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Teaching Revision as an Act of Voice and Agency

Revision is arguably the heart of the writing process, but teachers and students may sidestep the complexities in favor of the quick finish. By surfacing the classroom ecologies and practices involved in supporting student writers, the authors discover revision as a site for the development of agency.

Many students enter college without really ever having been asked to rethink their views on an issue or to restructure the approach they've taken in an essay. They've been trained in how to find and fix mistakes, and perhaps even in how to respond to specific questions about a draft posed by their teacher. But their final drafts are essentially the same as their first ones—only cleaner, smoother, more polished. They have been taught how to edit but not how to revise.

—*Joseph Harris,* Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts

Revision is arguably the heart of the writing process, but many teachers and students sidestep the complexities in favor of the quick finish. Teachers may decide they don't have time for a further round of drafting, and many students are eager to be "done" with a paper rather than look for ways to improve it. Yet revision is too important to push aside—our work has led us to believe that when revision is at the center of classroom practice, it can be a powerful site for the development of student voice, agency, and community.

Our focus on revision grew out of our involvement with the National Writing Project's College, Career, and Community Writing Program (C3WP), a collaborative inquiry into the teaching of source-based argument writing being led by numerous NWP teachers across the country. Its culminating project invites students to engage in extended research on an issue they care about, develop their own perspective within the ongoing conversation of other authors and texts, and contribute their writing to effect change. C3WP draws on works that demystify academic writing, such as Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say / I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* and Joseph Harris's *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*. C3WP teaches revision through targeted lessons that focus on particular argument skills, such as adding nuance to one's claims or establishing the credibility of one's sources. Rather than a surface approach, these targeted returns to writing-in-progress provide opportunities for students to rethink initial opinions and deepen understanding. We call this a "layered" approach to teaching revision (see Rimer and Croucher), similar to the process one uses to add complexity to a piece of wood by adding layers of varnish. Layered instruction creates time for the thinking of student writers and the relationships within the classroom community to mature—similar to slow food, where additional time and iterations allow for the development of flavor.

Slowing the Classroom for Revision

But does this process work in a real classroom? Revision requires returning to a piece of writing with fresh eyes to develop and refine it, which presumes a writer's personal investment. "My students don't seem to feel ownership of anything—not even the title of their papers," remarked one teacher during a recent professional development session. Many teachers in the room shared a similar sense of powerlessness as they tried to imagine

their most reluctant student engaging as an active writer and peer collaborator. Others commented that students had firm opinions that they rarely, if ever, modified in the writing process. To more closely examine what happens in the classroom when revision is approached as a layered process, Mary Sawyer and Jacqueline Rapant visited the classroom of Christopher Mazura and conducted interviews with his twelfth-grade students. Students typically sit in desk clusters, allowing them to easily conference with each other over Chromebooks and shared documents, but the desks can be moved into a large semicircle for whole-class instruction. Mazura's targeted lessons and peer feedback are vital:

> [Mr. Mazura] tries to focus our revision. [He'll say], "Today we are trying to make the best claim possible." Then we read [our draft] for claim and the best evidence to support the claim . . . and give it to two separate people. By having more people read it, you can make your piece make sense to more groups of people than just those who are like-minded. (Jimmy)

Students report that in Mazura's class they are learning "an advanced version of revision" that differs from previous versions focused on correction. The classroom alchemy supports collaborative partnerships among student writers and privileges their ideas, voice, and ability to make each other's texts effective for their readers.

Six Approaches into Revision

Mazura has spent the past 15 years developing his practice in the teaching of writing, which reflects both NWP's process orientation (Whitney and Johnson) and his background in contemplative education. He teaches revision through *slow, layered* teaching, asking students to explore various approaches as they respond to writing-in-progress (their own and their peers'): *noticing, naming, pointing, appreciating, evaluating, and revising.* We asked Mazura to describe and explain these approaches.

Notice

There is a kind of standing-still quality . . . in which comments and remarks become unimportant, and seeing things as they are becomes the real thing.
—*Chogyam Trungpa*

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Instructions: Read through the text once. As you read, notice. Resist the urge to mark the text.

