

# RADICAL TEACHER

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## Grammar in the Student-Centered Composition Class

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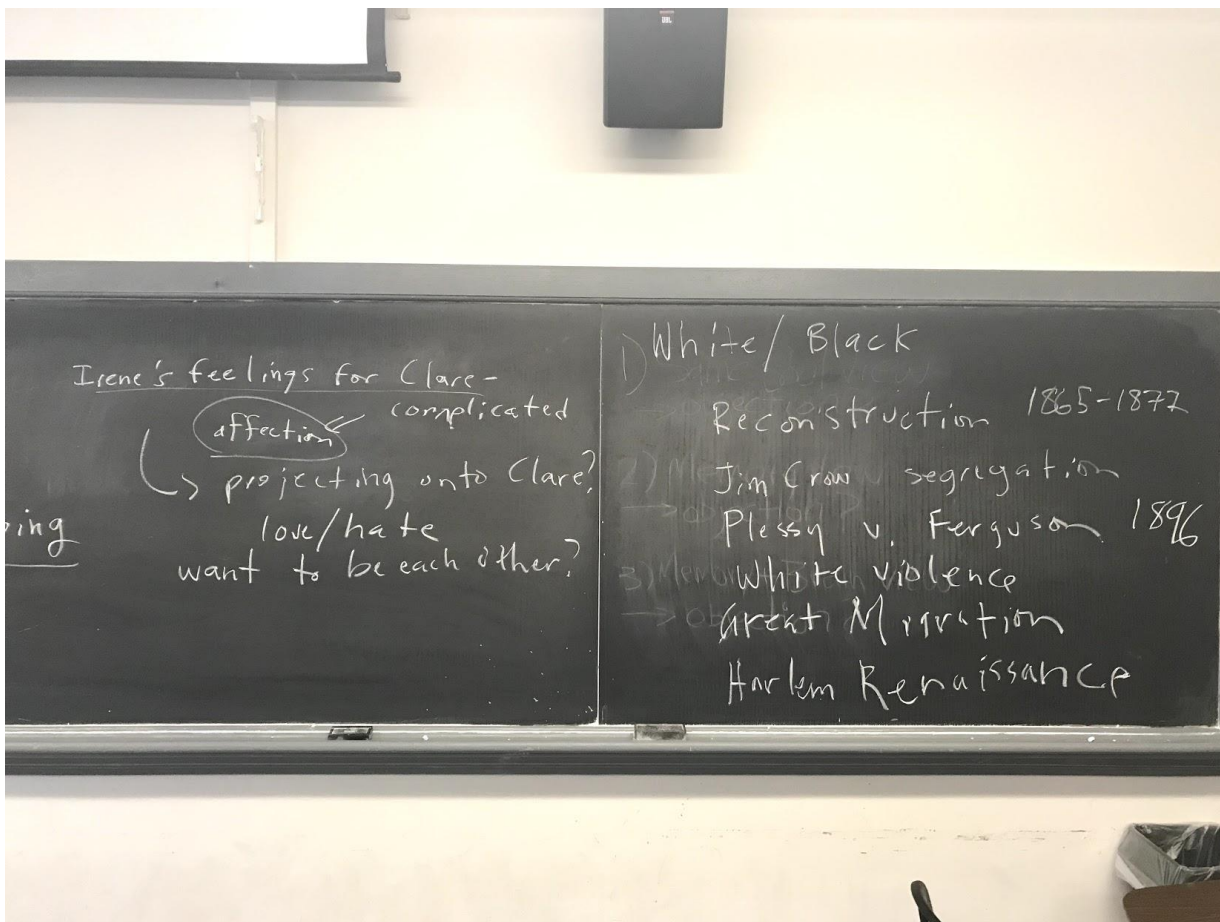


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There are few things less exciting and more conservative than teaching grammar, yet even at the university level, instructors find students lacking the ability to consistently form complete sentences or to make pronouns agree with their referents. True, standard English changes over time and to insist on antiquated diction would be folly indeed, but public discourse has its rules, and to some degree it has become the composition instructor's responsibility to introduce students to those rules. Few want to teach the complexities of modifier placement and the beauty of correlative conjunctions, however. Most instructors of composition would rather lead students to engage in important debates, to learn about alternative points of view, to become critical thinkers and writers.

At the same time, we ought to recognize the injustice of allowing students to continue making basic mechanical errors that may prevent them from expressing themselves well in written assignments in our own or other classes or getting the job they want when they graduate. Many instructors order writing handbooks -- all of them pretty similar in content -- and hope that red marks on assignments will lead the bewildered student to open the handbook to figure out how to undangle, for example, dangling modifiers. Most students, unfortunately, are both intimidated and bored by these grammar texts.

Many teachers occasionally teach specific grammar points or quiz students on readings from their grammar handbooks with mixed success. These methods of teaching grammar reflect a teacher- rather than student- centered pedagogy, and I suspect most college-level students have already been taught in this way to no avail. For these reasons, I have developed a more student-centered way of integrating grammar in the composition classroom.

The students in my composition classes at SUNY Buffalo and Erie Community College teach the grammar. I have compiled a list of the twelve most common grammar problems that occur in student writing. I ask students to pair up with another student in the class and choose one of the grammar points. Students are asked to do the following: research the grammar point; prepare a handout including explanation, examples, and some activity for the class (a short, ungraded quiz, for example); and present the grammar point and handout to the class as a five-minute lesson. For four to six weeks we begin each class with one of these peer-taught grammar lessons.

If nothing else, students learn how to use their grammar handbooks. I have also found that students learn not only to research their own grammar point but to be less intimidated by the supposedly daunting writing handbook and to view the class as a community of learners who may not be able to change the rules of grammar but who can collaborate to master them. After handing back papers, I have seen students locate the "class expert" on a particular grammar

point and ask for clarification. I have also found that after going through six weeks of grammar presentations, students become more comfortable adding their opinions to class discussions.

Is this as politically urgent as discussing and writing about the WTO? As radical as eliminating grades from the curriculum? Maybe not, but taking grammar, an unfortunately necessary component of the composition class, and asking students to teach one another -- to become dependent on one another rather than on the know-it-all instructor, to be responsible for their own and others' education -- produces a community of learners who are gradually mastering the rules of public discourse through which they can effect change.



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