

“Revising: The Writer’s Need to Invent and Express Relationships.” Janice Hays, et al, eds. *The Writer’s Mind* (Urbana: NCTE, 1983), 113-125.

REVISING: THE WRITER’S NEED TO INVENT AND EXPRESS RELATIONSHIPS

Although the primary purpose of the Queens English Project was not to elicit and study revision, the Project became a laboratory in which to study many ingredients of composing, revising among them. More and more composition teachers are encouraging their students to revise their writing. Workshop-like classrooms provide responses from fellow writers, and well-spaced assignment schedules allow the writer's own responses to ripen after continued rereadings. Yet nothing provides as cogent a redirection for rewriting as the comment from the teacher. In the light of our emphasis on structured writing in the work of the Queens Project, I thought it pertinent to ask how teachers influence the revisions their students make, particularly teachers who have given students frequent opportunity to practice writing in a few whole and impressive structures. Does practice in structured writing have an effect on revising? How can teachers of writing assist the writer to revise his or her paper effectively?

The Queens English Project

For this study I am drawing on the writing of a group of students who participated in the Queens English Project during 1978-80. Briefly, the Project has been an articulation project in English, bridging instruction in writing and reading between the last year of high school and the first year of college. Queens College and five feeder high schools¹ in the Borough of Queens, New York, collaborated under an award from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education.²

Initially, the Project had two key components: a cooperative seminar for teachers in a syllabus that emphasized structured writing,³ and a tutoring program in which trained

undergraduate tutors worked with high school teachers and students. The Project emphasized several principles: first, writing in whole structures. Whole structures introduced the key arrangement in writing as alternations of abstract ideas with concrete support. Students wrote fables and parables, narrative anecdotes, family stories, and personal and literary essays. They arranged these to present an abstract or generalized thesis accompanied by concrete support that took a variety of forms: a dialogue (as in the case of the fable), an anecdotal narrative (as in the personal essay), or evidence from a work of literature (as in the literary essay).

A related principle was making copious concrete observations on a piece of writing and then drawing from them a few useful, critical inferences. Our teachers and tutors exercised students in this principle by applying it to both published and student writing. They limited their responses to descriptive observations of the writing, which were neither judgmental nor corrective insofar as that was possible. Rewriting was another important principle. Students knew at the outset that writing was in fact *rewriting*. They were to draw their own inferences about what and how to rewrite from the observations which their teacher made on their writing. Teachers did not instruct students in how or what to rewrite. By repeatedly offering students the set of observations made on a piece of writing, we expected our writers to infer for themselves what revisions they ought to undertake to improve the text. Since our emphasis was on structure, we also expected that in order to rewrite parts, they would first revise the whole, or at least consider the whole.

Project Emphasis on Revision

The students whose writing I incorporate below as samples are among the program's weakest writers. The papers in question were written as part of their college English 01 course,

which they were required to take prior to the regular freshman writing sequence. Their teacher was Mindy Altman,⁴ who doubled as an adjunct in the English department and as a member of the FIPSE team. Ms. Altman's comments on student papers are a model of restraint and descriptive accuracy.

For the most part, we found revision to be an unappealing and a complex task for our students. What is more to the point is how our emphasis on whole structures influenced the revision of essays--that is, (a) how teachers capitalized on the course's emphasis on structure in the comments they made on early drafts, and (b) to what extent students integrated their awareness of whole structure in actually revising the essays.

At best, students in the Queens project undertook substantive changes (that is, changes other than for neatness and correct usage): (1) to fill out the structure of the first draft by providing more detail and supplying information remarked on as absent by the teacher; (2) to avoid disturbing the existing structure by deleting "digressive" elements; and (3) to effect real structural change--that is, to reorder parts, to assert an abstract comment about a concrete event, to focus a paper on a purpose discovered through the writing of drafts, or to sharpen the focus on elements that appeared merely accidental or subordinate in preliminary drafts.