Noticing is a retraining in how to approach writing-in-progress. In the first reading of a peer text, students are invited to notice both the content of the text and their own inner experience as they read. Regarding the content, they practice *believing*: "not just listening to views different from our own and holding back from arguing with them; not just trying to restate them without bias (as Carl Rogers advocated), but actually *trying* to believe them" (Elbow, "The Believing Game" 2; italics in original). Students may naturally notice a variety of things (individual ideas, sequencing, rhetorical moves). Often when students read to edit, they approach with a habituated critical eye, attending to mistakes for the purpose of correcting errors. This narrow and narrowing approach to a draft challenges any sense of possibility for evolution of thinking and cauterizes imagination. Noticing encourages students to approach the writing as a (re)familiarization with the text: it is like greeting, with a sense of genuine curiosity and generosity, an old friend.

Regarding their inner experience, students simply notice any thoughts, judgments, or confusions as they read. They become familiar with their biases—what they like, what they do not, what they accept, what they cannot. This process involves cultivating a discipline of noticing the readerly experience and attending the words in front of them. Students are encouraged to experiment with this approach—to play—and to articulate what they notice: *What is it like to notice what you think and simply return to the writing? What does it feel like to let go of the desire to correct in order to attend more closely to the idea arising from the space between the words?*

Name

When we know the name of something, it brings us closer to the ground. It takes the blue out of our mind; it connects us to the earth. If I walk down the street and see "dogwood," "forsythia," I feel more friendly toward the environment. I am noticing what is around me and can name it. It makes me feel more awake.

—*Natalie Goldberg,* Writing Down the Bones

Instructions: Reread the text, perhaps with some recollections of what you noticed in mind. In the margin of the text, name what you notice with a word or phrase. Names are a mirror—a reflection of what is there.

In the course of peer revision, students read each other's work multiple times. This second read is implicitly beneficent: readers *name*, in conventional or idiosyncratic (but always neutral) terms, what they notice by occasionally placing a word or two in the margin ("anecdote," "evidence," "claim," "supporting your point"). Students are further inculcated into the norms of a writing community and an asset-based approach: *If you are a reader, first ask the writer about their project before reading. Focus on the text itself rather than on any habitual agendas when offering feedback. If you are a writer, do not ask readers to search for mistakes or say anything about your perception of its quality—no need for a ritual apology.*

In the context of focused practice, students are asked to keep in mind aspects of writing craft or skills they are learning, for example "linking evidence to claim" or "appeal to pathos." As students read with these disciplinary names in mind, they may become visible to them, intentionally used by the writer for an effect. When readers notice these specific moves, they literally see the writing "at work."

On one level, asking students to name requires they hold attention to writers' words long enough to understand them, discern something about the writing, and bring into language a conception of the writing. Through this process, students' inner work as readers and writers—the meaning negotiations we all make silently—is made visible. On another level, privileging the practice of naming focuses attention on the writing itself (not the content, assignment, rubric, or standards) as the primary work of the community.

Point

Start by simply pointing to the words and phrases which most successfully penetrated your skull: perhaps they seemed loud or full of voice; or they seemed to have a lot of energy; or they somehow rang true; or they carried special conviction.

—*Peter Elbow,* Writing without Teachers

Instructions: Now highlight or underline something you named—from where it seems to begin to where it seems to end.

In naming, students articulate what is happening; in pointing, they consider where the effect begins and ends. With a pen or the highlight feature of a word processing program, readers place a visual frame around a part of the text, crystallizing it as a locus for conversation. This bracketing requires that students reread with greater precision, deeply considering the writer's purpose as it relates to what is happening in specific parts of the writing.

Asking students to point is not about decontextualizing a "hook," isolating punctuation, or forcing artificial boundaries ("The writer's voice ends . . . *here?*"). This process isn't clean. Rather than rely on writing's mechanical boundaries, students are asked to read more closely while keeping the whole in mind. Pointing, quite simply, gives the reader and writer something specific to talk about and creates opportunities for students to discuss the writing in concrete and meaningful ways.

In pointing, the reader is particularly responsible for attending closely, intentionally, and carefully to the writing. It valorizes the writer (and the writing) by bringing to the fore specific phrases unique to that moment of reading. The reader can say: "This, right here, right now, is doing something *to me*." As this practice unfolds in community, the group can develop an awareness of not only the discrete moves classmates are making but also the specific ideas they're working with. And by publicly noticing, naming, and pointing at the writing as having an effect, students begin to understand themselves as important members of a writing community and begin to develop a sense of who they are as writers and what they care about as individuals.

Appreciate

As a reader giving your reactions, keep in mind that you are not answering a timeless, theoretical

question about the objective qualities of those words on that page. You are answering a time-bound, subjective but *factual* question: what happened in *you* when you read the words in *this time*.

