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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of intervention strategies on the revisions minority students made in narrative essays in a process-oriented classroom. Thirteen African-American and Latino students enrolled in a private boarding school in New England participated in the research. The effect of teacher interventions was explored through two mini-lessons, one peer conference, and one set of teacher comments written directly on student papers. At the end of the essay sequence, students participated in individual interviews, and tudent papers were analyzed to measure the absolute number of changes, type of changes, and level of changes after each intervention. Results revealed that teacher intervention generated numerous changes and revisions primarily on a sentence level, while the peer conference produced fewer changes, mostly of word and word unit substitutions. These changes were more closely related to the types of revisions students made when no interventions were present. Findings suggest (1) that for these minority students, in contrast to earlier findings regarding process writing, the input of a teacher is greatly valued as long as that input is perceived as providing new information; and (2) that peer conferences were not valued because these students did not generally perceive peers as being able to help. These findings further suggest that directive instruction gives minority students access to a power with writing that they do not have as long as they are confined by their own insecurities about written expression. (Two figures of data are included.) (KEH)

Minority Student Perspectives on the Use of Intervention Strategies in Writing Classrooms

Paper Presented at

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My third grade year was perhaps the most memorable year in my life due to one incident. I was attending Garrison forest, a very old, conservative private school located in Baltimore County, Marland. Garrison is a rather prestigious school steeped with tradition. My parents sent me there, because they were very concerned about establishing a conservative image. They would frequently ask, "Why don't you behave the way we want you to?", or, "Why don't you do what we ask?" I did everything to rebel so I could be myself. In order to "get back at my parents", I would accept wild dares and bets in order to embarass or upset them.

On day a boy in my class named John Feaste came up with the ultimate dare. He leaned over and tapped me. In a raspy wisper he said, "I heard the most amazing thing today."

Trying to sound interested I said, "Really? What did you hear?"

"There is a bag of money in Dartle Hall", John said grinning widely.

"Are you crazy? There's no money in Dartle Hall."

"There is! Steve Morgan the ninth grader told me so. He said that it was in the air vent of the mens bathroom", John said in an argumental voice.

"How did it get there and why? Stop this nonsence and do your work"

"Never mind how it got up there. I think it's up there and I dare you to prove me wrong!!", John said in a fury.

I hesitated and said, "Okay! If I win you get your head flushed in a toilet.

The above is an excerpt from the introduction to the final version of an essay written by one of the students whose views I'll be presenting. The author, a 14-year-old Black youth named Michael, continues his paper by

describing how he enlists the help of the class brain and the class thug to devise a plan to get this money -- a plan which included a student standing on the toilet and Michael crawling on that student's back and climbing into the ceiling. As you might guess, the ceiling collapses, the author's parents are called, and in spite of an excuse by his mother -- maybe he thought it was a fire escape -- the author is expelled. Michael ends the essay by talking about what he learned about getting back at parents.

This morning I will talk about Michael's story and the stories of 12 other African-American and Latino Students who were a part of my class at a private New England Boarding School when I reentered the classroom as a teacher and researcher; the students came from inner cities across the United States. Specifically, I will provide context information on the rationale for my approach, on the form of the study, and on the nature of student response. I then will devote the primary section of the paper to exploring why, according to students, they revise papers as they do. We begin with context.

Contextual Information and Data Overview

As a former teacher of English, I entered the classroom in agreement with the theory of process instruction; that is, I believed that some components of process writing were important features of teaching and that they had been demonstrated by research to be effective (see Siddle, 1986). However, I was also concerned that not enough attention was being paid to student products, an oversight I saw as particularly problematic for minority populations, and was therefore interested in knowing more

about how interventions introduced during the revision process could improve student writing. By "intervention" I mean any teacher structured activity introduced in the classroom with the purpose of assisting student development of an essay.

In an effort to explore the effect of interventions, I imposed four as students revised a single narrative essay in our process oriented classroom. These were two mini-lessons, one peer conference, and one set of teacher comments written directly on student papers. (See Figure 1 on the handout for the sequence of these interventions.) Their content may be summarized as follows: mini-lesson one emphasized the macro structural features of narrative form; mini-lesson two focused primarily on style; the peer conference grouped three students with specific directions to provide feedback on features they liked and disliked in each other's essays; teacher comments covered the categories of "specific requests", "general comments", and "structural suggestions" and were written directly on student papers.

