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A Questioning of Choices: Teaching Revision

Dee Cassidy

The dream is always the same: I'm in my classroom with my students, and we're revising one of my own pieces of writing from high school on the overhead projector. The door creaks open, and all of my teachers, professors, and colleagues slip silently into the back of the room. They watch. They listen. And slowly these academic apparitions shake their heads in dismay. I hear the whispered words again.

"She can't teach. Fuzzy objectives."

"What about grammar?"

"Bloom would be reeling. Where are the higher-level thinking skills?"

"What about a theoretical base for teaching revision? Where's the pedagogy?"

As they begin to fade, I grow smaller and smaller until I disappear. Once more, they've found me out.

The Essence of Writing

Of all the acts that occur during the writing process, the most essential and the most intimidating to teach is revision. It is the breath, the life substance, of writing. To a writer, revision is an almost unconscious process that begins with the first seeds of an idea and never ends.

Nearly all of my own revision happens before I write. I "talk" a piece out in my head, turning the idea this way and that, trying out different voices and approaches, getting a general sense of the physical shape of the piece before I begin writing. Although it may seem peculiar, I hear the entire piece first, listening to quiet voices rehearsing words, passages, and scenes aloud in my head, and it is the sound of the language that helps to create meaning for me. Then I read aloud to myself as I write, and the changing of things as I go is natural and intuitive.

Communicating this process to students, however, can be a daunting task. Students must first see the need to revise their own work. The *enamorado* must be meaning and the language itself, not their own words. They must understand that revision occurs as a series of choices from the moment that they choose topic, genre, purpose, and audience. Students need to see that revision is an exercise in good judgment, exchanging ideas, words, sentences, and passages that don't work for those that do. Once students understand the power they have to create meaning with words, by choosing, for example, to tell a story in first person instead of third or to choose crimson over red, they will respond by evaluating past choices and looking for every way possible to make good choices.

The only way for this to happen effectively is for the teacher to model revision with his/her own writing, inviting students to help with the process. If the teacher models the need to clarify, to add, to delete, and to rearrange his or her own words on paper, students are more likely to emulate this ownership of the process, and, not incidentally, the risk-taking involved.

The Teacher as Model

Having been both a writer and a "pack rat" long before I became a teacher, I have accumulated dozens of pieces of my own writing, pieces that demonstrate almost every conceivable revision task. Although many teachers use typed student work as models, I have found this to be much less effective than using my own work. A viable alternative to using the teacher's own writing, however, is using student work from previous years that includes no identifying information. Both techniques give ownership of the writing to the teacher, setting the stage for modeling the process for students and creating

a more comfortable atmosphere in which students are able to develop their own tools for revision with less risk.

Each piece of writing that the teacher revises with students must be chosen consciously to illustrate no more than two revision tools. If I cannot find in my repertoire a piece that needs a certain kind of revision, such as the order of details, I will write one for my students. With practice, students often find more areas for revision in a particular piece than I have intended. In "The Basin" (shown below), for instance, which I use to focus on sentence variety and voice, my students have almost always added the over-use of adjectives and unclear details. This creates the opportunity to model two critical revision tools for my students: flexibility in thinking and acceptance of diverse ideas. By showing students that I don't always have to be right, indeed, that we can all be right at the same time, I am able to establish a safe framework for revising their own work later with peers.

Teaching the Process

Using the teacher's writing to lead students into revision is also a practical way of introducing the vocabulary, analytical tools, and objective evaluative thinking necessary for revision. It is essential that the teacher recognize that while each writer revises each piece differently, common tools for revision can be learned through observation and practice and then modified by the individual.

Because most of my students don't have little voices in their heads telling them what to write, I demonstrate my process for them on the overhead projector, translating it from a mental process to a physical one that they can then adopt in varying degrees, according to their writing styles or the demands of a particular genre. They hear me asking myself questions such as "Would this story be better if the lieutenant were the narrator instead of the sergeant?" or "Can my reader hear and see what the water looks like at the tide line?" or "Would my argument be more persuasive if this paragraph were moved to the end of the piece?"