The work of Nancy Sommers⁵ and the research study of eleventh grade writers in Virginia by Charles K. Stallard⁶ both emphasize that students themselves see revision as a rewording activity, adding, dropping, or substituting single words as a major change they make. Rewording, however, is not the chief change made in the papers of our students who, you will remember, were routinely expected to infer the changes to be made from the observations of their teacher and peers.

The exasperating truth is that more time went to recopying for neatness and completeness

than to any other single activity. Although nowhere in Ms. Altman's comments is there a hint of complaint about illegibility or sloppiness, the injunctions to be neat and to be legible carry the fervor of religion. Perhaps we can release students from the tyranny of the flawless copy by instructing them in how to make legible changes on a draft. Pencil-line insertions and cross-outs, numbered paragraphs, and clearly labeled substitutions are more instructive for conference study than completely resurfaced drafts that mask the process.

The second most frequent change corrected gross errors in mechanics, syntax, punctuation, and spelling. Since Ms. Altman's comments attended only to glaringly incorrect forms and punctuation, there are relatively few corrections. If we are to consider these errors a low-order concern in the revision of whole compositions, then teachers ought to reconsider the advisability of marking these weaknesses on a paper which first needs structural alteration or reconception. Delaying comment on mechanics in no way diminishes the importance of mechanical skills in the development of a young writer, but it does clearly demonstrate that ideas need to be sorted out first, that the bones of a paper need construction before we beautify the skin.

In a similar way, the third kind of change students in this class made also needs to be delayed. It constitutes, however, the leading substantive revision undertaken by students. Jerome S. Bruner has said we are in danger of becoming "slaves of the particular." And, consistently, the one teacher's comment to which students most effectively respond is the call to "be more specific." This is the single rhetorical change young writers produce with competence, though I am not convinced they see the rhetorical motives underlying these changes. Rather they are complying with a teacher's recognition that a structure needs filling out. The call for detail also supports some teachers' current interest in voice, in putting a personality on the page, that is

conveyed by language rich in sensory detail.

Drafts and Teacher Comments: Essay I

Draft 1a

A turning point in my life began on the twenty-fifth of June in the year of 1979. After 6 months of planning, I was finally taking the trip to Israel that I was dreaming and thinking about for a long time.

With all my baggage, my parents brought me to a building where they were having the orientation. Before I know it, I was saying good-bye and boarding the plane on the way to the land of milk-n-honey. My trip consisted of 6 weeks of new friends from all over the world. I had the best time of my life. I learned so much and experienced so many different things that at times I was actually speechless. I started picking up a new language and wanted to learn it as well as I could.

Upon returning home in August, I was welcomed by my family and friends. I had tears rolling down my eyes but a big smile on my face. I was so happy to have had the chance to go to Israel but I was so sad to leave there as well as leaving all my friends. I had story after story to tell everyone. The more I spoke about it, the more I realized how much I changed. I now know people who live different lives than that of mine.

I think that this trip did a lot for me. Its been one turning point that will stick out in my mind because of how much it meant to me.

Draft 1b

The turning point is something that changes the theme, subject or direction in a

story, or any piece of literature. It's the highest point in a story. In life, people have a turning point as well. It's the highest point of their life where decisions are made. It is usually something that will affect their lives forever or for a long period of time. This could be a job, marriage or any event. Whatever the change might be, it will be a change, drastic or not.

A turning point in my life began on the twenty-fifth of June in the year of 1979. After 6 months of planning, I was finally taking the trip to Israel that I was dreaming and thinking about for a long time.

With all my baggage, my parents brought me to a building where they were having the orientation... [The middle section of the paper is identical to version 1a.]... Upon returning home in August, I was welcomed by my family and friends. I had tears rolling down my eyes but a big smile on my face. I was so happy to have had the chance to go to Israel but I was so sad to leave there as well as leaving all my friends. I had story after story to tell everyone. The more I spoke about it, the more I realized how much I changed. My feelings, my actions as well as my attitude towards things changed. I now know people who live different lives than that of mine.

I think this trip did a lot for me. It's been a high point for me and it will effect the rest of my life. It's one turning point that meant a lot to me.