At the end of the essay sequence, students were informed of the research situation and agreed to participate in individual interviews. As well, all papers were collected and analyzed in three ways. To measure the absolute number of changes, type of changes, and level of changes after each intervention, I used a revision of the Faigley and Witte scheme. I then used a methodology suggested by Miles and Huberman to label the nature of these changes and assess their relationship to the intervention. Finally, to determine the effect of the changes on quality, three teacher raters independently ranked each draft. These raters knew neither the

students nor the order in which the drafts were written.

Figure 2 presents a breakdown of types of responses. As you can see, students responded most to the first mini-lesson and to the teacher comments written directly on student papers. The response of students was less to the second mini-lesson and to the peer conference. Figure 2 also indicates that the type of change was most often "additions", with the exception of the peer conference where "substitutions" account for the major change.

Not shown on Figure 2, but still relevant for context, is that change occurred most often on the sentence level (again, with the exception of the peer conference where change was most often on the level of "word" or "word unit") and that changes consisted primarily of elaborations of existing ideas. Interestingly, the independent quality rating by teachers paralleled the results of absolute numbers of changes: the first mini-lesson and the teacher comments were scored as the interventions to produce the highest quality changes, followed by the second mini-lesson and the peer conference.

But, the story of the number, type, and quality of changes is one that is told elsewhere (see Siddle, 1988). Today, I wish to highlight student interview data and hypothesize why students make so many changes after the first mini-lesson and the teacher comments, and make such fewer changes after the peer conference and the second mini-lesson.

Student Perspectives on Interventions

We begin with the interventions to receive the highest student

response: the first mini-lesson and the teacher comments. Secondarily, we consider the peer conference and the second mini-lesson.

Mini-Lesson One (ML 1) and the Teacher Comments (TC)

Immediately obvious about the ML 1 and TC , the interventions that receive the most response, is that these are two points where a strong directive role by the teacher is present. Interestingly, however, this correlation between response and instruction is not perceived by the students as negative. Rather, they value the teacher's help. Eugenio, for example, says he doesn't think of adding anything new to the story; he won't revise on his own because he thinks its alright as it is. "Without the teacher," Eugenio says, "I wouldn't know what to do." Likewise, Marie: "Without [the teacher's comments], I probably would have been lost. I wouldn't have known where to go." Winston comments along similar lines:

> If the teacher refused to give us any help -- that
> doesn't help us because then we don't know what to do.
> If you didn't give us any criteria, we wouldn't know
> what to look for.

Because of this valuing, one shouldn't be surprised by the close correlation between teaching instruction and the nature of the response. For example, in ML 1, Winston says, "I guess I was trying to to stretch it," Winston said during his first interview. "I think you were talking about more description and I was trying to think of places where I could inject things." Debra remembers that she tried to "extend it" because I said in

class that the papers needed extending. Kevin, by contrast, reports that he remembers being told to be "real specific." "I was trying to be specific," he says, "so I just took my first day and I started at the beginning and I wrote everything that happened from the airport to here. I was making it real specific."

Likewise, with the TC one student says, "I made the changes you suggested. . . if you hadn't wrote that [the comments], I probably would still have this [referring to the preceding version]." Or, consider Nichole:

> The coments helped me a lot. for instance, it was you idea to start [on stage instead at the beginning of the day]. I had tossed that idea becaue . . .the classmates said it would be easier to just tell it step by step and then [after the TC], I went back to the idea of beginning on stage.

That these students value the input of their teacher is a finding in contrast to earlier process writings where the teacher was encouraged to have a more diminished, facilitating role, and in support of the more recent literature which adovocates a more active presence by the teacher. Yet, the teacher is not alone in being valued. In fact, the students value the input of any person they perceive as knowing more than they do about English. Consider the following excerpt from Kevin's interview:

Kevin: That's mostly what I focused on -- on your comments. I focused on all of them.

Teacher: Suppose I hadn't given you any comments like that, what would you have done then?

