

ADOLESCENT WRITERS AND REVISION: AN INEVITABLE STEP

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Adolescent Writers and Revision: An Inevitable Step

Much research has been done in the area of students' attitudes toward writing and their inability to use the writing process effectively. Too often students see revision as a boring chore, not a learning experience. We felt students did not know how to correct errors found in their papers, or if they did, were unwilling to do so. With this in mind, we were motivated to create English instruction that would not only meet the needs of our middle school students, but produce better writers. Therefore we posed the following research question: How will student-writing pieces be enhanced with the implementation of structured revision strategies?

The Importance of Revision

For many students writing is a difficult undertaking. It is a multi-step process that requires creativity and individuality, but also the correct use of standard English. "...including selecting a topic and deciding what to say about it, developing an organizational framework, generating individual sentences, and dealing with the mechanics of getting particular words on the page or computer screen in the right order" (Beal, 1993). Understandably for young writers this is overwhelming. The spoken language evolves from birth, yet the written language is something that even adults continue to struggle with. When interviewed, professional writers will admit that they cannot create a first draft that eloquently conveys what they intend. "Revision is a fact of life for almost all writers who want their words to be read by others" (Bauer 1993, p. 134). As a professional writer, Bauer (1993) admits that she spends the majority of her writing time in revision. Not because she enjoys it, but because

by revising she can communicate more effectively. However, many middle school students do not understand the value of writing skills in their daily lives. With the introduction of “inventive spelling” in elementary school, many students feel that if teachers are able to decipher the meaning from their written pieces, the errors do not interfere, and they have met the requirements of the assignment. Therefore, it is not surprising that many middle school students are very poor writers.

Frustrated Students...Frustrated Teachers

Young writers may be able to envision the story they would like to create, however, the process of producing this well written piece of work seemed to be elusive. Why can a child easily put his/her ideas into words, yet cannot put those same thoughts into writing? The majority of students have outstanding imaginations and excellent story bases. They like to start writing pieces with “My name is.... and I’m going to tell you a story about...” and they love to end stories with “Thank you for reading my story”. These may be polite, but they are not the quality of writing an English teacher would like to see. Because this troubled us each time we sat down to grade a stack of poorly written papers, we decided that now was a good time to change the way we were teaching our students to write. What we felt had been missing in our classrooms was the students’ ability to utilize the writing process, particularly revision. We wanted students to leave our classrooms with the ability to produce well written, polished pieces of writing. We concluded that the key to reaching this goal was to stress the importance of revision skills, allocate the time necessary for revision, and implement various instructional strategies.

As we thought back to previous years, we recalled our frustration with the process of revision. The goal of the revision step is to meticulously read through the paper, looking not for mechanical errors, but errors that impede the audience's comprehension. The revision step should encourage writers to make more broad changes, such as adding, modifying, or deleting ideas, not individual words. Too often students see revision as a boring chore that stands between them and their word processor with its colored fonts, fancy graphics and rainbow-tinted paper (Smede, 2000). We needed to make revision a positive, beneficial "chore".

Peer-editing: The Blind Leading the Blind

We provided numerous opportunities for students to peer conference and still received very poorly written papers. Peer-editing opportunities were met with much groaning and complaining. Sharing published work is rewarding for a young author, then again, if the author does not feel the editor he or she has chosen has skills superior to his/her own, s/he is not likely to value the editors opinions or suggestions. As a result, peer-editing can be discouraging to both author and editor. As we read through various research articles, we found information that pointed to our difficulties. We wanted to help students see revision as the process of polishing already well-written work, but that is not how our students pictured it. Murray (1998) argues that students often see revision not as an opportunity to develop and improve a piece of writing but as a sign that they have failed to do it right the first time.

Many young writers are worried that they do not have enough to say in the first place, and a teacher or peer editor asking that they revise their work is often met with dismay (Beal, 1993).

I Said “Revise” not “Proofread”

It seemed so simple. Tell students what revision is. Tell them how important it is and how much better their writing will be and we won't have to read one more mundane, poorly edited paper...If only it were that easy. According to Beal (1993) increasing emphasis on revision may lead children to revise more often, but it may not mean that they are revising more effectively. Without specific explanation, many writers complete the revision step by becoming cautious recopiers, adding some new words or sentences and using neater handwriting or a different font on their “revised” drafts (Harper, 1997). These few changes do nothing to enhance the writing. After completing this kind of revision, students hand in piles of disorganized, poorly written, uninspired papers (Smede, 2000).

So what is the key to successful revision? The first step to revision is careful, thoughtful reading (Cunningham, 1988). An editor should be reading the text looking for comprehension problems: Will the reader be able to understand what I have written? Will the reader understand my story or descriptions? Are there gaps in my writing that leave the reader asking questions? This means that revision requires writers to detect these comprehension problems. This detection may be the reason that many writers do not understand how to revise.

Student's Inability to Revise

Carol Beal (1993) felt that this inability to revise could be related to three basic difficulties:

“One possibility is that children can tell fairly easily that something is wrong with their work but that they do not really know what to do about it... it may be that they cannot easily tell that the text is unclear...or they have trouble with both components” (p. 645)

This information changed how we looked at the revision process. If our students are not accomplishing what we expect during revision due to a lack of understanding, we needed to remediate that weakness. Nevertheless, we could not possibly sit down with sixty students for individual conferences to point out these errors. We needed to find a way to help them identify errors on their own.

So Now I Have to Revise?