—*Peter Elbow,* Writing without Teachers

> *Instructions: Return to a section where you "pointed" at something. In the margin, articulate your experience of it. What did this place in the text cause you to feel, think, or wonder? Be careful and precise. Your comments set the tone for subsequent conversations with the writer.*

Situating students' work at the center of classroom inquiry conveys that student writing has value. Because this writing may have been read for years primarily to correct what is wrong, it can take practice to notice what *is* working in the writing and for the community to experience this writing as worthy, even though it may not be finished or "perfect." For these reasons, the class engages in the practice of *appreciation*.

It may be easier to describe the act of *appreciation* by considering what it is not: it is neither simple value judgment nor empty praise. Teachers of writing are familiar with what can happen when students are asked to give "positive feedback" without explicit modeling. In the margin, we might see: "Good!" "Nice job!" or perhaps a simple emoji :). While this kind of praise can be temporarily validating, teachers also know it is possible to pepper a page with compliments without having attended to the writing at all. Used routinely, praise can actually devalue the writing by dismissing it as complete or failing to acknowledge the writing's power.

Appreciation offers an articulation of the reader's *experience*, which may benefit the writing in the short term and the writer over the long haul. When readers appreciate something, they first attend to it and honor it with a response—they begin a dialogue with the writing. Appreciation not only validates the writing by conveying it was considered but also explicitly illustrates the writing's impact. When conferring, readers share the comment(s) verbally to open a conversation about what the writing is doing well. The earlier work of naming gives students language to use when speaking about writing, and the neutral comment(s) in the margin can be a launchpad for a discussion of the ideas, the writer's choices, or how the writing is at work in a rhetorical context.

With appreciation, contrary to the closure of correction, the writing is acknowledged as living—and comes alive again in a discussion that may lead to its evolution. While appreciation may include descriptive validation and musing about writerly choices, it may also surface conversation about how the text is working in a way not previously considered by the writer. In this way, *appreciation* opens a door to a practice of a critical, communal evaluation of writing.

Evaluate

In general, the students' experiences with writing instruction have taught them that talking about writing-in-progress is a matter of offering "constructive criticism"; it is a matter, that is, of helping the writer decide how to improve his or her text. But as we proceed with our various conversations about writing-in-progress in my class, most students eventually let down their guards enough to begin exploring possibilities in their writing—not possibilities for "improvement" but possibilities for thinking differently or more carefully about important aspects of their lives that emerge in their writing.

—*Robert Yagelski,* Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability

> *Instructions: In the margin of the text, note places where the writing resonates. Also note areas that your conversations with the writer revealed are ripe for reconsideration. Next to these, you may want to jot a question, name a curiosity, or a pose a possibility.*

As students deeply consider the writing, traditional correction, editing, and rating are abandoned to allow space to appreciate the work as it is. In conversation, appreciation can foster a sense of trust not only in one another but also in the shared experience of talking about writing. Upon this firm foundation of shared experience—of a text and of a discipline—the writer may choose to invite the reader into further conversation about next steps.

On one hand, the work of feedback has already been done: student writers have experienced their text through a peer's eyes and may already have some ideas for revision. But on the other hand, as teachers of writing understand, without explicit feedback student writers may remain rudderless when it comes to putting the writing to more robust work. Students are encouraged to stay with the process, continuing in the work of collaborative evaluation, which often unfolds in two stages.

First, there can be some acknowledgment of any shared readerly experiences of alignment, which extends *appreciation* into confirmation in the form of a "√" or similar mark in the margin. This inscription acknowledges the deep work of the writer writing, the reader reading, and the community collaborating: *This place in the writing resonates.* Evaluating can be a way to indicate places in the text where the writing seems to be doing its work for the reader and writer.

