Teaching Thinking Through Teaching Revision

Composition research confirms that most students do not revise their essays, as the term *revise* is understood by expert writers. Of course, students *think* they are revising, but usually they are merely editing—checking spelling, making word substitutions, tinkering with sentences, deciding on punctuation. (Classic early studies of the revising behavior of novices versus experts include Faigley and Witte, 1981; Sommers, 1980; Flower, 1979; and Beach, 1976. Recent works on teaching revision include Booth, Colomb, and Williams, 2008; Harris, 2006; and Gopen, 2004.)

What our students need to understand is that for expert writers the actual act of writing causes further discovery, development, and modification of ideas. If one examines the evolving drafts of an expert writer, one sees the messy, recursive process of thinking itself as new ideas emerge during the drafting process. Expert writers do extensive rewriting, the final products often being substantially different from the first drafts. (To encourage this kind of global revision, I often tell students that a "C" paper is an "A" paper turned in too soon.)

The foregoing description differs from an older positivist model of the writing process that many of us of a certain age were taught in school. The old model looked like this:

A Positivist Model of the Writing Process

1. Choose a topic.
2. Narrow it.
3. Write a thesis.
4. Make an outline.
5. Write a draft.
6. Revise.
7. Edit.

This description presupposes what Elbow (1973) calls the "think, then write" model of composing in which writers discover, clarify, and organize their ideas before they start to write. But it seriously misrepresents the way most academic writers actually compose. For example, few scholars report starting an article by choosing a topic and then narrowing it. Rather, academic writers report being gradually drawn into a conversation about a question that does not yet seem resolved. The writer-to-be finds this conversation somehow unsatisfactory; something is missing, wrongheaded,

unexplained, or otherwise puzzling. Similarly, having focused on a problem, only rarely does a skilled academic writer write a thesis statement and outline before embarking on extensive exploration, conversation, correspondence with colleagues, and even, on some occasions, writing one or more drafts. A thesis statement often marks a moment of discovery and clarification—an "aha!" experience ("So *this* is my point! Here is my argument in a nutshell!") rather than a formulaic planning device at the very start of the process.

Presenting students with this problem-driven model of the writing process has a distinct advantage for teachers. It allows them to link the teaching of writing to their own interests in teaching the modes of inquiry and discovery in their disciplines. Their goal is to get students personally engaged with the kinds of questions that propel writers through the writing process. Thus the writing process itself becomes a powerful means of active learning in the discipline.

Why Don't Students Revise?

If one of our major goals is to teach thinking through revision, we need to understand more clearly why students do not revise. Our first tendency may be to blame students' lack of motivation or their ineffective time management. They do not revise because they are not interested in their work or do not care about it or simply put off getting started until the night before a paper is due. But other explanations should also be considered.

For example, one hypothesis, influenced by Piagetian theory, argues that revision requires the ability to "decenter" (Kroll, 1978; Bradford, 1983)—that is, to think like a reader instead of a writer. One of Piaget's observations is that persons identified as concrete operational reasoners have difficulty switching perspectives. If sitting in the back of a classroom, for example, a person may have trouble sketching the room from the perspective of a lecturer standing in front. By analogy, novice writers may have difficulty imagining their drafts *from a reader's perspective.* If a passage seems clear to the writer, he or she believes that it ought to be immediately clear to the reader also. Novice writers may simply not recognize their reader's confusion and consequently not recognize the need to fill in gaps, to link new information to old information, or to arrange material in the order needed by readers.

Related theories emphasize students' lack of familiarity with academic genres or with the complexity of addressing rhetorical problems (purpose, audience, genre) as well as subject matter problems. What drives revision for mature writers is their awareness of the complex conversation that a piece of writing must join—how its argument must accommodate oppos-

ing views, for example, while also contributing something new to the conversation. Thus, mature writers need multiple drafts because, in the face of many different goals and rhetorical constraints, they can concentrate on only one or two problems at a time.

Another contributing factor may be the increasingly common strategy of composing and revising on a computer screen without paper drafts. When word processing first came into vogue, several researchers (Daiute, 1986; Hawisher, 1987) showed that although word processing facilitates sentence-level revision as well as some larger-scale revisions such as additions, deletions, and block moves of text, it may actually discourage major reconceptualizing of a text—the kind of global revision that leads to substantial dismantling and rewriting. By revising from the screen rather than from a hard copy, writers see only narrow windows of their text rather than the whole. Global revision often requires the writer to revisit earlier passages, to compare, for example, a topic sentence on page 5 with what was forecast on page 2. Such a bird's-eye overview of a text is easier with hard copy than on screen, where scrolling backward is time-consuming.

Whatever the cause of students' failure to revise, teachers need to create an academic environment that encourages revision. The importance of revision has been highlighted by the NSSE/WPA research on writing assignments that contribute to deep learning (Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, and Paine, 2009). This research identifies the presence of "interactive elements" in an assignment as the first of three criteria for best practices. These interactive elements include building into the assignment opportunities for in-class brainstorming, peer review, teacher feedback on drafts, or visits to a writing center. (See Chapter Six for further discussion of the NSSE/WPA research.)

