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Delivery Workshop: Writing Notes of Significance, In Class

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“Dear Amanda, I’m in Miz Aiken’s class and it’s so boring.”

This is how the notes I confiscate usually begin. Sometimes it’s a “What’s UP?” or a “What r u doin?” but the sentence about being bored in class is always in the first line or two. This year at our rural school so many notes were being written and passed during classes that many students were actually disciplined for their behavior. I was sad to see students written up for being ‘disruptive’ but understood the perspective of my fellow teachers. While I have observed students’ willingness to write notes to each other (during invaluable class time, to my horror), I have also fantasized about harnessing this interest and energy for peer communication. What would happen if students were given permission to write notes to each other? How could this communication be used “productively” to support thinking, writing, and learning processes? What would happen if their note-writing became a method of feedback?

Students love to talk to each other, write to each other. They would really rather talk than provide peer edit to their papers. I watch my students write prolifically and profusely when writing to their friends. I watch them select a partner for peer revision and fill out the checklists and rubrics—and then begin the fun part, the chatting. Students are so adept at figuring out just what is necessary—analyze the rubric, identify the requirements, decide how to meet them or not), and then produce just enough effort to complete the project. After that it is fun time because, they tell me, they’re “done.” When I teach peer feedback and editing, students demonstrate a moderate amount of interest and apply some of the

skills. Still, I would like to see them offer more feedback with a little enthusiasm—I know I’m not the only one.

They love to write notes, love to talk. For some time, I wondered how do I harness this energy? How can I help them focus on their writing, learn how to give productive and constructive criticism, and let them work together? What would happen if they could do the revising and editing quickly so they get to the fun? What would happen if I let them write to each other? I began to think more and more about allowing students to write to each other. I began to wonder what feedback would look like if it were written in the form of a note. Then, while attending the National Writing Project’s National Conference in 2005, I participated in a small workshop that included excerpts from Peter Elbow’s Loop Writing. Elbow wrote,

I call this process a loop because it takes you on an elliptical orbiting voyage. For the first half, the voyage out, you do pieces of almost-freewriting during which you allow yourself to curve out into space—allow yourself, that is, to ignore or even forget exactly what your topic is. For the second half, the voyage home, you bend your efforts back into the gravitational field of your original topic as you select, organize, and revise parts of what you produced in your voyage out. Where open-ended writing is a voyage of discovery to a new land, the loop process takes a circling route so you can return to the original topic—but now with a fresh view of it (60).

The idea of Loop Writing seemed to shake loose more ideas, more suggestions for dealing with my interest in students-writing-students as a method of feedback for writing. The workshop struck a

resonant cord with the questions I was asking myself about the students in my classroom, encouraging peer feedback, and their enthusiasm for writing to each other. I began to ask more questions, read about Loop Writing, ask more questions, go through my teaching notes, ask more questions. I felt as though there would be some way I could use students' note-writing to foster other skills with writing in general.

I decided to focus on the question, "What happens when students are asked to give peer response in writing (*rather than verbally*)?" And, I decided to attempt a different kind of workshop for giving feedback—a Delivery Workshop. Before the NWP conference, the idea of facilitating higher usage of literary device and citation of research in student writing had been on my mind. Ideally, I wanted students to use these elements of writing—communicate clearly with sensory or figurative language and give proper credit to resources. If students were not initially applying these elements of effective writing then it would need to be brought to their attention at the revision stage. I decided to create and try a 'Delivery Workshop' so that peer editing would, hopefully, draw students' attention to necessary revisions. Such a workshop would employ the use of listening skills, editing and revising skills, and then apply the use of student-to-student note writing.

During the NWP conference presentation, I began to devise a process and design a rubric for developing student writing and revision, encouraging use of literary elements, and utilizing student generated communication (or, note writing): a 'Delivery Workshop.' This workshop would mimic a peer revision circle but would *not* allow discussion. No talking. Imagine.

Essentially, students bring the rough draft of their speech, work in a small group of 3 or 4 peers, and one-by-one read their speech aloud. The other students would listen carefully to the speech, respond in writing only (no discussion), and then give the letters to the student-speaker. Without taking time to go over the letters, the next speaker would begin to read aloud their own writing—the process would begin again, cycling through each member of the group until all students had read their work aloud and received responses from their peers in writing.

