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When You Wish Upon . . . Story? Semantic Editing in the Fourth Grade

Gerald R. Oglan and Amy Donnelly

Overview

Consider the following scenarios of two Grade 4 teachers discussing a piece of writing with their students:

Scenario #1

The fourth grade teacher looked at Meredith's writing sample and asked, "Where is the rough draft of this piece?"

Meredith walked over to the classroom file of writing portfolios and rummaged through her file until she found her first draft. "Mrs. Smith, here is my draft. I'm sorry that I forgot to staple my draft to this piece. Do you think that I am ready to publish it?"

"Hmmm," she hummed as her eyes skimmed the paper looking for spelling or grammatical errors and she corrected any errors she found. Then she double checked for a beginning sentence that introduced the topic and a concluding sentence that summarized the story. "Yes," she smiled into Meredith's eyes, "You're ready to publish!"

Meredith bounced back to the publishing center in the classroom and stapled the editing checklist, the rough draft, and the class editing sheet to her final copy. The final copy was filed into her writing portfolio. As she went back to her seat, she stopped by the class library to browse through books.

Scenario #2

A group of fourth grade students have signed up for an author's circle and are listening to one member read his story. The teacher is conducting a writing conference with another group of students while the rest of the class is working on individual pieces of writing:

"Yes, but why did you choose use the word 'said' again?"

"Because the boy said those words."

"I KNOW that the boy said, 'I'll tell you who did it.' But you know, did he scream it, whisper it, or cry it?"

"Oh yeah. Do we still have that chart where we listed all those words, I mean synonyms, for said?" His eyes skimmed the room as he stopped by the door. He contemplated the words on the list and finally turned to his classmate who followed him to the door and stated, "I still don't know which word is the best choice. Thanks to you I know that it is not said! I mean, man, I'm on my third draft, and I still don't think it's finished."

"Yeah. Why don't you go look in one of those Fractured Fairy Tale books and I know that'll help you decide."

This article examines how semantic editing was introduced in a Grade 4 classroom. The two scenarios above are indicative of classrooms where teacher's beliefs about writing influence how editing and revision are dealt with. Our experiences helped us to understand that editing and revision are areas of a writing program that have been sources of frustration for good-intentioned teachers whose only desire is for their students to be able to edit and revise their own work. So, why are teachers struggling with this issue?

Writing: Same Process, New Conversations

The two scenarios above clearly demonstrate the dichotomy between two classrooms that value and invite writing. Both classrooms describe learning environments that encourage children to view themselves as writers. Yet their editing processes look and sound very different. What is so striking is that in one classroom (Scenario #2) the children were clearly in charge of listening and asking questions that might make a difference in their classmate's piece. The questioning strategies editors used to help an author consider more detailed language was accepted as part of the writing process. As they talked with one another about a piece

of writing, they naturally accessed the tools they created to facilitate the writing process. Charts hung in the classroom that contained lists of synonyms, character traits, questions about setting and plot and the classroom library that was made up of mostly familiar books. Conversations prompted the use and reuse of these handmade tools. Children also accessed each other as resources to assist the author in making critical decisions for their piece, whether it be a choice of word, topic, or illustration. So why would one classroom (scenario #1) place the teacher as the source of semantic editing while another (scenario #2) placed the ownership in the hands of the students?

Teachers helped us recognize that a variety of perspectives existed in practicing semantic editing. Although teachers have been exposed to the writing process for at least the last decade we were surprised with the responses teachers had to our questions. "How do you encourage children to use their growing understanding of written language to develop as editors and authors when writing for publication?"

"I do most of the editing because my kids don't know how."

"I tried to get my kids to revise but they don't know what to look for."

"Only a few of the kids in my class are capable of editing."

"My editors rush through editing to get to their own work."

The answers to our query led us to believe that teachers view editing and revision as a linear model. In such a model the teacher controls editing and makes decisions about the text. We want to focus on semantic editing as one aspect of writing that views revision from a holistic perspective supporting a student-centered perspective.

Semantic Editing: A Holistic Perspective

In the second scenario, writing and authoring are viewed as a recursive process (Harste, Short, Burke 1988). The boys continually shifted from sharing their views about a piece to uninterrupted reading and writing as they searched for the best phrase or word that would best fit the needs of that piece. Moving from discussion back to personal writing and reflection may vary depending on the degree of importance and significance of each particular piece of writing. When we encourage children to believe that writing is part of a process that must be fully undertaken every time they write, we move them away from a linear view of model writing (draft-teacher correct-copy) to writing as expressing and communicating. Good writing, the kind that shocks your imagination or makes you cry or

moves you to take action, or even shares interesting information, comes from writers who make informed predictions about the path that best suits the editing purposes of that piece. Encouraging the fluid use of a process is what seems to make an important difference.

