anne Curzan’s essay is a masterpiece of logic and should be de rigueur reading for all those teaching English or writing-intensive classes in English. As an instructor newly appointed to the Queens College department of comparative literature, I teach classes in the most diverse county in the country, and the students in my classes reflect that diversity. Their native languages, often the languages they speak at home, range from Spanish and French to Hindi, Urdu, Japanese, Korean, and Russian.

Curzan’s suggestion that an instructor write “[C]ome talk to me about this construction” on a student’s paper rather than mark something “incorrect” speaks volumes about her desire to help students master written English without belittling the spoken-language skills they already possess (878).

Curzan’s insights are invaluable.

Raymond E. Skrabut

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TO THE EDITOR:

While not disagreeing with the basic tenor of Anne Curzan’s comments in “Says Who? Teaching and Questioning the Rules of Grammar,” I believe they reflect a somewhat myopic view of the rewards for being in grammatical control of one’s spoken and written language. To many students, especially Americans, grammar has loomed as the *bête noire* of English and foreign language studies. It should not! Here, to know is to conquer. Count your blessings. Compared with *Beowulf*’s Anglo-Saxon, with its noun declensions sporting six cases, dual coexisting with singulars and plurals, verb endings vying for interminable space, our modern