REFEREED ARTICLE

Motivating High School Students to Revise

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Abstract

Students often resist revising their writing, and the final copies often look much the same as the first draft. Additionally, the high school environment often quells student revision. Many teachers lack writing training, and therefore struggle to give direction to students. However, as the author of this article discovered, incorporating and teaching revision strategies is manageable. If teachers can start teaching revision strategies, and change the practices that hamper the writing process, student writing can only improve. Learning how to revise is an important and necessary skill for all writers, no matter their level or ability.

"Do I really have to do a good copy? My handwriting is really neat in this one." How many times do teachers hear similar types of student comments? An even more troubling thought is where the student received the idea that a good copy simply meant more legible handwriting. Students usually understand the necessity for editing because they want to catch their spelling, grammar and capitalization mistakes. However, revision – the adding, subtracting, and reorganizing of ideas – is a difficult concept to teach and the process to which students are often the most resistant.

Many ineffective practices are currently employed in high school classrooms, which actually undermine the writing process. Part of the problem is the need for teachers to record copious marks in high school, and cover a vast curriculum. This need for marks, combined with a lack of training in teaching writing (Kolling, 2002), can result in a hurried or often sparse approach to revision. For effective revision to take place, high school teachers must scrutinize their role in terms of the feedback that they give to students. Teachers must teach students revision strategies. Additionally, peer evaluation plays a fundamental role in the revision process, and teachers need to experiment with different models, even if the implementation can prove challenging. Finally, teachers need to seek out new audiences for their student writers, in order to give them a reason for writing, beyond the threat of grades. In effect, the goal is to create a flexible system that encourages writing as a process delivered by teachers who equip students with strategies to evaluate and improve their own writing.

The Teacher's Role

Writing anxiety's effects upon student achievement are well-documented (Thompson, 1980). Revision can often be the spot where many writers either surrender, hoping to finish the piece as quickly as possible, or become open to the idea of developing a stronger piece. Teachers can be an important variable in this decision. Beginning writers, and even the more experienced, resist revision because they interpret it as meaning they have not done it correctly the first time (Kolling, 2002). Students "like it the way it is" (Kindzierski, 2009) and, as teachers, we must try to remember the frustrations of revision: a lengthy and messy process. Student writers may feel protective of their first draft, and be resistant to any modifications or omissions. If teachers are more sensitive to the messages that they send to students (usually via written feedback), it may ease anxiety, which in turn could produce a stronger piece.

Time is an essential ingredient in the writing process. Teachers, and the high school system, need to allow the space and time for revision to happen. Many teachers are under constraints to get the product finished and move on to the next assignment. Timed essays, which are often a

constant in high school classrooms, do not fit well within the structure of the writing process (Worden, 2009). One only needs to scan literature on Writer's Workshop instruction to see that many of the ideas are directed at elementary or middle school (Graves et al., 1998). Perhaps this middle school focus is because middle school is perceived as having the time and space for the writing process, or perhaps teachers assume that by high school students have mastered writing skills, and the teacher merely needs to give the assignment, determine the due date, and tell students to begin. The reality, as any high school teacher knows, is that large deficiencies exist in many students' writing skills.

The challenge is to encourage revision in a rigid system with students who are unmotivated to make changes because they are either too attached to their first draft or simply want to get the assignment completed. The first step in making that system more accommodating for student writing is recognizing that writing is a process that requires time for all its stages. As any writer knows, writing an original piece of writing can be more difficult on a strict timeline. Writers often need time to discuss their work with fellow writers, as well as with the teacher. Teachers need to encourage on-task behaviour, but also recognize that for some students, on some days, the process may take longer than the teacher had planned.

Changing Teacher Feedback

Teacher feedback, both written and oral, is fundamentally important, but teachers cannot focus on every aspect of the writing; to do so would undermine student confidence (Treglia, 2009), resulting in a weaker product. Teachers often have the feeling that students, particularly weak students, will not revise unless teachers make copious comments on the rough drafts. Then teachers are dismayed when the students hand in the good copy with none of the suggested revisions completed. This practice of marking every mechanical error on a paper can be attributed to the pressure that teachers feel to correct all mistakes, because society has come to believe this is the role of the English teacher (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). Moreover, teachers cannot focus only on mechanical errors, because students then think that revision is only fixing mechanical errors (Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). Furthermore, by correcting every single mechanical error, often at the expensive of ideas and organization, students lose ownership over their work (Atwell, 1987). The question then becomes, who is the real author: teacher or student?

Effective comments, whether written or oral, are those that focus on ideas or organization (Treglia, 2009) in student-friendly language. Specific comments such as "You're off the subject here" and "Now talk about another disadvantage" (Treglia, 2009, p. 80) have been found to be the most effective in resulting in changes. Reviewing the rubric during the revision process will also encourage students to revise for ideas and organization (Dean, 2006). Many times, teachers give the rubric to students, but do not spend time reviewing it with them. Students need to be encouraged to use the rubric, and feedback comments should be in language similar to that of the rubric. There is no point in using terminology such as "vague" or "awkward" if it is meaningless to the student. Comments need to be specific to the writer's work and in language comprehensible to the writer.

Conferencing with students, either during class or after class, can be an extremely effective way to assist students, as well, but teachers need to be aware of their conferencing style. Atwell (1986) encouraged teachers to listen carefully and ask questions about the piece, but to avoid writing on the paper: "Remember the centrality of ownership in students' growth as writers. The piece of writing belongs to the writer" (p. 95). Teachers should guide the students towards revision, rather than telling them what to change (Stemper, 2002).