Kevin: Then usually I would go get somebody else

and let them read it and tell me what I need. But, like, if there was no one at all, then maybe I'd have changed a few words and recopied it and that would have been about it.

Teacher: What people would you usually let read it?

Kevin: Adults. My friends, usually friends are like 'yeah, that's good' you know. I mean, that's all they can say. They might say something a little more, but with your parents or an adult, since they know English, they can tell you more what you can change.

* * * *

Kevin: No one of my classmates read it, just my girlfriend Aretha. She read this . . .she's real good in English.

Teacher: So what you're saying is if somebody weren't good in english, you wouldn't bother?

Kevin: Yes, cause I'm pretty good in English and I rather just do it my opinion then somebody else's who I know is not really good in English.

From his interview, it appears that Kevin values the assistance of his parents, adults, and his girlfriend. He does not value the assistance of peers in general. Why not? Because he's looking for someone "good" in Englis

Kevin is not alone in turning to adults he perceives as knowing

something about English. During the regular school year, Omaira seeks the aid of her uncle; Debra has her sister read her papers; Michael, Michelle, Chris and others give papers to their parents for reading.

One other point about this reliance on "experts to help improve their papers. Do they entirely give up editorial control? Do they just do what people tell them? How do they distinguish between what to change and what to ignore? Listen again to Kevin:

Teacher: Let's say your mother says you should change something. Do you ever not change it -- what she suggests?

Kevin: Yeah, I do, a lot of times.

Teacher: What makes the difference in when you listen to her and when you don't?

Kevin: Well ok, if it's something that I just know I like, I really like it, then I won't change it no matter what anybody says, unless it's my teacher or something.

Teacher: Then how come you change it? Because she has to grade it?

Kevin: Yeah, because she has to grade it. But if I'm just getting suggestions, then it's pretty much my own decision as to whether I want to change it or not.

Kevin maintains editorial control as long as he perceives the expert's opinion as "suggestions". He does not see teacher's comments as

suggestions; he sees those comments as making a grade difference.

In this perspective, Kevin is also not alone. The students made changes that, in Eugenio's words, "satisfy what [the teacher] said." Even students who say they did not feel compelled to follow teacher suggestions did, in fact, follow the suggestions.

Interestingly, however, the students do not perceive this grade association any more negatively than the dominant role of the teacher. In fact, they talk very positively about the essays they produced with the teacher's help. Uniformly, they indicate that they like their final version the best. Says Michael: "I like six (the one after the TC) alot. I really do. Six I'm really proud of."

The Peer Conference (PC) and the Second Mini-Lesson (ML 2)

Given the desire for help by someone good in English, the response of students to the PC should not be unexpected. Unlike the other interventions (where students made a lot of changes and revised primarily on a sentence level), the PC precedes fewer changes and those made are most often word and word unit substitutions. As such, it is more closely related to the types of revisions that students make when no interventions are present. As Kevin hinted earlier, the data from interviews reveals this lack of attention is because the students do not receive substantive comments from their peers. Says Michael in general regarding peers reading his papers:

> I usually don't let other people read over [my paper]

> because I know what I like and I know what I don't like and I know other people try to help and they give you what they like and what they don't like, but I've found that usually what they don't like really doesn't help that much.

Marie, in describing the peer conferences she's experienced at home, says the problem is that students sometimes are not in a "working mood; they really just aren't that much help".

Kevin and Ruth are more specific in providing reasons why peer conferences aren't helpful.

> Kevin: I may have looked at [peer comments], maybe change a few things, but usually if someone is on the same level that I am, I really don't pay much attention to it.
>
> Teacher: What if they have a really good idea?
>
> Kevin: Well, then maybe I would change it if it was really good. If it was better than my idea then I would change it. But, most of the time it's just like well, 'that nice,' 'it's ok', you know. And I'm guilty of that myself. It's hard for me to tell the people what should be done differently. I can't do that.

Here Kevin focuses on the fact that neither he nor his classmates often provide the type of feedback that would help an author. This observation is supported by Ruth.

