

OVERCOMING CHILDREN'S RELUCTANCE TO REVISE INFORMATIONAL WRITING

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Most authorities in language arts agree that revision is an important component part of writing. In developing competent student writers, teachers need to communicate to them how useful a tool revision is. Donald Murray states that "Revision--the process of seeing what you've written to discover what you have to say--is the motivating force within most writers" (56). He believes that revision enables writers to better understand what they are writing about, and the motivational aspect of revision is seen as powerful enough to motivate even the more reluctant writer.

Lucy Calkins describes sequences of revision in a nine-year-old writer. Revision, in this case, consists of ". . . three interwoven threads" (23)--how the child learns to revise, why the child revises, and how the child revises. Following these "threads," one can see in Calkins' description of the enthusiastic, revising writer the motivation which Murray claims is integral for writers and the revision of their writing.

Donald Graves, too, has noted the value of teaching children to be capable, insightful evaluators of their own writing. Teaching this to children may result in their becoming increasingly proficient at knowing what they want to say, and at revising their writing to say it.

Practical suggestions made by Murray, Calkins, Graves, and others include: avoiding "red-lining" students' writing (Hillerich); reacting first to students' writing by accepting it (Golub, Kantor); listening to what the writer is saying, rather than concentrating on errors such as spelling or mechanics (Brereton); and creating environments where revision can be regularly performed (Schwartz).

Yet, in spite of these suggestions, we are still faced with students who are not motivated and who would rather do most

anything than write. Such students may be affected by “writing apprehension.” Daly and Miller describe them as:

Individuals with high apprehension of writing (who) would fear evaluation of their writing, for example, feeling that they will be negatively rated on it. Thus they avoid writing when possible and, when forced to write, exhibit high levels of anxiety. They expect to fail in writing, and logically they should since they seldom engage in it. (244)

For these students, writing anything once may be a joyless task, and revision may be approached with funereal enthusiasm.

It is important to note that most of the research that supports the effectiveness of revision assumes that topics students write about are of interest to them (e.g. Graves and Calkins). Thus writing and the resultant revisions deal with things that are familiar or things that fascinate the student. The positive findings of such research may be in part due to the fact that there is intrinsic motivation to revise. Motivation to revise one’s writing in the best possible manner is tied to what the students feel is their stake in the writing. As Murray states: “It (rewriting) is what they do to find out something about themselves or something about a subject in which they are interested (57).

If students willingly revise writing concerning topics which are interesting and familiar to them, should we expect enthusiastic revision behavior to transfer to writing where topics are unfamiliar or uninteresting? As many students will agree, there are times when the assigned topic for writing is neither familiar nor fascinating. In fact, outside of the English class or lesson (where hopefully student writing and revision are encouraged), this may be the norm for much of the writing required of students.

This type of writing is typified by the “informational report,” which is required across the curriculum. With such reports, it is quite possible that intrinsic motivation will not play as great a part in prompting the revision of student writing. Students are not necessarily interested in what they’re writing about, and because informational reports are not necessarily concerned with things that students are concerned about, the reports may not be considered worthy of revision.

The informational report is often a compilation of data gathered from books, magazines, and encyclopedias. The topic typically does not originate from the student, so the student may have little stake in improving, through revision, what is being said. Intrinsic motivation may have little or no bearing on revision of informational reports, as the reports are not regarded by students as their own creations. Motives for revision, if extant, may not be as strong as they might for truly original pieces of writing.

How can we approach informational reports so that enthusiastic, concerned revision may take place? Examples from a writing class may best illustrate the different approaches which teachers might take to raise students' interest in revision.

The class was composed of 6th and 7th graders, and had as a primary goal the improvement of writing skills. Because the class was a "writing class," students were encouraged to seek assistance whenever they were having problems with writing. Frequently, students sought help with assignments from other classes. For example, in science or social studies, students needed information on topics like "Neighbors in South America" or "Our Solar System." Many of the students dreaded these tasks, and many proceeded to produce papers which were obviously written by writers who didn't want to write.