Fat Drafting and Revising Strategies

Before revision begins, the student needs to have a lengthy enough piece, or there will be little to revise. Bishop (2004) noted that sparse drafts are often the case for student writers and that "drafting generously offers writers more ways to saying it – some of which they'll like and some of which they won't" (p. 14). Bishop called this process of elaborating upon the ideas "fattening up" (p. 17), and used a number of strategies to teach revision. Hyperlinks were one strategy that involved "drawing in imaginary hyperlinks with markers and then writing the text for these links" (Bishop, p. 19). As a writing teacher at Al Bayan Bilingual School in Kuwait, I asked a grade 10 writing class to take this idea one step further. Students created actual hyperlinks with Microsoft Word for their drafts, and later incorporated the links back into the revision copy. Each hyperlink was evaluated for the expansion of the ideas and the organization of those hyperlinked texts. Some students had difficulty understanding why they were not doing actual hyperlinks to websites, as they had done in other classes. However, the final result was that students did add more detail to their drafts, and the placing of the hyperlinks forced them to think about the organization of the paper, as well. It also resulted in some students doing additional research for their topic when they realized the skeletal structure of their drafts. I would repeat this process, substituting markers for computers.

Once students have developed a draft with stronger ideas, they need strategies to determine how to organize the entire piece, the individual paragraphs, and the sentences within those paragraphs (Dean, 2006). Dean asked students to outline their ideas after the draft, or write a brief summary for each paragraph. If the students are unable to do this task, it may be because there is more than one idea in each paragraph. Local revision is about the effectiveness of sentence fluency and understanding that sentence length is an important tool. I am following Dean's recommendation by asking my grade 10 class to count the number of words in the sentences of one paragraph to determine lengths. Dean gave her students the following guidelines regarding sentence length: "Short sentences will give the idea some punch. Long sentences are good for background information" (p. 153). Dean also recommended sentence-composing activities, such as those given by Killgallon & Killgallon (2007), as a way of strengthening sentence structure and variety. Organization is a difficult concept for weak writers to grasp, but giving students concrete strategies to follow makes the process much more tangible.

Peer Evaluation

Another important element in revision is peer evaluation. Teacher feedback is not enough; students need their peers. Peer evaluation gives students a larger audience for their work (Dean, 2006). It also gives them an opportunity to discuss their writing. Student discussion is a key component of the process, but it is sadly often discouraged in many writing classrooms (Stemper, 2002). For weaker writers, peer evaluation exposes them to stronger writing, and allows them to reflect upon their own work. Finally, peer evaluation is something students generally enjoy that can also serve to ease writing anxiety (Gokce & Atay, 2007). Thus, peer evaluation, while difficult to manage, should be a staple in all writing classrooms.

However, in order for peer evaluation to work effectively, students must be trained to recognize effective and ineffective peer comments (Dean, 2006). Dean (2006) asked students to rate their partner's paper on its ability to maintain their interest level, and assigned marks for the task of peer evaluating another's paper. This rating system dissuades students from marking papers of their classmates as merely "excellent" (Dean, p. 163). Neubert and McNelis (1990) advocated training students to determine, rate, and categorize peer comments as "useful" or "vague" (pp. 52-53). As a result of direct instruction of peer editing, Neubert and McNelis noticed an increased percentage of useful comments, while the number of vague comments dropped.

The process of training students can be time-consuming, but hopefully, if done at the beginning of the year, these training techniques will be effective for the remainder of the year.

Peer editing can be done in small groups with everyone reading the same paper, or with partners exchanging papers. However, the least productive type of peer feedback is what Dean (2006) called the "read-a-neighbor's-paper-and-tell-him-what-you-think kind of peer readings" (p. 163). Teachers need to model how to peer edit. They also need to recognize that this process may not work successfully the first time. Thus, the research supports the idea that perseverance with peer editing pays off and results in stronger revisions (Kindzierski, 2009).

Authentic Purpose and Audience

It is incumbent upon teachers to discover ways to motivate students to revise. Obviously, grades are the ultimate motivating force for getting the writing done, but ironically not motivation to do a strong job. However, when students are aware that someone other than the teacher is reading their work, an authentic reason for writing is created. Even when that audience is a pretend audience, it can still be a motivating force (Dean, 2006). I am currently searching for forums for students to publish their work for a wider audience, and have found a blog to be very helpful as a publishing venue. High school students, who initially complained about the blog, are now commenting on each other's work without being asked to by the teacher. Next semester, I plan to set up Wikispaces for each student for use as a writing portfolio and as a tool for collaborative writing. In another effort to promote purpose in writing, I will give grade 9 students the assignment of writing and sending business letters. This assignment may take the form of a fan club letter, a complaint letter to the school's administration about dress code, or suggestion letter to the makers of a video game. The student will generate the topic, and in generating the topic, take more ownership over the writing. In the past, I asked students to write a letter to S. E. Hinton, author of *The Outsiders,* after studying the novel. These letters were perhaps the strongest piece of writing from the class all year. Even though the class received only a generic response from the publisher, the letter hung on the wall for the entire year.

Conclusion

As a result of writing and researching this topic, I have implemented new revision strategies such as changes in teacher feedback (more individual conferencing, less focus on marking all mechanical errors), the use of fat drafting strategies, and the introduction of peer evaluation. Will these changes produce stronger writing? While that remains to be seen, it is apparent that the status quo is not working with many students. Thus, if student writing is going to improve, it will not happen if teachers view writing as a product simply to be graded, given back, and forgotten. Student writing will, however, improve if teachers see the value in revision and understand that it needs to be taught as a series of strategies with the goal of empowering students in high school and beyond.

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