Teacher's Comment on 1b

Cindy, I notice that you begin with a paragraph which explains "turning point" abstractly and which generalizes about its role in literature and life. You mention literature first and then life; the main focus is a story taken from your life. Your story is

about neither a job nor marriage; it falls under the category of “any event.” The next paragraph tells us what kind of event: a trip. This trip was obviously very important to you. But if a turning point is that point where decisions are made and where changes occur, what decision did you make and how did you change? You start to tell us towards the end; how could you tell the reader more? Your feelings, actions, and attitudes changed from what to what? How did learning about others change you? Is this the most important point? I notice it is at the end of the essay. I would love to hear more about this trip some time.

Draft 1c

A turning point in a person’s life, is the highest point. It is usually something that will affect their lives forever or for a long period of time. This could be a job, marriage, or even a change like moving, etc. Whatever the change might be, it will be a change, drastic or not.

A turning point in my life began on the twenty-fifth of June in the year of 1979. After 6 months of planning I was finally taking the trip to Israel that I was dreaming and thinking about for a long time.

With all my baggage, my parents brought me to the Rego Park Jewish Center. This was where the leaders of the trip were having an orientation to familiarize parents and the participants of the trip. Before I knew it, I was saying good-bye and boarding the plane on the way to the land of milk-n-honey. My trip consisted of 6 weeks of fun, learning, seeing and climbing. I also made a bunch of new friends from all over the world. I learned so much and experienced so many different things, that at times I was

actually speechless. I started picking up a new language, Hebrew, and I wanted to learn it to the best of my ability.

Upon returning home in August, I was welcomed by my family and friends. I had tears rolling down my cheeks but a big smile on my face. I was so happy to have had the chance to go to Israel but I was so sad to leave there as well as leaving all my friends. I had story after story to tell everyone. The more I spoke about it, the more I realized how much I changed. My feelings, my actions as well as my attitude toward things. I was not as serious about things before my trip and I wasn't interested in the history of Israel until I came home. I now know people who live different lives than that of mine and I realized that everyone has special qualities. I learned from this because I got a chance to hear, see and learn about different people and their qualities. It gave me a special feeling that in six weeks I changed so much.

I think this trip did a lot for me. It's been a high point for me and it will effect the rest of my life. I had the best time of my life. It's one turning point that meant a lot to me.

Teacher's Comment on Ic

Cindy, you've included more here than in your previous version. You give more specifics about the beginning of the trip, and you begin to tell more about what you learned, for instance, about the people. But you could still be more specific. What did you learn about the people and their qualities? How do they live differently than you? In what ways have you been affected? How have you changed? You may focus on one specific incident (one of your many stories) and show from it what you learned and how

you were affected. Come see me to discuss it.

On 1c, the second revision, in the paragraph beginning “With all my baggage,” the student finally has changed “brought me to a building where they were having the orientation,” to “the Rego Park Jewish Center. This was where the leaders of the trip were having an orientation to familiarize parents and the participants of the trip.” These changes were made in response to the instructor’s specific queries in the margin of draft 1b. I will return to this set of papers to talk about the teacher’s and writer’s common failure to achieve real structural change.

In the same way as Cindy has done, young writers will often change their papers to supply a specific detail in response to a reader’s request for clarifying information, yet will entirely miss the larger purpose of the reader’s comments. Phyllis, for example, retyped an entire essay for the sake of inserting a six-word phrase, “when I was 11 years old,” into its third paragraph. Yet in her comments, Ms. Altman had reflected on the relationship of the parts of the essay to the whole in a way that brought into question the real point of the episode. Her suggestion that readers needed to know the writer’s age at the time the episode took place was incidental to this broader purpose. Yet in Phyllis’s revision, she responded only to the specific question about age and entirely ignored the more important discussion of the paper’s focus which surrounded it.

Drafts and Teacher Comments: Essay 2

Another act of revision reflects a decision to delete digressive or unintegrated material. But digression is a novice’s mishap. Certainly Kenneth Burke, Thoreau, and many great essayists have the ability to resist digression, but they also digress willfully, eloquently, and know how to

relate digression to the main stream. Here are two versions of another essay, a tale of family bravado and regret:

Draft 2a

You should stick to what you believe in and never give in. Never let somebody do what you don't want them to do. My grandmother let somebody do something she didn't want him to do and almost lost somebody precious to her.

