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Upside Down and Inside Out

Amy Enzi

Groans accompanied the announcement that the revision stage of writing had been reached, and I sighed. Why was it that the students were so reluctant to find their own mistakes? They didn't *really* want me to edit. That meant that I would find all of the errors and point them out to kids. As these three thoughts ran through my head, I realized that I didn't want to be the editor either. I particularly didn't want the job after I supposedly had the "final" draft in my hands. I hated having to fix the errors in order to grade it so I could determine the students' abilities to accomplish a certain style of writing.

The crossroads lay before me: How could I get my students to edit and revise their papers so that the final grading was not a burden on me and a disappointment to them? The question in my mind lead to this: What is the best way to get students to edit and revise their papers using the writing process? I could see two paths at this point—continue to do things the way I had been taught in my college preparation classes, or find a new way to teach editing and revising. Since I wanted to ease my discomfort, I began to read articles that would pertain to student writing in the editing and revision stages. I chose the path less traveled, and as in Frost's poem, it made all the difference in the revision and editing stage of the writing process for my kids.

I started an editing process out with a project that required each student to bring in a piece of gum with the wrapper still intact. I then placed the three letters which make up the word GUM on the board and explained to my students what an acronym was. The students grasped the concept of acronyms, and all of a sudden the room was a buzz with the different acronyms that they knew. "F.B.I., C.I.A., I.R.S.," the voices hollered. As I pulled them back in, I sent them on a journey to figure out what GUM might stand for in an English classroom. I gave the students three rules: They had to participate, they could use any sources in my room, and the acronym had to be appropriate and tie into English. At first, they tried to think of things to tie into "great," but as they received verbal feedback

that they were cold, they started searching around the room. Periodically, I would give the students more clues such as, it is a part of the writing process, it can be found within the room, it is a part of the revision and editing process, etc. The students loved it, and they had, dare I say, fun looking for the answer. As they found the answer, they were sworn to secrecy, and this heightened the curiosity of the remaining students because they wanted to know what GUM meant too. Once all of the students knew what GUM stood for, we discussed the differences among the three things—grammar, usage, and mechanics—and reviewed the rules on a limited basis. The students then shared in small groups what portion of GUM gave them the most trouble and found the part of the English textbooks that could help them with their trouble spots. When the students reported back as a whole, I was pleased to see that they focused their weaknesses in the same areas I had previously identified. I felt like my students and I were on the right track, and that by knowing their weakness they had a starting point from which they could correct their papers. As they chewed their gum, they searched for potential problems as far as GUM went. With their heads bent over their papers, their murmurs indicated that they were checking with their peers to see if a given paragraph "sounded" right. The idea of GUM appeared to work, and I was grateful to John Wilson Swope for introducing me to the acronym of GUM, which allowed me to hook the kids on a process that the students have done in the form of worksheets since second or third grade. Surprisingly, the kids already knew what was difficult for them, and by reminding them that there were resources in the room so that they could check their work, they eliminated a lot of the marks that I had made on their papers in the past.

Once I had the wheels turning, I proceeded to have the students turn their papers inside out and upside down. To do this, we focused on punctuation, proofreading, and peer editing, and revision workshops. I turned to published experts such as Roy Peter Clark, John C. Schafer, Jan Madraso, Michael H. Graner, Romano, Murray, and the trio

of Meyer, Youga, and Flint-Ferguson to help me figure out how to make my students independent editors and revisers. I also borrowed a mini-workshop lesson from Maxwell Nurnberg.

Roy Peter Clark presented a workshop on "The Art and Craft of Writing" in Salt Lake City, Utah, and he urged the writers to read the sentences both left to right and right to left to focus the eyes on the individual words and the importance of a single word in a sentence. He also suggested "making the verbs do the work." He emphasized the significance of subject/verb clauses to make the sentence powerful. Finally, he placed the period as a top priority in writing since it provides the reader with a visual stop sign. When my students tried this, they realized how drab the words "got" and "stuff" were, and they set out to find new words. They also eliminated some of the run-on sentences and fixed fragments while reading their papers outloud. It seemed that if they could hear the error, they would fix it. If they read the error, it would remain within the papers.

Schafer supported Clark's idea of using the punctuation as a visual aide for the reader. He suggested that punctuation needed to be taught so that a writer could get the readers to follow his/her train of thought throughout the paper. He took student writing and pointed out the differences between different placement of punctuation. This made students coordinate their thinking with how the reader should read the papers. Schafer doesn't eliminate the need to teach the rules, he merely warns that the emphasis should be on improving students' writings instead of memorization of the rules. (Schafer 46-49). When we did this in class, the students laughed as the writing took on different meaning when new punctuation was inserted or moved throughout the sentences. Some serious thoughts turned silly as the punctuation jumped around, and by seeing where the punctuation should not be, the students figured out where it should go. We then did an activity that Maxwell Nurnberg published called "Have a Comma, the Pause That Refreshes." The students had some lively debates about which set of sentences answered the question attached to it, and it made them more cautious about using commas.