> . . .when my classmates read my papers, they won't

> give negative comments. I think none of us do . . . give negative comments about our friend's papers. We look at the good side about them. We never look at the bad side about the papers. We will point out grammar, but if its ideas, we won't say the ideas are bad or anything.

Like Kevin, Ruth indicates that students perhaps are more sensitive to feelings than they are truthful in criticizing the work of their classmates. The data base supports these ideas, as few suggestions, in fact, are made by peers.

But what of ML 2? This intervention, like ML 1 and the TC, has direct teacher input. Yet, the student response to it is almost as little as to the PC. The reason for this may be summed rather briefly: Students say that they had "already done" what was being asked for in ML 2. As a result, they either do not revise at all, make minimal changes, or seek the help of outside people. Thus, the ML 2, rather than causing a specific response, seems to cause the most confusion as to what to change. I have concluded that a point exists of diminishing return with the mini-lessons. An additional lesson seems valuable only if the students perceive that they are being given new information.

Discussion

The response and comments of these African-American and Latino students lead us in two directions: 1) that for these students, at least, the input of a teacher is valued (as long as that input is perceived as providing new information), and 2) that peer conferences are not valued

because they do not generally perceive peers as being able to help. This last section considers reasons for this response.

If one were to consider the theoretical stance of Michelle Foster, the results are not surprising. In her dissertation (1987), she describes a classroom where the teacher had students write essays at night and work in groups to edit them the next day. In response to the lack of teacher directives, an irate young man says the following:

> I didn't feel she was teaching us anything. She wanted us to correct each others papers and we were there to learn from her. She didn't teach anything, absolutely nothing.
>
> Maybe they're trying to learn what Black folks knew all the time. We understand how to improvise, how to express ourselves creatively. When I'm in a classroom, I'm not looking for that, I'm looking for structure, the more formal language. (p. 32)

Foster's student's description is strikingly consistent with that of my student -- Omaira. Describing her process classroom at home, Omaira says "we weren't taught the right way." Ruth also mentioned that she "wasn't helped" by the frequent revising (without teacher input) and peer conferencing at home.

Possible reasons for this valuing of the teacher's input are addressed by Delpit (1988). In describing her work in Papua, New Guinea and Alaskan villages, she says the following:

> . . . I find it unquestionably easier -- psychologically

> and pragmatically -- if some kind soul has keyed me in on such matters as appropriate dress, interactional styles, and taboo words or actions. I contend that it is much the same for those seeking to learn the rules of the culture of power. Unless one has the leisure of a lifetime of "immersion" to learn them, explicit presentation makes learning immeasurably easier.

The students in this case do not speak about cultures of power and the need for these to be made explicit. However, they do consistently seek the assistance of people they perceive as being able to help them with their writing skills. This person is most often the teacher; the power of the relationship is clear, but the role is not viewed negatively.

But, in writing terminology, why are the ML I and the TC so successful? I argue that it is at these points that students are able to "resee" their papers. Bartlett (1982) has suggested that students are unable to correct errors in their own text because of "blindness" (p. 199). Apparently, what allows students to make so many changes after these interventions is a "reseeing".

Earlier comments from the students themselves have supported this notion. "We don't know what else to do," they often say as explanation for their lack of revision activity when no interventions are present. Debra explains: "At home, I want to revise, but I don't know how to." Likewise Omaira:

> [paraphrase]
> Sometimes I get stuck. When I do and I don't like it, I just leave it alone. I don't know how to change it. I just know it's not like I want it to be.

Yet, unlike these earlier situations they describe, after ML 1 and the TC students make major additions which elaborate their ideas. Apparently, something in the intervention has caused them to see more.

Thus, mini-lessons and teacher comments, when providing new information, may be important as additions in process classrooms for some students. In fact, these interventions produce large numbers of student changes; the changes make the essays better; and student appreciate the input. Of course, the results do not present evidence that the interventions will make the students better writers in general (for example, teaching them to internalize the feedback that helps them resee). More longitudinal work must be done to answer this question.

Yet, if we concede the need for more directive feedback from the teacher, does this mean that we give up on the peer conference? In spite of the low response of the students, I think not. Further, I have reason to believe that students can be taught to work successfully in groups.