Classrooms that support relationships encourage children to take risks resulting in writers sharing their best thoughts with a fellow writer. As a result young authors push one another in hopes of publishing their best thinking. Just as language operates as a whole system, the process of editing operates as a whole. One visible difference that empowers children as semantic editors is the critical stance they adopt in order to truly provide meaningful feedback.

Semantic Editing: A Linear View

In theory semantic editing deals with the revision of the meaning of text that may appear to a reader as confusing or in need of clarification. Sometimes the author may need help teasing out the essence of an idea. Students are expected to read their pieces to other students who are not familiar with the story for the purpose of offering suggestions for consideration. The final decision to change or revise any part of a text is always the decision of the author. We discovered in our conversations with teachers that semantic editing was not specifically taught. In fact, it was assumed that editing a piece for meaning was a skill students arrived with at the beginning of the school year. Demonstrating the process of revising a text to make a message more clearly understood for the reader was something teachers thought little about. Most teachers "lumped" conventional editing—which dealt with surface level features of text such as punctuation, spelling, or grammar, etc.—with the revision of a text which deals with the meaning potential of the author's intended message. The two are distinctly different. Atwell (1987) believes that asking students to edit before the content is set reflects misunderstanding of what writers do. We felt that semantic editing (revisions for meaning) preceded conventional editing (surface level features of text) and that most of the author's attention should be placed on semantic revisions. We found the opposite to be true. That is, most teachers in their desire to lump the two editing features together were placing more emphasis on surface and spending less time (if any) on the semantics of the piece. Atwell agrees:

Teachers and students who focus on editorial issues in early drafts are de-emphasizing information and disallowing the real possibility that revision will allow for changes of such magnitude that the final draft will be significantly different (106).

We made connections as to why we felt this was happening. Consider the following journal entries in figure 1.

Figure 1: Journal Entry

I went bowling went to my grandmother's house. Then we went to my uncle's house who lives next store. On Sunday we went to the mall. We got a movie called Stanley and Iris.

Translation: I went bowling went to my grandmother's house. Then we went to my uncle's house who lives next door. On Sunday we went to the mall. We got a movie called Stanley and Iris.

Weaver (1995) describes readers as relying on function words and content words to construct meaning. Function words are identified as articles, conjunctions, and prepositions that signals a content word. Content words are words that carry the meaning of the text and rely on nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs to establish meaning. The writing sample in figure 1 demonstrates how a student in Grade 4 writes using vague language (grandmother's house, uncles, mall,) as a way to express her meaning. One issue we wanted students to be aware of was that in order to make their writing more appealing to an audience they needed to provide the reader with more detail. Common nouns are vague because they refer to general categories of people, places, and things. As an initial focus we wanted students to consider using proper nouns. In doing so, they begin shaping their text providing the reader with more detail and information to consider when they read.

Initiating Semantic Editing: When You Wish Upon A Story

Our observations of writing classrooms helped us discover that many students were not taught what to listen for during the reading of a story or how to make suggestions to an author. Teachers on the other hand often told us that they did not know how to handle students who were sarcastic, and used this time to point out faults of other children. Rather than being constructive, students'

comments were sometimes viewed as destructive, creating tensions and making authors feel bad. In some cases this even resulted in children not wanting to write for fear of what others might say. To overcome this, we started by explaining to a group of Grade 4 students that we were going to read them a story and their job was to first act as listening editors. The job of the listening editors was to provide the authors with suggestions that they could use to help their story be more appealing to a reader. We decided to use wishes as a strategy to get students to initiate the revision of text. The wish directed students into using positive comments. The comments were presented in the form of a wish and had to tell the author what the peer liked about the text. With this in place, students were invited to listen to a story as it was read and to listen for words or sentences that were confusing or unclear. The text we used consisted of stories that we developed and felt were representative of the type of text that Grade 4 is write (see Figure 1). It was important that students had time to model semantic editing and write their wishes before they worked on their own. The class took time each day for a week listening to stories, working in pairs, and writing wishes (see Figure 2). Over the week, students became very adept at listening and offering wishes.

