A PORTRAIT OF FOUR
STUDENT REVISERS
For a long time now, I’ve been looking at student revisions. I’ve been interested and troubled by the differences I’ve noticed among student revisers. Some really re-think a piece. For others, no matter how much talking and explaining and modeling I do, revision means to re-copy neatly, making some minor grammatical changes. If, as Donald Murray says, “writing is revision,” what does that mean for students who can’t seem to “re-see” a piece? I began to wonder if there was a particular combination of factors that enabled some students to make sophisticated revisions, and, if so, if there was some way I could alter my classroom to encourage development of that ability.

One day in September, I was sitting in the teacher’s room with the pile of first pieces of the year, rough drafts and finished drafts. I was in an angry mood, for a variety of reasons, and I deliberately pulled Jon’s paper out of the pile. I had had Jon as a student the year before, and I liked his writing very much. I thought his would be a good piece to start with, a good counter for the sour day.

Jon’s piece was called “Dining Out in Dallas.” I looked at the finished draft and its strong opening line, “Everything about my father screams conservative except his politics and his idea of ‘fine cuisine.’” Nice start, I thought. Then I scanned the rough draft. It began with “Whenever I visit my father in whatever city he’s living in at the time, I become hopelessly lost in processes of eating out.” The strong opening line of the final draft I found buried halfway down the first page, in a paragraph which did not appear in the final draft. I looked at the rough and final drafts more closely. The final draft had a new ending, pieces had been moved around, and other paragraphs had been deleted. The author’s “voice” seemed stronger; by the final draft, he had become clearer about what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. The changes Jon had made were complex, more like the kinds of changes professional writers indicate they make than the kinds of changes students typically make (to borrow a scale used by Nancy Sommers). How had he made those decisions?

I looked through the rest of the papers, and stopped again at Randall’s. His was a horror story, relying on a slow, inevitable buildup of detail to create its effects. When I looked at his rough drafts, I saw he had left notes to himself, in red. Warnings such as “too much too early,” “too much of a give-way,” and “silly use of words” adorned the pages of his first draft. In his final draft, he had removed parts, added others, and finished with a very powerful closing line. I read it to my Friday afternoon, eighth period class, and, when I was finished, there was a stunned silence. Then they burst into applause.

How did Jon and Randall do what they did? How did they know when they had gotten the effect they wanted? Would their approaches have anything in common with each other, or with other effective revisers? I began looking for more students to question.

Marjorie’s first pieces had been polite and careful. She sat with a group of girls who were all good writers, in a technical way. They knew how to put words together and didn’t make grammatical mistakes. They seemed cautious, both with what they wrote and with their responses in group. Marjorie’s first story was about the day she got her contact lenses; her second, about the day she got her hamster. The revision of the hamster story, however, was told from the hamster’s point of view. In the first draft, I read a straightforward narrative that could have been a journal entry; in the second, I was bouncing along inside a dark paper bag, screaming “I want my mommy.”

Her next story, a departure from her usual topics, was about the murder of a homosexual by his jealous lover. Again, the first draft set down simply what happened but the final draft was an amalgam
of voices in which everyone concerned—the murdered man's mother, the neighbors, the murderer's mother, the dead man's lover—had a chance to tell their parts of the story. Periodically, the murderer would have a chance to explain how "they made me do it."

Both of these revisions represented real changes from Marjorie's original style, and I had some questions. How had she made the change? Had something she could describe caused it? How did she go about making revisions where she kept the outline of the story but changed everything else?

From Lesly's journal, I know she is writing a novel. The second piece she handed in was twenty-seven pages long. Looking at the original, I saw that entire scenes more than a page long had been eliminated and replaced with others. Because the only note of directions to herself that I saw read "Code: paper 1," I assumed she was carrying complex decisions in her head. I thought it took courage to throw out so much that she had worked to create. I wondered where she had found the time, and the confidence.

In order to find out more about how these students revised, I made up a questionnaire for them. Their answers to the questionnaire generated more curiosity from me and, with helpful advice from New York City Writing Project members Robin Cohen and Mickey Bolmer, I made up questions to ask them in follow-up interviews. Three of the students came after school and allowed me to tape what they had to say; the fourth, who worked, responded more fully in writing to a second questionnaire. As they talked, some of my questions were answered, and I began to get clearer pictures of them as individual writers.