Students would use these letters to guide their own revisions. Rough draft and letters would be submitted to the teacher with the final draft of the speech. The ultimate goals of such a 'workshop' would be to allow students to receive useful feedback from peers, direct students to apply literary elements required by the specific assignment, and have students actually revise their writing. At the time, I supposed my goals for the workshop were a bit ambitious. Yet, students should apply literary devices in their own writing to develop effective writing as well as effective speaking.

I believe strongly in helping students see the value in writing as a process and how critical it is that they invest in their own writing and writing process. It will be the process of writing—the process that students take with them and follow—that makes the students' effective and successful in their communication of ideas.

Methodology

For such a workshop to be effective and productive, I would need to develop a procedure. The more I considered using the workshop in class, I wanted to do more than just create a new lesson plan—I wanted to test the workshop to see if anything about students' understanding of writing, listening, or speaking would change. I considered those three goals again: receive useful feedback, apply literary elements, revise own writing. Each idea is repeatedly covered in various mini-lessons and small writing projects.

The Delivery Workshop would be a way to "check in" with students to see if they carry over ideas about writing and the writing process. I decided to test and use the Delivery Workshop only on the larger speech projects—a piece of writing that would have the students' speaking for a minimum of 4 minutes. Since the larger projects were a kind of culmination of the smaller lessons, and since those projects have more value allocated in the grading scale, I felt the larger projects would be one place that offered more for the students to listen to as well as more places to offer their own editing and revising commentary. As I considered the idea about students relying on knowledge gained from classroom lessons

and experiences, I decided I wanted to collect information in the form of a survey.

Deciding on questions for surveys is critical. Surveys can result in qualitative or quantitative data, or both. Making decisions about what I wanted to know, what I wanted students to “talk” to me about, and translating that into a well-worded question was extremely challenging. If I wanted students to learn more about the writing process, I also wanted to know their perceptions of the writing process.

If I wanted to understand whether or not they formed an opinion about peer revision or if their opinions about any aspect of the writing process changed over time, I would need to collect their thinking prior to testing the workshop. I decided to take two surveys and use the same questions—one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. This would allow me to track a change in opinion, any variation in the student’s experience with the writing process.

The surveys would include open-ended questions about students’ perceptions of writing, revision, and peer revision. I also wanted to find out what students had to say about their own writing as well as their perceptions about so-called “good” writing. I decided on a list of questions, understanding that open-ended questions would result in a variety of comments, answers, and sometimes non-answers. Open-ended questions would be a risk, but I thought open-ended questions would give me the chance to really hear from students.

I planned to have the students fill out the same survey twice—once at the beginning and once at the end of the semester—and then I would compare their answers. When I conducted the surveys I explained that the questions were not an assignment, that I depended on them to be brutally honest, and that their answers would be used for my research and may be published in one of my own pieces of writing some day. I believe students are interested and often inspired or motivated about topics and projects when they discover the people with which they are working are motivated, inspired, and interested.

Similarly, I wanted my students to know the survey was not busywork, that their input was

vital, critical and would definitely be used—that my research would be valueless without *them*. Conversely, I was concerned that if I told students that the test project was the Delivery Workshop they might embellish their own writing or “over-write” their own notes. If I wanted to see their own note-writing style, perhaps the notes would be more authentic if the students did not know which project I would be “researching.”

I explained to students that they did not have to fill out the survey forms if they did not want to—and that unclear or dishonest answers would not help the research. I did not, however, inform my students that I would be “testing” the Delivery Workshop or that the survey was related in any way to the workshop.

The surveys were supposed to show me student understanding of writing, student perception of their own writing (strengths / weaknesses), and student opinion of peer responses to writing. I really wanted to know what they thought the so-called writing process was, what they considered to be elements of good writing; I wanted some insight to why they would be interested in writing or reading, what they liked about the writing they did read (even if they claimed to hate reading or writing). If I could understand their ideas about writing, it might help me offer instruction that would be more tailored to my audience.

If I could understand their version of the writing process, it may help me clear up misunderstandings or clarify purpose for using a process-approach to writing. The surveys were one way for me to get in touch with student thinking and understanding as well as construct a scaffolding for the Delivery Workshop. Hopefully, the second time the surveys would show some change in student perceptions—revealing information or feedback about students’ understanding of writing, the effectiveness of the workshop, and my teaching.