Fifteen Suggestions for Encouraging Revision

In the spirit of this research, I offer fifteen suggestions for promoting revision by building interactive elements into an assignment or a course.

1. *Profess a problem-driven model of the writing process.* Instead of asking students to choose "topics" and narrow them, encourage students to pose questions or problems and explore them. Show how inquiry and writing are related.

2. *Give problem-focused writing assignments.* Students are most apt to revise when their essays must be responses to genuine problems. See Chapter Six for advice on creating writing assignments that guide students toward a problem-thesis structure.

3. *Create active learning tasks that help students become posers and explorers of questions.* Students need to be seized by questions and to appreciate how the urge to write grows out of the writer's desire to say something new about a question or problem. Through classroom activities that let students explore their own responses to questions, students rehearse the thinking strategies that underlie revision. Chapters Eight through Thirteen focus on strategies for active learning.

4. *Incorporate low-stakes exploratory writing into your course.* Chapter Seven suggests numerous ways to incorporate exploratory writing into a course. Exploratory writing gives students the space, incentive, and tools for more elaborated and complex thinking.

5. *Build talk time and writing center conferences into the writing process.* Student writers need to talk about their ideas with others by conversing with classmates, friends, or writing center consultants/tutors. Writers need to bounce ideas off interested listeners, to test arguments, to see how audiences react, and to get feedback on drafts. In this regard, consider having students talk through their ideas in small groups before they write their first drafts. On many campuses, the writing center director can arrange for writing center consultants/tutors to conduct tutor-led brainstorming or draft workshops in class. Also encourage one-on-one writing center consultations. One of the most important services offered by writing centers is the opportunity for students to talk through their ideas in the early stages of drafting.

6. *Intervene in the writing process by having students submit something to you.* Take advantage of the summarizable nature of thesis-based writing by having students submit to you their problem proposals, thesis statements, nutshelling statements, or self-written abstracts. Use these brief pieces of writing to identify persons who need extra help. Much of this work can be done online through electronic bulletin boards or other courseware. See Chapter Fifteen for further details.

7. *Build process requirements into the assignment, including due dates for drafts.* If students are going to stay up all night before a paper is due, make that an all-night session for a mandatory rough draft rather than for a finished product.

8. *Develop strategies for peer review of drafts, either in class or out of class.* After students have completed a rough draft, well in advance of the final due date, have students exchange drafts and serve as "readers" for each other. See Chapter Fifteen for advice on conducting peer reviews.

9. *Hold writing conferences, especially for students who are having difficulty with the assignment.* Traditionally, teachers in American universities

spend more time writing comments on finished products than on holding conferences earlier in the writing process. As a general rule, time spent "correcting" finished products is not as valuable as time spent in conference with students at the rough draft stages. See Chapter Fifteen for suggestions.

10. *Require students to submit all drafts, notes, and doodles along with final copies.* Have students staple their final copies on top of draft material arranged chronologically like geological strata. Not only will you have evidence of your students' writing process, but you will also set up a powerful defense against plagiarism.

11. *Allow rewrites, or make revision-oriented comments on typed next-to-final drafts.* Many students are motivated toward revision by the hope of an improved grade. If students have an opportunity to revise an essay after you have made your comments, you will strike a major blow for writing as a process. See Chapters Five, Fifteen, and Sixteen for advice on writing marginal and end comments that encourage revision rather than cosmetic editing.

12. *Bring in examples of your own work in progress so that students can see how you go through the writing process yourself.* Students like to know that their teachers also struggle with writing. The more you can show students your own difficulties as a writer, the more you can improve their own self-images.

13. *Give advice on the mechanics of revising.* If students compose entirely online, explain the advantages of revising on a double-spaced hard copy rather than on the screen. This strategy leaves plenty of room on the page for crossing out and revising while making it easier to look back at earlier pages for inserting large-scale mapping statements, signposts, and other structural cues.

14. *Don't overemphasize essay exams.* Symbolically, essay exams convey the message that writing is a transcription of already clear ideas rather than a means of discovering and making meaning. They suggest that revision is not important and that good writers produce acceptable finished copy in one draft. Although essay exams obviously have an important place in liberal education, they should not substitute for writing that goes through multiple drafts. See Chapter Twelve for further discussion of essay exams.

15. *Hold to high standards for finished products.* Teachers are so used to seeing early drafts as final copy that they often forget how good a globally revised essay can be when teachers demand excellence. Students do not see much point in revision if they can earn A's or B's for their quickly edited first drafts.

Conclusion: The Implications of Writing as a Means of Thinking in the Undergraduate Curriculum

As this chapter has tried to show, teaching thesis-based analytical and argumentative writing means teaching the thinking processes that underlie academic inquiry. To use writing as a means of thinking, teachers need to make the design of writing assignments a significant part of course preparation and to adopt teaching strategies that give students repeated, active practice at exploring disciplinary questions and problems. Additionally, it is important to emphasize inquiry, question asking, and cognitive dissonance in courses and, whenever possible, to show that scholars in a discipline often disagree about answers to key questions. By teaching a problem-driven model of the writing process, teachers send a message to the Skylers of the world that good writing is not a pretty package for disguising ignorance. Rather it is a way of discovering, making, and communicating meanings that are significant, interesting, and challenging.

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