Second, there may be persistent areas where reader or writer experience a sense of uncertainty, disconnect, or confusion. Students can identify these as places where they may have hesitated, experienced an interruption of a train of thought, or had to reread. In earlier conversations, writer and reader might have been compelled to "correct" these sections or even avoid them, unsure of what to say or suggest. Readers need only note with a "★" a couple of such places that seem ripe for rethinking and that may call for formal revision. To provide the writer with some direction, readers can jot an open-ended question in the margin that asks the writer to consider the idea more deeply or from another perspective: *Might you mean X? But would Y agree? Does this evidence counteract your claim that X . . . ?* Or readers might name their curiosity or what drew their attention to this portion of the text: *Do you really think Y? I am having trouble understanding {"word"}.* More explicitly, a reader may want to pose one or more possibilities for this section, naming something they want to know more about: *How about considering what Y says in {article name}, p. X?* And finally, a reader may point the writer toward specific ideas for revision: *You might want to introduce some alternative viewpoints after this sentence here.*

Revise

Ultimately, then, writing instruction should serve two main functions: to help students understand and harness the power of writing not only as a technology for communication but also as a way of understanding themselves and the world around them; and to foster a different way of being in the world, one informed by the inherent interconnectedness of all life.

—*Robert Yagelski,* Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability

Instructions: Rethink. Talk. Review resources. Rewrite.

When it comes to actual revision, student writers are empowered to draw on the resources they need to make decisions in support of their intentions—resources that are, first and foremost, collaboratively created. Writers begin rewriting from the recommendations of their community of readers. Often, this is enough to spur students into revisions that impel the writing. But if these suggestions are not enough, students may also draw on our collection of writing about writing, which appears both in our notebooks and in the margins of texts we've read. These include mentor texts, teacher models, and peer writing that students have annotated in their study of writing craft. Students are thus able to draw on the wisdom earned through the practice of attending to the words of many different writers. Students may also draw from shared experiences of direct instruction where writing moves were the subject of inquiry. Students might recall a lesson on connecting evidence to claims or they may apply previously studied resources, such as sentence frames drawn from composition texts such as *They Say / I Say*.

Students may have conferences with the teacher or may return to chat with one another. Formal revision continues to be driven by the collaborative practices of noticing, naming, pointing, appreciating, and evaluating as students reread, talk through, and rewrite in community. And, at the end of the day, if students desire, they can return to the revision heuristics learned across the course of their schooling. If they want to shoot for the *STAR* approach to revision, so be it: they'll be doing it with their feet on the ground, propelled by deeper experience with conversations about writing, a sense of themselves in a community, and the knowledge that their words matter.

Revision: Building Voice, Agency, and Community

Many of us have asked students to "peer revise" with a rubric or apply an acronym to a draft in an attempt to help them manage the messy process of revision. Or we have simply told students to revise without much direction at all. But, in treating revision as a procedure to complete rather than an opportunity to rethink and reshape writing in community, students become adept at following a set of directions to produce writing in exchange for a grade, and they remain students, not writers. What

we have written about here is a layered approach to *teaching* revision in a community of writers. Throughout this process, students strengthen their ability to read, respond to, and talk about writing as they reread, rethink, and rewrite. Because the common goals of developing a skill or producing a "better" text are subordinated to the collaborative process of inquiry into ideas, students gain a sense of connection to each other as thinkers and writers. Mazura's students are able discuss how revision this year differs from earlier school experiences:

> When we did peer revisions [in previous years] . . . it was geared toward grammar and structure and everything. It was more like "this isn't the correct word usage." So, it was more of like, corrections from teachers. [This year] . . . it's more about conversation which is where most of the thinking happens. Because you can focus on grammar later, but if the initial claim or logical process isn't there, then there is no argument. (Kaitlyn)

As a result of slowing down the writing process, revision provides an opportunity for students to have their ideas validated and developed in community. They broaden their perspectives beyond the individual, gaining a sense of their own voice in the process. When the goal of writing instruction is to support not only college but also civic engagement, as is the case in Mazura's classroom and C3WP, the revision process we have described provides student writers the opportunity to envision their writing as having an effect on the wider community. Indeed, eight of Mazura's students had their letters to the editor published in the local newspaper. These letters articulated researched perspectives on community issues ranging from funding for the public library to a proposed permit for a gas station in a residential area. By bringing revision to the center of classroom inquiry, we have learned that teachers can support students in gaining voice, agency, and a deeper connection to a wider community. ⒺⒿ

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

When we're ready to share our writing with others, it is important to take time to reread what we have written to make sure that our message is clear and our spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization are polished. The word *re-vision* means to "look again." After writing an initial draft, successful writers "look again" at their writing to make sure that they have accomplished what they set out to do. Once a piece has been revised and major changes have been made, successful writers then edit or polish their writing to make certain that readers won't be confused or distracted by unintentional errors. Read on to find out where to begin in revising and editing any piece of writing! http://bit.ly/1UdqGc6