Despite urgings to produce papers which they might be proud of, many handed in papers that indicated little or no revision had taken place after the first draft was written. When students got their papers back, they were happy with a minimum passing grade, and the reports were quickly filed away or thrown out.

To help remedy this situation, we tried two techniques for writing and revising informational reports. Both increase student involvement in what's being written and what needs to be revised. First, we tried giving "persuasive" informational report assignments. These reports were a standard part of the English curriculum, and were not restricted to a specific content area. Students were told that they should choose a topic that they were interested in. They were also told that they were to be "experts" in the topic they chose, and they had to prepare a persuasive argument to read to the whole class. The authors were then to defend their claims or positions. Topics varied greatly, as determined by individual interests. Examples of some topics were: Babysitting, The Best Rock Group, Cross-Country Skiing, My Favorite Food, and The Most Enjoyable Television Program.

Many students who were reluctant to do the informational reports approached the persuasive writing assignment with enthusiasm. After initial drafts were written, each student met with the teacher in an individual conference. As initial drafts were gone over, many students asked if their arguments or statements were convincing. The reply was in question form: "Will you feel comfortable stating your opinion and answering any questions about it or disagreements with it from the audience?"

It is apparent that the assignment encouraged revision. Because students were expected to persuade their classmates, they were prepared to revise because they needed to, in order to create the best arguments. Most students worked vigorously and independently in revising their drafts. A good example would be the student who had

chosen to persuade the class that pizza was indeed the best food one could eat. With earlier writing assignments, she showed little interest or motivation for writing or revising. When given the opportunity to write persuasively for her classmates, both attitude and behavior changed. She searched for pieces of information which would strengthen the report, which would refine the factual content of the pizza paper and subsequent oral presentation and defense.

Revision became an on-going process, and the student realized the benefits of revising to clarify and strengthen her position on pizza. Information from magazines and books was used to supplement written discourse, rather than constitute the whole of it. The nutritional value of pizza, the ease with which it is made, and other pertinent facts were gleaned from various sources. These and the assertion of the delicious taste of pizza were used to try and convince classmates (and teacher) that it was the best food. Where earlier reports seemed little more than a listing of facts and figures gathered from various sources, in this assignment the student felt she had something important of her own to say. The student looked past the facts and figures contained in the writing to see if things "fit together" or "sounded right." Sentences were reworked and paragraphs became more cohesive. She was cognizant of how revision might improve both the style and content of her writing. Because the student saw revision as a purposeful part of the writing process, and not as an isolated, inconsequential component, she was more frequent in her use of it. As an "expert" on her topic, the student made sure her work was written and revised with expertise.

Students enjoyed hearing from one another, and they enjoyed presenting the facts and feelings they had on their topics. As proposed by Marion Crowhurst, peer response to writing proved valuable. Writing which dealt with topics familiar to other students (e.g. My Favorite Rock Group, My Favorite Food) was eagerly and concisely commented on by other "experts" in the field.

The above example shows how students can become enthusiastic about an informational report when they are asked to write about something interesting and when they have to present their findings to their peers. But how can we transfer the increased motivation and performance that students exhibit when writing about interesting topics to topics that are uninteresting? How can we make the writing and revision of informational reports more interesting and rewarding for students?

It is unrealistic to expect that children need only be asked to write on topics they are interested in. Informational reports on topics that children would normally prefer not to write about are a regular part of most schools curricula. But suppose we could find a "common ground" where the interests of the learner and the content of the course can be written about and revised enthusiastically? We might

have the best of both worlds. It will require creativity from both the student and the teacher, but the results will be worth the effort.

Hence, the second technique: finding "common ground" between the writer and the topic. If students in a science class are required to write an informational report about motion, one way to find common ground is to allow the student to explore the topic through studying an aspect in which he has an interest--in this case, perhaps, investigating the role of motion in sports (or in some aspect of sports). Similarly, a newspaper delivery route or babysitting service may become the focus of a report on economics. Events of ages past might be compared to contemporary situations in an informational report for social studies. The students' prior knowledge and interest in a topic will provide motivation to revise writing which otherwise might not have made it past a first draft.