My students understand that I expect them to arrive often at revision decisions that differ from those of other students and, most importantly, from mine. If, however, their revision responses seem to be too narrow or to be completely out of focus, I will guide their thinking into admitting more possibilities.

For example, it is often more difficult to get them to add detail than to omit too much detail. Their tendency is to settle for telling instead of showing when they already have a strong picture in their own minds. When this happens, I often choose a particularly descriptive passage from a

published work and rewrite it as "telling". One that I often use is from Elizabeth Goudge's *The Child from the Sea*: "The child awoke with the sun, as was her custom, and shot up instantly out of the nest of blankets, her brown feet reaching for the floor almost before she had rubbed the sleep out of her eyes." Rewritten as "The child woke up early and got up fast." This passage invites students to create their own word pictures with rich detail. After recording and discussing all their suggestions, I show them the author's version. This technique also demonstrates that in writing there are limitless possibilities in what we choose to allow our readers to experience.

Questioning the Writer's Choices

I begin the year by tackling two revision tools at opposite ends of the spectrum: variety in sentence beginnings (concrete) and voice (that most abstract and elusive quality in writing that is difficult for many students to grasp). "The Basin," a descriptive piece from my junior year in high school, serves as a model for both. No less than half the sentences in this piece begin with *the*, and it is entirely devoid of voice. Each student has a printed copy of the piece to mark and keep for reference as we revise together using the overhead projector. I accept all suggestions for revision, explaining terms and reasons for decisions as we work.

The Basin

The sun had nearly disappeared behind the low green hills in the distance and the hills behind were already gray with evening. The dusty road curved to the right and dipped into the valley. The fields beside the road showed heavy black dirt between their young plants. The air was quiet and warm where the road was touched by the rays of the setting sun.

A woods of tall locust, hickory, and pine trees replaced the neatly fenced fields on both sides of the rutted road. The air was cool and stirring slightly in the woods. It smelled of damp dirt and pine cones.

Between two flat stones, both about three-feet wide, a narrow path descended into the woods from the left side of the road. The bed of the path was covered with wet, black leaves, small stones, and rotten branches with yellowed pulp inside. Tangled bushes rose on the left side of the path, but the right side dropped about thirty feet at right angles to the path. The path made a circle about sixty feet in diameter and then went down steeply so that it reached the bottom of the basin almost directly across from where it had begun its descent.

Twelve willows rose from the floor of the

basin past its edge. Long, light-colored grass grew on the floor of the basin and up its steep sides. The brush had all been cleared away, but there were still some traces of it around the willows.

A stream about three inches deep and two feet across appeared on one side of the basin and disappeared in a pool a foot deep and four feet across on the other side. The stream ran slowly, as if knowing it had no place to go. There were many small stones on the bottom. The water was rust-colored and it left the stones rusty with fragments of red-brown moss clinging to them. The bottom of the stream was spongy with the same dark moss. The pool at the opposite side of the basin was so dark that in the twilight it appeared black.

The golden sun slanted down through the tops of the willows and made a striped pattern on the floor of the basin. The air was full of dust specks and they were visible in the bars of fading sunlight.

In about half an hour the sun was gone and only a dim purple light shone in the woods. Outside the basin the air was dry and the night birds had begun to call. There was no moon, but the stars were out. The earth smelled of summer.

After reading the piece aloud, I record on the chalkboard student responses to the question "What isn't working in this piece?" Because the sentence pattern repetition is so obvious, students usually mention that first. Comments follow about too much detail, fuzzy detail, no apparent purpose, and no sense of my feeling toward the subject. When all suggestions have been recorded, we then look at choices I made when I wrote the paper that created the voiceless monotony. I explain to my students what I have learned only as an adult: it was my poor relationship with my high school English teacher that led to the choices I made in this piece that would keep him from knowing anything about me or my grandfather's farm. It is this process of questioning my own writing decisions and how they relate to the success or failure of my purpose in the piece with my students that enables them to begin to step back from their own writing and take that second look.