My grandmother had 4 children, all boys, of which my father was 3rd born. My grandmother also had a brother who was a butcher. When my grandmother gave birth to her first child, her brother, my great uncle, asked if he could perform the *briss*, the circumcision. He even had a kit for such a purpose. My grandmother flat-out refused him. When my grandmother had her second child, my great uncle again asked her if he could perform the *briss*. Again, my grandmother refused him. When my grandmother had her third child, my father, my great uncle again asked if he could perform the *briss*. This time my grandmother gave in. My great uncle cut off a little too much though and my father had to be taken to the hospital. My grandmother never forgave her brother for that. My father, though, became very close to his uncle, the butcher, as he became known.

My grandmother learned a very valuable lesson after that. She became one of the most stubborn women I knew.

Draft 2b

[This version of the paper is identical to 2a down to the middle of paragraph two.]

. . . He even had a kit for such a purpose. My grandmother correctly refused him. When my grandmother had her second child, my great uncle again asked if he could perform the *briss*. My grandmother stuck to her original decision and refused him again. When my grandmother had her third child, my father, my great uncle again asked if he could perform the *briss*. This time my grandmother gave in. My great uncle cut off a little too much though, and my father had to be taken to the hospital. My grandmother never forgave her brother for that and he became known as the butcher.

My grandmother learned a very valuable lesson after that. She always stuck to her original decision and never gave in to anybody. She became one of the most stubborn women I knew.

Teacher's Comment on 2b

Steve, I notice that the changes that you made put a greater emphasis on your grandmother. Her stubbornness isn't the lesson but is rather the result of the lesson. Although you focus on your grandmother from start to finish, it seems that the main action is performed by your uncle and that it's his action that sticks with us rather than your grandmother's. What do you think?

The first draft, 2a, includes a throwaway sentence about the father's developing a close relationship to his uncle despite this nasty slice of history between them. In the final version, the writer has eliminated this sentence, probably feeling it a digression, and the teacher's final comment invites the writer to reevaluate the focus of the whole episode. It is possible that reconsidering the friendship of the two men might have allowed the writer to see another focus to

this family story. The writer needed to ask why he included the information in the first draft and how he thought it related to the rest of the story. Perhaps alternative generalizations might deal with the strange attraction between victim and wrongdoer, particularly between family members who are forced to live out their lives almost within each other's embrace; or with the persistence of guilt; or the attempt to condone or pay back; all possible themes which do not come to light because the student sees the buried sentence as a digression without searching for whatever ties that interesting friendship to the rest of the writer's idea.

A reconsideration of a paper whose writer has attempted revisions of a first order of concern--that is, structural changes--might be instructive here. Look at la, b, and c. My guess is that the student noticed that she begins with a concrete narrative and that an abstract statement on the nature of a turning point is absent from her essay. The writer supplies the abstract comment in lb, focusing on the decisiveness of a turning point and generalizing that change inevitably follows a turning point and can affect "any event."

But does what follows in lb now carry out the promise clearly stated in the new opening paragraph and commented on by the teacher? It does not. As a reader of this essay, I expect the writer to show how her new knowledge bears on her own life. Attention needs to focus on the *language* of the assertion, on the *turn* of turning point. But turn from what to what? The details of learning a language, learning the history of another country, immersing oneself in other lifestyles and values in the context of this paper serve only insofar as they will be made to reflect on the *turn* in the writer's life.

But the writer doesn't know how to develop her essay in a way that conveys her life's changes. A writer who has this degree of difficulty in conceptualizing the point of her paper fails to apply the acts of invention necessary to conceptualizing. Let us look at this problem more

closely. In isolating the components in her definition of turning point--that is, decisiveness, life-long effect, the high point it takes in a life, the changes the turning point sets off--the writer needs to analyze the complex experience of her trip to Israel for these attributes, to identify what is new in the experience and relate that to what she knows. Recognizing the new elements in a maze-like experience is an act of invention. Our students require practice in invention and accommodation that will habituate them to the writer's continuing need to relate new ideas with old--that is, to revise a first draft so that a second draft, whose relationships are more visibly signaled, evolves out of it.