The process for the Delivery Workshop solidified with the checklist I created. The checklist to be used by students would have three sections: a detailed procedure, a quick-glance procedure, and a model letter. The detailed procedure covered most of the hand-out page with specific instructions and

included sentence starters. I have found that students don't always know precisely what to say when offering suggestions to peers. Going over types of feedback and then providing sentence starters gives students a place to spring from, an easy place to begin.

The quick glance procedure was up in the right corner of the page with a very brief step-by-step instructions. I wanted to give students a place to go to remind them of what is next since the question always seems to be, "What do we do now?" This "quick glance" was intended to be like the "Popcorn" button on the microwave—an easy start and stop. The model letter positioned at the bottom of the page was intended to do a few things. Of course, it models the intended outcome for students: a business-like letter that is friendly but focuses on feedback.

The letter also gives the class a chance to discuss a writer's purpose and voice. Some students voice their disgust that I seem to have nailed the teen writer's voice on the head. Still, it is important to review the ideas of purpose, audience, and environment for writing and a model letter is a way to launch that discussion. I am careful to review all parts of the handout aloud with students, slowly. Each section on the handout has a purpose and students need to understand that once the workshop begins it is critical that the only person who speaks is the Writer-Speaker, all feedback must be provided in writing.

I first tested this procedure in my Advanced Public Speaking class. I thought it would be a good idea to test the handout, workshop, and letter-writing on so-called older students to see if they would participate, and participate in a professional way. I was very pleased with the results because this small group of twelve students couldn't imagine a worse torture than having to write notes to each other. Yet, the letters contained the information I requested: the professional content of feedback for both performance and writing. I felt ready to test the Delivery Workshop on my sophomores in Speech I in both my 3rd and 4th hour classes, two separate groups of students, two different times of day. I had high hopes of tapping in to the student's unique desire for note-writing. I also imagined they would think I was

tormenting them—using their own communication methods against them.

In class, the procedure of the workshop went well. Methodical. It was the instructions afterward that seemed most difficult to students: using the feedback to make authentic improvements to their own writing and presenting. It was the students' responsibility to keep the notes and rough draft together, use the information to improve their work, and turn in the rough draft with letters at the time of the speech. The questions were not about how to revise, but about the opinions or suggestions students received in the letters. "What if I don't like what they said I should do," a student asked. These questions became an opportunity to discuss audience.

If the audience doesn't "get it" (your information, your message, your meaning, etc.) then you have failed as both a writer and a performer. The writer-speaker has to be strong enough to consider the feedback as an opportunity to test the integrity and clarity of their own work. While all feedback is not good feedback, all feedback should be considered to have some value. If someone proposes a change that the writer doesn't agree with, then the writer must assess the value of the comment along with assessing the clarity of their own communication. The goal is to communicate clearly and effectively—to make sure the audience understands. Students appeared to understand the idea of the difficult balance: what the writer wants to say versus what the audience will hear.

I was very pleased with the participation during the Delivery Workshop in both Speech I classes. The students followed directions on the handout, and then provided meaningful discussion afterward. I used the Delivery Workshop twice in that same semester—still not revealing to students it was that lesson plan I was "researching". When students performed their speeches, turned in their final drafts, and submitted those rough drafts with the workshop letters, I discovered that not every student was willing to explain or explore the writing-speaking in their letter. Some letters were two sentences long, other letters had defined paragraphs with carefully expressed ideas. This made me consider new questions about assuring

each student receive the same amount of careful feedback, changing the small groups, using different groups within the same workshop session and so on. Reviewing and comparing the rough drafts to the final drafts also made me consider, again, the leap between drafts: why don't they revise?! Some drafts had used the feedback, some had not—only creating a typed version of the rough draft without any changes. So, I had come back to a few of my original questions.

The last step of the research process for me would be the end-of-semester surveys. The very same surveys the students completed at the beginning of the semester. I had hoped to see some variation in their thinking. I was also curious to see if I could connect any changes in their thinking to the Delivery Workshop. Some teachers would like to hope that they have made THE difference in their students' perceptions, and I am among them—hoping the research project worked, the delivery workshop made a difference in student writing. Still I believe “the facilitator recognizes that teaching is not learning, that learning is something that occurs inside of learners when conditions are right; and she sees the art of her work not in her own personal display, but in arranging those conditions for students” (Zemelman, 57). I went through the piles of ‘research’ with the idea that there may be some measurable result, some identifiable consequence of the environment, the process, and the methodology.