As my students asked more questions of me about my piece, I was able to see that it was really not a piece about a place, but about three people and their relationship to that place: my grandfather, my father, and me. Revision meant beginning over again to get to the heart of why the place I described was so important to me. The following is the beginning of what evolved from students questioning my choices:

My grandfather was the quintessential quiet man. At 85, he stood tall and strong under his full head of smoke gray hair, with young blue eyes that invited us to share our lives with him, but never allowed us to look inside. As the only daughter of his first-born son, then dead for 13 years, I often went with him as he worked the farm. One sultry August afternoon, the year I was 14, as he walked behind the tractor I was driving, throwing fat ears of Silver Queen into the sleds I was pulling, he told me to stop.

And then "Dee Dee Di," he said, wiping his forehead with his red bandana, "I'm going to take you to Lonesome Valley before we go home. It was your father's favorite place when he was about your age."

My breath stopped and the only sounds I heard were my heart beating and the cicadas droning in the late afternoon haze.

The Tools of Revision

Because each writer and each piece of writing differ from every other, there is no definitive list of revision "tools" to memorize or master. However, there are two steps that I model for and require of my students with each piece of writing. Every piece must be given a 24-hour "rest period" and then must be read aloud by the writer to himself or herself before revision can begin. The wait time gives students a chance to put a little objective distance between themselves and the piece. Most significantly, the oral reading of the piece by the writer helps him or her to "hear" areas for revision that he/she cannot "see" when reading the piece silently.

Two excellent resources for helping teachers create mini-lessons that allow writers to observe and to practice adding detail, clarifying focus, organizing thoughts, developing voice, and playing with language to create precise meaning are Barry Lane's *After the End* and Gary R. Muschla's *Writing Workshop Survival Kit*. These books provide lists of revision questions that students can ask themselves as they begin the process, questions that guide students to examine leads, unity, clarity, organization, originality, detail, deadwood, transitions, conclusions, and other aspects of their writing, such as style and grace.

I have developed the following suggestions to help teachers begin to see revision with new eyes. They are highly individual and certainly not exhaustive.

- Relax, be calm, and treat revision as a natural process.
- Create a safe atmosphere by being the first

risk-taker.

- Allow students to progress in revision at their own rates.
- Make questioning your writing and students' writing a safe activity.
- Help students to see that in writing there are not always "right" answers.
- Practice, model, encourage, criticize, praise, validate, guide, and accept yourself and your students as writers.

Seeing Ourselves as Writers

The most useful revision tool that a teacher can instill in a student is the belief that he or she is a writer. The teacher must believe in the certainty that every person can learn to trust his or her own instincts, and to use words on paper as easily and as effectively as spoken words. Being a writer is a way of stepping outside your life while immersing yourself in your surroundings so that you record and internalize every aspect of yourself and the world around you. It is being the camera and the cassette recorder while you participate in life. The teacher must lead students in letting go of old self-concepts and attachments to the protection of years of "I can't's." To do this effectively, the teacher needs to be able to see himself or herself as a writer, to write with and for the students, and to be open to explore all the magnificence and all the danger inherent in teaching writers. By doing so the teacher gives the student credibility as a decision-maker.

As the year progresses, I use pieces that I write with my students as teaching pieces, and rely upon older pieces of writing less frequently. Thus I am able to model that revision is not static, that it is

not a single activity isolated in its slot between drafting and editing, and that it is a way of being and thinking more than it is an academic activity. The writer who is truly at home with revision is the one who is able to question every idea, every word, every choice with the confident knowledge that the right choice is only the one that works best **then**, for **that** piece. **Being** and **thinking** revision means seeing that all possibilities for choices exist, and that there is no danger in change.

The Invitation

We are all real writers. We wouldn't have survived college English courses if we weren't. As writers, we need to free ourselves to revise with our students as easily as we breathe. By so doing, we become what we want our students to become. In the best sense, revision cannot be taught: it can only be learned.

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About the Author

Dee Cassidy, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, teaches English at Eaton Rapids High School. She serves as adviser to *Voices*, a high school writers' club, and coordinates a middle-school writing conference within the *Rally of Writers* annual spring conference for adult writers in Lansing.