Drafts and Teacher Comments: Essay 3

Now let us take one closing look at techniques writers use to revise effectively. Many of our writers understood the need for wholesale revision of structure and went after it in diverse ways. See for example essays 3a and 3b:

Draft 3a

There are different ways of remembering your childhood. Most of the time it is by looking at pictures or by having your parents telling you about it. Many times you vaguely remember. Sometimes you don't even believe what your parents tell you; you think they are just telling you a story, like a fairy tale or something.

As a child I can recall many things that happened to me. Most of the things that happened to me, when I was young, come back to me in my dreams. For example I can recall when my brother and I were young we used to have pillow fights on my parents' bed. The pillow fell over the bed; I went to get it before my brother. I hit my forehead

on the side of the bed, which is made of wood. I was bleeding a lot. I would have thought that it was only a dream, but I have a scar on my forehead from this incident.

Looking at pictures or someone telling you about your childhood aren't the only ways your childhood memories come back. There is also another way, by your dreams. I would recall most of my childhood days as dreams, but they actually occurred because I have scars to prove some of them.

Teacher's Comment on 3a

Faith, I notice paragraphs 2 and 3 state that you remember your childhood through your dreams. The 1st paragraph doesn't mention dreams at all, but does mention other possibilities including "remembering vaguely." Paragraph 1 emphasizes ways of remembering. Paragraph 2 emphasizes dreams and names a particular incident. Paragraph 3 repeats the statements made in paragraphs 1 and 2. What is your most important point? Is it that it's important to remember your childhood? or that we dream about things that really happened? What's important about the particular incident you cite? I'd like to discuss this essay with you. Please make an appointment.

Writer's exploratory response to teacher's comment

Dreams are an important way in which I remember my childhood days. Usually these dreams come to me after I had thought about being young again. I know that my dreams are true because when I tell my mother about my dreams she tells me it was true. Dreams are sometimes considered as nightmares like mine are.

This dream which I mentioned was a nightmare because I was hurt. Any of my

dreams which something . . . (unavailable).

Draft 3b

There are different ways of remembering your childhood days. One way is by your dreams. To me, dreaming is an important way in which I remember my childhood days. Usually I have these dreams after I see young children playing outside and see how cute they are. I have this feel of wanting to be young again. I know the dreams which I have are true because when I tell my mother about my dreams she tells me that it happened when I was young.

I can recall many things that happened to me. Most of the things that happened to me, when I was young, come back to me in my dreams. For example, I can recall when my brother and I were young we used to have pillow fights on my parents' bed. The pillow fell over the bed. I went to get it before my brother. I hit my forehead on the side of the bed, which is made of wood. I was bleeding a lot. I would have thought that it was only a dream, but my mother told me it was true. I also have a scar on my forehead from this incident.

Dreams could either be good or bad. In my case it was like a nightmare because I was hurt (not feelings) physically. Any dream in which I am hurt I consider a nightmare. This doesn't stop me from wanting to be young again. I always think it would probably turn out better the second time around because I wouldn't be as careless as I was the first time. I think that it is a real nice way to remember your childhood. In your dreams.

Teacher's Comment on 3b

Faith, you've done quite a job of rewriting this essay. You focus entirely on your dreams and the way in which they become a vehicle through which you remember your childhood. You start with a generalization and then state what causes you to dream. You move towards a specific dream. You explain your feelings, especially at the beginning and end. You've really put yourself into this. Nice work.

In 3b the writer completely restructures the paper to accommodate the discovery of her true purpose, that one way of remembering her childhood is by dreams. In response to the teacher's comments, this writer wrote several exploratory paragraphs in the space at the end of her first draft. These possibilities, once put into writing, break the perseveration of the original structure. By working in short forms, the writer has been able to re-perceive her subject and redesign her essay. The writer of another essay hit upon a similar method to unlock his ideas by underlining key sentences in the first draft and expanding each into a paragraph. My feeling for some time has been that the first draft reflects our best spontaneous, unexplored ideas but leaves the relationships between them unexpressed or partially expressed, relationships that are at once worthy of further detection and mapping.