Figure 2: My Weekend Story and Wishes

MY WEEKEND

I went to my aunt's cottage. I played with my cousins. We watched a movie and played some board games. When I got home I went outside and played with my friends. My mom and dad took me out to buy some new clothes for school. My birthday is coming soon.

① We wish that this author would put more information about what she/he did at their aunt's cottage.

② We wish that this author would write more about their aunt.

Once students generated wishes, authors were invited to consider this information when they revised their pieces. Figure 3 is an example of Katherine's revision based on the feedback she received from the wishes.

Figure 3: Katherine's Revised Weekend Story

My Weekend

I went to my Aunt Lisa's cottage near Los Angeles, California. I played with my cousins, Louisa, and Scott and we watched the movie 'Mr. Holland's Opus' and played the board games Monopoly, Sorry!, and Trouble.

When we got home in San Diego California, I went outside and played 'Tag' with my friends.

My mom and dad took me to Target and bought me some jeans, and sweat shirts for school.

My birthday is coming soon. It's on Sept. 17. I'm going to invite all my friends.

Semantic Editing: A Never Ending Story

The difference in the revised piece is obvious. By incorporating the wishes from her peers, Katherine was able to revise her piece and in doing so provided more information for the reader. But we did not want to stop there and asked ourselves, "What would happen if students read the revised piece to others and requested more wishes?" Figure 4 is a sample of the new wishes based on the revised story. At this point, it is important to note that students left behind the notion of wishes and moved into using questions. Calkins (1991) talks about questioning as an act of revision. She believes that reflecting on our thoughts or those of others, asking questions, not only underlies revision, but thought itself.

Figure 4: New Questions for Katherine's Revised Story

Do you like your aunt?
 What is Target?
 What kind of tag did you play?
 Why did you go to Target if it's a store?
 Do you like your friends?
 What part of San Diego do you live in?
 How did you get home?
 Did you like the way you got home?
 Did you find it fast or slow?

Once new questions were generated Katherine was asked to consider these when she revised her piece a second time. In doing so, she took her piece to another level of meaning. By considering the second set of wishes Katherine had to think about her text and how to accommodate the new information. Graves (1994) describes students like Katherine as reflective learners who are able to shift back and forth between one point of view and another while still retaining their own. We can see that Katherine decided to use some of the suggestions but not all of them (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Revised Story Based on New Questions

I went to my favorite Aunt Lisa's cottage near Los Angeles, California. I played with my cousins Louisa and Scott, and we watched the movie 'Mr. Holland's Opus' and played the board games Monopoly, Sorry!, and Trouble.

When I got home in San Diego, California, I went outside and played 'Frozen Tag' with my best friends, Lauren, Katie, and Jackie.

My mom and dad took me to a store named Target and bought me some jeans and sweatshirts for school.

My birthday is coming soon. It's on Sept. 17. I'm going to have a birthday party and I'm going to invite all my friends. I can't wait!

For instance she responded to the first wish (Do you like your aunt?) by adding the adjective "favorite" to describe her feelings for her aunt, the third wish (What kind of tag did you play?) she named the type of tag as "frozen tag" and added the names of her friends, Laren, Katie, and Jackie. At this point Katherine was satisfied with the revisions she made and drew closure on her semantic editing. Katherine experienced the revision and editing process that real authors access, making decisions, incorporating changes, but always in control of her text. Once she felt comfortable with the text, it would now be edited for conventions or surface level features (spelling, punctuation, grammar).

Summary

As a strategy to initiate semantic editing, the notion of wishing has been well received. Teachers remark that once they initiated the process, they found their students taking more ownership of their writing. This provided teachers with more time to observe their class and work more closely with students. But it was the students who also noticed a difference in their writing and the role that they got.

"I think it really helped me organize my stories."

"I never knew it was such a long process, but it was worth it in the end."

"It helps me because the teachers and the class are giving me lots of ideas."

"I like how we work with partners. My stories now make sense."

"I wish we could do more writing because it is fun."

"It helps me change a bad story into a good one."

"I feel that if you could only think of one or two wishes that would be good enough."

"The fun thing about it is you can use your imagination."

"What I think about the whole thing is that it's all very exciting and when we get older we can do documents and novels."

These comments reflect the level of awareness students bring to editing having had teachers who view semantic editing as learner-centered. The exciting part for teachers is they now see the potential and possibilities to change, extend, and refine the process to meet the needs of their students.

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