In assigning writing topics, it may be beneficial for the teacher to review exactly what is called for in each assignment. It is up to the teacher, ultimately, to determine if "common ground" really does exist between the student and the writing topic. Here, the open-minded and creative teacher can be a great asset to the students. The teacher may find that topics typically assigned for the specific school subject do not encourage creativity or interest, and would be hard for most anyone to write about enthusiastically.

For example, the study of foreign countries is a common topic in many social studies classes. It is also a required area of study which some students find distant, uninteresting, and unappealing. To find a "common ground" where the student is interested and motivated is a challenge. Roy Fox found that the writing apprehension of students could be reduced by a program which included selection of writing topics on "a variety of contemporary issues" and topics which were interesting for the students writing about them. Fox concluded that, while most students are required to write (as determined by school curricula), "student-centered methods of teaching writing" can reduce their level of writing apprehension.

Are there things pertaining to foreign countries which will interest students? This question can help stimulate many ideas for informational reports. Many countries which seem far-removed for many students may be found to have many interesting, "relatable" things. One student, hardly enthusiastic about writing an informational report about a South American country, discovered that llamas inhabit the Andes mountains. As an avowed animal lover, she wrote and revised enthusiastically about llamas. Her informational report eventually included the importance of the llama to the culture, people, and economy of Peru. Here, a student's interest in animals provided the "common ground" on which to build an informational report. With careful planning and taking advantage of students' and teachers' creativity, many school subjects can become at once interesting, familiar, and motivating.

John Beach has described “stimulating” activities which help to increase students’ interest, motivation, and frequency of revision. By providing pre-writing exercises which make the topic to be written about more familiar and more appealing to the student, writing and revision will seem more purposeful to the student. The Indians of the Amazon proved intriguing to one student who researched, wrote, and revised about poison darts and shrunken heads. For this student, unique and fascinating aspects of South America provided enthusiasm which facilitated writing and revision. Ultimately, the report discussed the differences and similarities in lifestyle between himself and an Indian youth. The initial interest in “unusual” things (e.g. shrunken heads) helped provide motivation to revise initial drafts. Thus, pre-writing activities which allow student and teacher to explore the writing topic and assignment from many angles are an important consideration if we want to encourage revision.

An informational report which deals exclusively with shrunken heads or poison darts may elicit previously unobserved enthusiastic writing and revision. But does a report on shrunken heads, however well-written, meet unit or course requirements? Does a report on an isolate, unique topic give evidence of the student having learned or achieved course or unit objectives? It is on this point that the teacher can make valuable suggestions as to how the student may step from “common ground” (the interests of the student) to “new territory” (i.e. the content area material and objectives of the unit). Taking advantage of the enthusiasm generated by the “common ground” topic, the teacher can help widen the scope of an informational report to include broader course objectives.

Both Graves and Calkins have shown that sequences of revision become increasingly proficient as the writer progresses. Their work, however, often concerns writing about topics which the students themselves have chosen. Hopefully, benefits realized by the student through revision of writing which is important to the student will be carried to other writing tasks. Unfortunately, this may not be the case. Informational reports, unless creatively approached by teacher and student, may prove a discouraging task to the writing and revising student.

With either or both of the above approaches (persuasive writing and “common ground” writing) we provide the opportunity for revision to be perceived as purposeful by the students and for the students to perform revision enthusiastically. Writing on topics which encourages revision may benefit the writer at a later date. Certainly, there are instances when even the most accomplished writer would rather not revise. Revision is a time-consuming task. But if revision is seen as an important and valuable tool in crafting the writer’s work, it may be used in situations other than the classroom assignment for which it is required. A student may progress to see revision as something not demanded by a teacher, but something required by the

writing itself.

Informational reports have the potential to be either interesting or uninteresting. Motivation to write and revise them often depends on the manner in which topics are presented, chosen, and assigned. With careful planning, consideration of student's needs and interests, and open-mindedness to varied approaches to informational reports, we may encourage developing writers not only to revise, but to see the benefits of revision.

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