

Them and I are Using Best Practices

By John Bachmann

A couple of years ago, I was driving a friend's grade 8 daughter and some of her friends to a party when their topic of conversation unexpectedly turned from the "hottest" boys in the school to, of all things, English grammar.

I listened bemused as they recited a number of examples of bad grammar in student presentations and also, unfortunately, in the way some of their teachers spoke and wrote. Not wanting to miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to improve English usage, I piped in with a pet peeve of my own.

"What about 'Her and I are going to the store'?" I volunteered, only to trigger a puzzled silence in the back of the van.

"What's wrong with that?" asked Carolyn, a straight-A student.

"Would you say 'Her is going to the store' or 'She is going to the store'?" I queried.

"She," she agreed.

"Then, why wouldn't you say 'She and I are going to the store'?" I continued.

"I've never heard of that rule!" was the unanimous response from the back.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of rules that students don't hear about, let alone learn, as they make their way through Canadian schools. While modern educators dismiss concerns about grammar as an anal-retentive throwback to rote learning, there are significant costs to grammatical and other misuses of language.

It Starts with Clarity

Good communication is a necessary prerequisite for intelligent discourse and becomes especially important when we are grappling with hugely-controversial issues such as public education. It has many components, but two key ones are a) clarity through brevity and correct structure, i.e. grammar, and b) agreement on the meaning of key terms.

The writing of today's high school and post-secondary students demonstrates that they have been exposed to a lot of words and ideas, but my own observations, reinforced by reports from post-secondary educators and employers, indicate that these students have a limited ability to summarize and comment, especially in writing. Oftentimes, the right words are there, but the resulting message on paper is an incoherent (and long) patchwork quilt.

Does this matter? Is good written grammar important in our predominantly oral society? All the evidence continuing to come in from the working world that students eventually enter suggests that it does.

Whether in the private or the public sector, million-dollar decisions are not made solely on the basis of oral presentations. Data and arguments must be put to paper or computer document for reading, review and debate by decision-makers. Even the ubiquitous, and often misused, Microsoft PowerPoint software isn't effective unless the presentation content is prepared with meticulous attention to content, sequence, brevity, grammar and spelling.

Given the information overload that we labour under today, an inability to formulate clear and concise data and arguments consigns anyone suffering from deficiencies in these skills to a supporting role and severely limits opportunities for advancement. One hopes that, as new elementary and secondary curricula are implemented in Ontario and other provinces, teaching and correcting grammar will come back into vogue and will result in improved skills.

No Common Dictionary

Communication that is brief and clear will still not result in understanding if the terms being used have different meanings to the participants. Very few institutions, save perhaps the ironically named but now mercifully defunct German Democratic Republic, have been as adept as Canada's public education systems in co-opting language to suit their purposes.

Parents usually first encounter educational doublespeak when they investigate the reading programs being used to teach their children to read. Suggestions that these programs are not phonetically based are quickly rebutted with "Of course we use phonics! We've never stopped using phonics!"

Further investigation usually reveals at best phony phonics, an 'eclectic' approach that treats phonics as only one of three 'cueing' systems — context, syntax and phonics. Real phonics, on the other hand, starts with the central premise that children should invariably sound out unknown words.

When the white knight 'Accountability' and his noisy entourage first appeared on the other side of the educational moat several years ago, educrats were quick to react. Down came the educastle drawbridge. But when the good knight trotted into the courtyard, he and his followers were transformed by Newspeak, the educrat's magician and alchemist extraordinaire, into "Outcome-Based Education" (OBE).

By defining the 'outcomes' in OBE in vague and unmeasurable terms, such as increasing self-esteem and gaining a love of learning,

educrats were able to genuflect to the public demand for more focus on results while continuing business as usual.

A similar fate has befallen the word 'quality.' Survey after survey indicates that parents are most concerned about the knowledge and skills their children learn in school — that is, the outputs of the system. Parents are, of course, also concerned about their children benefiting from a supportive and safe learning environment, but learning results are paramount.

Even the recent OISE survey, which was carefully worded to encourage statements of dissatisfaction with recent changes to Ontario schools, could not disguise this strong parental emphasis. Yet whenever educators refer to quality, they mention inputs such as class size and numbers of support staff, never what the students are learning.

Very recent reports from the educastle indicate that the nefarious Newspeak is busy again. This time, his wand is being waved at the concept of 'best practices.' Outside the educastle moat, best practices involve *comparing the performance* of outside organizations against one's own, identifying those that are doing exceptionally well, investigating what they are doing that may be causing these exceptional results and, finally, adopting at least some of these practices to improve the performance of one's own organization.

Best practices inside the educastle, however, involve 'reflection' by teaching practitioners without reference to outside organizations. As noted in the draft Standards of Practice from the Ontario College of Teachers, teachers are expected to meditate on what their students are achieving and somehow discover paths to improvement intrinsically without using the continuous improvement processes the rest of the world has been using for more than 20 years. The fact that this also ignores the notion of comparison implied in the word 'best' doesn't phase the educators one bit, nor is this surprising given their ongoing resistance to attempts to maintain precision and clarity in our language.

Many classroom teachers, especially at the secondary level, are concerned about students with poor language skills. We must continue to educate these teachers and encourage them to speak out against the misuse of terms such as 'best practices' that are getting in the way of improvements to real learning outcomes.