We had been teaching the writing process for years, yet had not spent the time necessary during the revision step. Therefore, we planned to restructure the way we taught that portion of the writing process. Our project looked so good on paper. We were going to introduce the writing process and all its parts, help students brainstorm, pre-write and draft. When their first drafts were complete, we planned to make a copy for ourselves and return the original to the writer. We were then going to move into the revision step, where our students would have total ownership. With little teacher direction, they could determine what errors were present in their papers; they could make any changes they deemed necessary. This is what we had done in the past. We introduced revision, talked about what it was and assumed that students would find and fix errors. We were willing to allow students this freedom because

from the aforementioned research we knew that this would not work. Our plan was to allow students to revise on their own, and we expected minimal revision. We would then give them the copy of their paper that we had made, and we would spend quality time teaching them how to revise. We thought that by taking the time to lead them through the revision process with teacher directed activities and modeling, students would emerge with well-written stories. We also hoped that they would see the importance of the revision step. We had planned to begin the writing pieces together, however, as the time approached we found that we were not on the same timeline.

Take 1: Crash & Burn...
(Stacey's Experience)

I began the writing project before Angie. In the end, this confusion may have been the only thing that saved this project. I hit my first snag as I watched my students revise as they had in the past, without structured teacher involvement. Many of them were asking good questions, of each other and me. They were crossing out, rewriting, adding and deleting, exactly what revision is! As I relayed this information to Angie, this not only surprised us, but also panicked us. Many of them were working very hard. How could I take that all away when I asked them to start over on the copy I was planning to give them? We were going to have to change our plans. We could no longer prove the benefits of teacher directed revision because we would not have two copies to compare as we had expected. Initially we were going to compare the original changes students made on their own, to the changes that they made during our classroom revision activities. We were going to categorize and tally the quality and quantity of changes, and this collection would be compiled into quantitative

data. Without the two drafts to compare, our data did not exist. How could we prove what we were seeing? I continued ahead with the teacher directed revision, but still needed to prove that these structured activities were benefiting my students. Because Angie had not yet started the writing process with her students, we were given time to regroup and devise a new data collection plan.

Take 2: Success!
(Angie's Experience)

I began my revision instruction by asking students to revise with a partner making any changes using only a red pen. The following day, my students came to class, thinking they had completed the revision step and were ready to move on in the process. They discussed as a class the changes they had made and the importance of the revision step. Then on the same rough draft, I led my students through the teacher directed revision activities, this time using only a blue pen. Using this method, students did not have to revise things they already had, but could see the revisions the new activities were making in their writing piece due to the two colors.

The activities appeared to go very well. I had excellent class participation, and many seemed to be improving their error detection abilities. I was feeling very successful. Together, Stacey and I had been flexible and open minded enough to know that to benefit our students, we needed to change our plans from multi-drafts to multi-colored pens.

The Task at Hand

The majority of the data collecting occurred in Angie's classroom because of the problems Stacey encountered during the initial phase. Many of the teacher directed activities focused on adding details such as the five senses

and writing to show rather than writing to tell. We also encouraged students to replace repetitive words such as 'said' and 'then' with 'replied' and 'furthermore' which are more descriptive. Once the teacher directed activities were completed, we handed out a brief survey to our students. This survey asked the following questions:

- Was it more helpful to have a teacher direct the revision activities?
- How many additional changes did you make during the directed activities?
- Were you happier with the outcome of your final paper?

We received many positive comments in response to the first question. Some remarks from students were: "It made it easier and more direct", "I knew what to do if I had any corrections to make", "I got more than one opinion", and "It made my story better". Two students responded negatively to the teacher directed activities because they preferred to work alone.

The second question focused on additional changes made during the teacher directed activities. This question gave students the choices of many, some, few or none, regarding how many changes were made, and showed the majority of students felt they made "some" changes. Many of the additions students made were during an activity that stressed the importance of using the five senses, for example:

- 'The glass glinted in the afternoon sun, it looked like a priceless treasure.'
- Smoke billowed from the end of the car, and the wheels screeched as they skidded on the pavement'.

- ‘...like a squirrel compared to a giant’
- ‘When my mom told me, I screamed and jumped for joy, like a teen girl who just won N’Sync tickets’

The students’ averaged thirteen additional changes during the teacher directed activities. We felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment by just reading their final drafts. Then getting such positive comments back as well made us feel like our mission was successful!

Conclusion

Through our research and experience, we learned that sixth graders produce better stories when they revise in response to teacher questions and revision activities that focus on content. If we truly want our students to develop their critical thinking skills, they need to be writers. All writers who want their words to be read by others know that revision is a fact of life. Until we began researching the importance of revision, our students spent a maximum of ninety minutes revising and proofreading. Their revision time was very independent and included minimal teacher direction. Even though we were not seeing the revisions we hoped for, we were unsure of how to make improvements in the process. Our action research forced us to create revision activities that could be teacher led, yet not stifle creativity or take away from the student’s autonomy to write what he/she wanted.

Our project was very successful; our experience tells us that. The quality of papers that we received during our action research surpassed those of past years. We have already seen an improvement in our students’ attitudes and willingness to revise. They are asking questions not only of us, but also each

other. Although our data was difficult to collect and analyze, it clearly showed directed revision activities to be extremely beneficial.

We have learned a great deal from our data. On the positive side, many students were willing to make changes if the errors were clearly pointed out to them. This became apparent during the teacher directed activities, as we watched students make many more changes to the papers they considered already revised. With improved peer-editing sheets, we saw students more willing to help others make their writing better because they felt their opinion, as an editor, was valued by the author. Many students were willing to put forth the effort and spend the time necessary, if it was provided to them. In the past, we offered our students very little time to make these necessary changes.

We will continue to work with those students that are not able to seek out errors on their own. With continued modeling, and teacher directed revision, we are convinced that all students will be able to not only identify, but also correct their own errors.

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