During the following summer, this study was replicated using the same interventions and the same students. While the results of this replication are a separate story to be told at a later time, my impression of the raw data indicates that students valued the conference more, at least in conversation, than they did the previous summer. Even though students were given no more guidance for the PC than before, more frequently, they talked about the value of having peers read their papers. That students perhaps can be "taught " to value peers critical review and ideas is also supported by the general teaching technique of the special

Thus, perhaps one way to give students a basis from which to evaluate and comment on other's papers is to give them a language with which to converse. This hypothesis is supported in the work of Bizzell (1986) who notes that students simply do not have enough of a knowledge of academic discourse to help each other (p. 67).

Secondly, I think students must be taught to value the comments of their peers. The PC in this case provides some reason to believe that this would not be a difficult task, in spite of the devaluing comments that students generally make. True, the PC produces fewer changes in student papers. However, of the changes that are made, the results which examine the relationship of the change to the content of the intervention indicate that some of the changes are the result of suggesions offered by peers. In Nichole's case, for example, the PC precedes a substantial revision, one prompted because her conference partners suggested the story might be better told in chronological order. Other students regard the smaller changes suggested by their peers. While these data cannot resolve the questions, I think the comments from the following summer suggest the possibility that students can come to value the help of one another.

If in fact, having a language to evaluate papers and valuing the comments of peers are necessary components to make the peer conference work, then these possibilities might provide some explanation for the conflicting findings in the literature on peer conferences. Some conferences produce positive responses; some produce negative responses -- the difference may be in the preparation that students receive for conference activity, a preparation that goes much further than just the

structuring of the conferences on a particular day.

Limitations and Conclusion

The larger study (Siddle, 1988) notes as its limitations the influence of the environment, particularly the influence of a minority teacher with minority students, as well as the ordering of the interventions. However, I think for this discussion two other factors are more importantly considered:

First, are these responses cultural differences or do they apply to all students? Based on my interviews with students in a writing program in rural North Carolina, I am inclined to say that all students appreciate guidance when performing an unknown task (I also see this appreciation in my doctoral students as they begin their dissertations). The degree to which some students find a directive approach intrusive probably depends largely on how comfortable students already are with the task at hand.

I also think African-American Black people, at least, might be a bit more structure oriented in their approach to tasks. Certainly this is suggested in the work of Foster (1987), Delpit (1988), and Hale-Benson (1987). More work, of course, will have to be done with a sample which includes both majority and minority students to begin to ascertain the extent of the differences in response.

A second issue seems also important to consider. Does such adherence to the teacher mean that we fail to give power to students, both as writers for themselves and as respondents to peer writing? I think not. In fact, it is my contention that by providing more directive instruction

we give students access to a power with writing that they do not have as long as they are confined by their own insecurities about written expression. Further, I don't think giving power and providing structure have to be mutually exclusive. Once students have/understand the structure and can manipulate it to suit their own purposes, they have acquired power.

The student that I began with, Michael, concluded his essay by using the classic "what I learned from this . . ." I would like to take a similar approach. From this work I am forced to advocate interventions as important additions to process classrooms. I see interventions as a way of giving students language. Moreover, by giving them language, I think we give them power to help themselves and each other. This is what I have learned from listening to these student voices.

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The Effect of Intervention Strategies on the Revisions Minority Students Make In the Narrative Essay

Data Overview

Figure 1

Sequence of Interventions

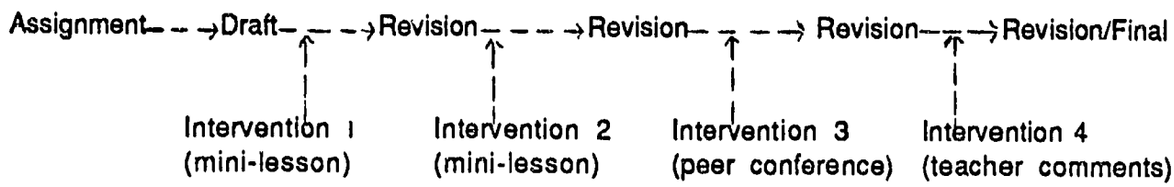

Figure 2

Breakdown of Changes After Each Intervention