Other Considerations

If writing in whole structures cannot be counted on to elicit whole revisions,⁷ what else can we do to extend our relatively myopic students' prospects for revision? Pursuing relationships between ideas is a creative act that completes the writer's work. Other devices I have tried in classes of advanced and beginning writers appear to direct students toward more substantial

revision.

Metaphor or analogy, for example, is an analytical thought structure which, students discover, exposes and extends relationships by linking the unfamiliar to the familiar, identifying as many corresponding parts as possible. Writing analogies also assists writers to work from intuition to system, a track more inventive and hospitable to ideas than one that operates in the reverse. By contrast, establishing a fixed structure and filling it out, while it imprints structure everlastingly in the mind of the writer, operates from system to intuition; one complaint of our high school teachers was that students often remained stuck in the system. Our college teachers, on the other hand, found that their more confident students moved very quickly to intuitive resources for invention.

Shifting to another point of view also requires student writers to re-perceive their material or their problems. Shifting the time of an essay or the governing pronoun requires revision of a more profound kind, since an issue must be viewed from a wholly new perspective and perhaps within another time frame.

Finally, focusing on language is central to solving rhetorical problems. Conceptualizing in *language* makes the most of inexperienced students' myopia since it requires a close look at the language of the concept statement--such as in the essay on the turning point. Only language can help the writer track the new idea as it emerges in the act of revising and trace it to existing ideas locked in the language of the first draft.

Practicing a sequence of structured writing exercises, as we have been doing in the Queens English Project, becomes a program of considerable consequence in learning to write. High schools in the project report that New York State regents exams written by participating students were noticeably more coherent and better structured than those written by

nonparticipants. But structured writing may not be enough to habituate students in the larger moves of revising. Revision requires strategies for re-perceiving, a chance to place structural alterations ahead of the filling in of details or adjusting for correctness. It requires inventing new ideas and expressing their relationship to what already exists, often somewhat stranded, in the draft. On the teacher's part, teaching revising means understanding that a good revision has all the creative implications of a new piece of work.

Notes

¹ Beach Channel, Flushing, Grover Cleveland, John Adams, and John Bowne High Schools.

² Six Queens College faculty members were awarded the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education grant. They are: Janet Brown (Secondary Education), Judith Fishman (English), Betsy Kaufman (Secondary Education), Donald McQuade (English), Marie Ponsot (English), and Sandra Schor (English).

³ Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen, both of the Queens College English Department, introduce their seminal work on whole structures in their book for teachers, *Beat Not the Poor Desk* (Montclair, N.J.: Boynton Cook, 1982). Marie Ponsot led the teachers seminars in the project.

⁴ I am indebted to Ms. Altman not only for her cooperation in providing me with copies of revision sets of her students' work, but also for her intelligent adherence to the principles of the project during the fifteen weeks of her 01 class.

⁵ Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *College Composition and Communication* 31 (December 1980): 378-388.

⁶ Charles K. Stallard, "An Analysis of the Writing Behavior of Good Student Writers," *Research in the Teaching of English* 8 (Fall 1974): 206-218.

⁷ Although I have included none of the students' fables in this study, I need to say a few words about them. In revising their fables, students generally rewrote the moral for elegance and conciseness. Those few students who rewrote the narratives of their fables changed diction, sharpened dialogue so that it advanced the plot and/or was more representative of stereotyped character, or included more details of setting. My judgment is that the aphoristic rewriting of the morals was highly effective; but it involved different, usually local, *rewriting* strategies; on the other hand, *revising* skills are necessary in redoing the whole fable structure: narrative and moral. What I observe in the rewriting of fables has been a general neglect of students to link the moral to the narrative and work reciprocally in a total, structural revision of the whole fable, this despite teacher observations precisely on the reciprocity--or lack of reciprocity--between moral and narrative.