Madraso took Clark and Schafer's advice one step further and implemented methods to help students not only improve their punctuation, but also their proofreading ability. She presented a Proofreading Journal sample which allows the students to keep track of their progress as they go along. (Romano also gives this suggestion in his book.) This seems helpful for the students, and it provides them with a reference to check when they start new projects and return to old projects. I would like to

use a journal as such a tool from the start of the year to see what skills the students improve upon throughout the year.

In addition to the editing journal, I used Madraso's suggestions for mini-workshops to help my students tame their weaknesses as far as writing goes. For some reason my classes go nuts over semi-colons. They don't use them well. After we used Madraso's method for discovering this style of editing error, semi-colons disappeared from the papers. I didn't want my students to eliminate the use of semi-colons for life, so we did an activity where we surveyed a letter by Martin Luther King, Jr. and figured out why the semi-colons were used to emphasize his writing. The semi-colons then reappeared in a dignified manner within the papers and only after a consultation with an editing group.

With the emphasis placed on technology right now, I also kept an eye out for computer programs and hints about how to use computers in editing. While Madraso offered computer programs to help students work on an independent basis, she warned that computer programs are not perfect (Madraso 32-41). I didn't find any other references to software or computer technology that would help my students with editing and revising on the computer.

Meyer, Youga, and Flint-Ferguson also show how important it is to use grammar as an integrated part of the curriculum. I agree with this trio because teaching grammar as a part of a unit can be compared to putting children's medicine in honey or jelly so that they will swallow it. If the students learn grammar as a by-product, they don't balk at trying something new. If I ask my students why they use a semi-colon, half of them will look at me as if I landed from another planet while the others struggle to give me an answer. If I ask them why Dickens used a semi-colon in one of his sentences, they look at me as if I am clueless and provide several correct reasons why Dickens would use a semi-colon. I prefer to have me look like the one who knows nothing about writing, than to put them on the spot and possibly discourage them from learning (Meyer 67).

As we worked through the papers, I decided that I would test my own theories on the peer editing and revision workshops. Graner suggests that the best way to teach students how to revise is to use a couple of papers as models and have the students apply their revision concepts to their own papers once the model papers have been revised. Romano and Murray both propose that group editing is appropriate within the writing classroom. I would say all three are correct because each class handles these two concepts differently. I have one class where the students all read each other's pa-

pers numerous times, and they were insulted that I would suggest that they should revise their own. Another class couldn't begin to concentrate on revision if they worked with others because they were too social and never made it to revising their papers. The social group did fine when they applied Graner's peer workshop revision methods which had the students work through two model papers and correct errors, and then apply the same concepts to their individual papers. Another class did well with both methods, and when I asked them which one they liked best, they admitted both methods helped them fix spots in their papers (Graner 40-44). In my opinion, the method that I would prefer is that of the peer editing. This allows the students to find, fix, and take final ownership in their papers.

As a last editing exercise, we went through Reilly's Rules, which is a handout I picked up somewhere along the line. The kids liked the rules because they were down to earth, and the word "sucks" appeared in the list of rules. Once we made it past the discussion of the rules, the students decided that they had mastered the revision process for the paper that they were working on at that time.

I couldn't leave it at that, though, and I brought out a gold coins exercise. At this point we had a preview show of what the published pieces would look like. The students had to pick a spot from their writing that kept the reader looking for more information and reading. The students usually found four or five such spots. When the students shared their piece with the class, they received a gold, chocolate coin. This exercise usually gave the students a chance to share a great part of their story and earn a "reward" for scrutinizing their papers so closely for two class periods. It also left them with hint of anticipation as to what the "publishing party" would be like which enticed them to finish the paper to the best of their abilities.

There were no groans when the students finished this process. In fact, many of them wanted to retrieve their writing folders and do editing and revising on the rest of their work, especially if they might receive a piece of candy and the praise of their classmates as they found the perfect word to finish a phrase of their papers. The best thing, though, came from the results. I was the person the students wanted to share their work with and receive feedback from. I was not the pen-wielding, mark-making person they had perceived me to be, and they were excited to share their masterpieces with me. I have learned a lot from this process, and the murmurs of, "How would you change that?" and "Help, I need a word to replace 'stuff' . . ." are music to my ears.

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About the Author

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