Results (or, What Came Out of The Oven)

There are some conclusions I can draw from the surveys and the Delivery Workshop itself. The guidance I received from other teacher-research, from other education- or writing-oriented texts, as well as the input from my students helped me generate the research questions and follow the research process. There are other conclusions that are more like questions, leading me to the next idea or to a variation in my teaching, conclusions that are less than conclusive. In the Delivery Workshop, I discovered two kinds of benefits: A series of benefits to the classroom structure and teacher, and then benefits to the students.

The process of Delivery Workshop offers

a checklist as a guide for giving feedback. Which leads to another benefit, students have a model to use when deciding what kind of feedback to provide. By having a list of sentence starters, students can identify which element of writing they are trying to address. Students know that they are supposed to offer feedback that is meaningful as well as the kind of feedback that addresses either the writing or the performance. Having a checklist helps them decide what to say about what element of writing. Finally, writers have documentation they can refer to when revising their own work. By using the information *about* the Delivery Workshop as well as the letters they received *from* the Delivery Workshop, students have tangible tools to work from—providing they are ready to do the “work” associated with writing.

Besides offering benefits to the teacher and classroom structure, the Delivery Workshop benefited the students in a few more direct ways. First, students had to actually practice their speeches out loud before they revised them. The practice of reading a work aloud—no matter the eventual application of the work—is critical to the revision process. Students rarely read a piece of writing aloud. The Delivery Workshop requires a read-aloud, and this action could also benefit other types of writing. Second, the workshop has students practice their listening skills. The read-aloud receives a response from the listeners as part of the process of the Delivery Workshop. Listening is a activity that is connected directly to critical and analytical thinking—which is another significant skill that students do not often have opportunity to practice. These two aspects of the writing and revising process (speaking and listening) also brought me to a third benefit of the Delivery Workshop: students become models for each other. The analytical nature of being in a workshop helps foster students' own writing skills.

While there were definite benefits, there are also some drawbacks and on-going questions as a result of the Delivery Workshop. As with any class or lesson, there is an issue of time. The procedure of the Delivery Workshop does not allow much time for discussion. Writers do not have much time or opportunity to discuss the written response of their

peers, if there is any time at all. Questions within the workshop groups have to be asked quickly, or remembered by students and then asked at a later time. In addition to time, listening to each other presents challenges for deep or structural feedback to the writers.

Without physically seeing the rough drafts, students cannot give responses with regard to format, sentence structure, spelling, or any other ‘visual’ aspect of writing. (Example: While some students may have cited their research resources as they spoke, they did not properly write resources citation according to MLA format in the final draft.) Similarly, the quality of feedback is still a concern. Not every student received feedback that was helpful, meaningful, or that offered any kind of instruction to the writer. Some students only provide “positive” feedback. I would like to see students offer more balanced feedback—giving ideas for improvement while still complimenting writers on what works well.

Implications (or, Where Do We Go From Here?!)

The initial goal was to harness the energy, interest, and focus with which students apply to writing notes. Another goal that emerged was to help anchor the writing process, or the idea that writing is a process. And beneath those ideas, I realized another goal was to focus on my teaching. How can I provide an effective classroom environment? How can I develop my method of instruction? The process of the research, reviewing the material from my students, and reading thoroughly on education methodology and philosophy reminded me “the approach that produces the best learning is focused practice. In these situations, teachers present students with the components and subcomponents of the process and then structure writing tasks to emphasize a specific component or subcomponent” (Marzano, 142).

The inferences and partial conclusions I can draw are, for me, complicated. And yet, simple. While there cannot be one singular method for revision that resolves all issues surrounding ineffective student writing, this is one strategy to use in a classroom that attempts to help with some

elements of writing. There are definite benefits with regard to using this revision tactic to demonstrate and encourage writing as a process. Students participated and thought through writing as a process. Some students did revise their own work. As the surveys show, some students revised their own thinking on peer revision. Delivery Workshop is a strategy that works for “some.” that has usefulness, and that results in “some” benefits to classroom community while supporting the writing process.

My favorite discovery comes from the survey of a more advanced writing student. On his first survey (written in January), he checked the No box with an emphatically dark penciled “X”, stating that “peer revision should not ever be used” with several underlines and exclamation points. The second survey (written in April) had a box he added to the checkbox choices of “Yes” and “No” on the peer revision question. He wrote a comment that said, “Sometimes it works. Thanks.”

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