Jon takes his writing very seriously. That puts pressure on him—"I either want to do a comedy or be profound, and it's hard... I throw a lot away"—but it also means he cares very much about the result. "I'll just love it to death... I'll want to kill people if they don't like it."

He has a writing group in class, but says they aren't always as honest as they could be because "here, everyone's worried that we're all going to hate each other." But when Jon goes back to New Hampshire to visit relatives and friends he has there, he brings work with him, both his artwork and his written work. He shares his writing in particular with a friend who is himself a talented writer, and who shows Jon his work.

How did he know to make the changes he made? "My group helped. They laughed there—I laughed here—and I wasn't really sure what it was about, in the beginning." When he revises, he says he's looking for "continuity." To him, that means it has to read smoothly. "If I have to think about what I was trying to say, I change it. I know a piece is a good one when I drastically revise it and still like it."

Jon feels he has to know what he wants to say before he can write. He wants to impress his audience, and that generates a strong desire to be original, "so original, sometimes I can't think of anything. Something that I turn in, I want it to be unique, so they'll all look at it and know I did it." In that way, his attitude towards writing is similar to his attitude towards his artwork.

He likes most of what he writes and writes for pleasure. When he's around the house and bored, he'll "pick up a paper. If it's got lines, I'll write, and if not, I'll draw."

"Versatile" is the word Randall used most often to describe himself as a writer. While he has confidence in his ability as a writer, he doesn't like sharing his work, saying, "I feel my writing has too much of me in it to spread around." Some of that attitude may reflect his notion of "the ignorance of (continued on page 12)
our society, and their lack of appreciation of art and the work put into it.”

Randall revised his piece in three and a half hours of solid work one night when he was alone in the apartment and “nothing could be heard except the scratching of my pen.” When he revises, he tries to do away with predictability. His writing process is similar to the way he does his artwork in that he tries to “add detail that others may leave out because they think they’re unnecessary... I like to give it dimension, to give the beholder what is beyond their perspective.”

When I asked if there was “anything to add, anything else you want to say,” Randall had something on his mind. He said, “writing is at its worst quality when it must be submitted by a given date. No deadline provides ample time. The author should decide when the piece is complete. Nobody ever told Michelangelo or Rembrandt that their work was due.”

Listening to Marjorie’s responses on the tape was a delight. She seemed to be the least inhibited by the presence of the recorder. She said she had never thought of herself as a writer, but that she had been enjoying writing and likes what she’s working on. Her attitude when she approaches a first draft is loose. She says, “Well, this is a first draft, it doesn’t matter. Then I write anything. I still try to make it good, but I know I’m going to revise it a lot, so I don’t say, well, it’s got to be like this...”

The changes in Marjorie’s pattern of writing seems to be paralleled by changes in her personal life. “I’ve always been a ‘nice’ person—I’m trying to let loose this year, and become more myself.” When she revises, she thinks about other people’s reactions. She’s friendly with the people in her group in class, and she says she might think, “Well, what is Gayle going to think?” Even though she has her writing group with her, mentally, when she’s working, she says it’s not pressured, “it’s a friendly sort of being with me.” She also finds her group too polite sometimes, so “I sit down and pretend I’m somebody else. Everyone else has to be polite, but I don’t have to be polite to myself.” This sense of not having to be so polite seems to be part of what gives Marjorie the increasing freedom in her work.

How does she know exactly what changes she wants to make? “I don’t know. I like it if it’s funny—but usually I just get a feeling.”

Lesly hated reading and writing until high school. Now she enjoys writing—she says journals, for example, make her feel better—and “I can’t get enough of reading.” What caused the change? She says, “It just happened.”

Like Marjorie, Lesly says she doesn’t see herself as a writer. “I just write what comes up. I’m not a talented writer.” Who’s talented? “James Baldwin, Stephen King. It’s the way they write. It’s what they put down on paper.”

Lesly feels she has to know what she’s going to say before she starts writing. The rough draft of her story, she said, just came out of her mind, but, working towards another draft, she struck things that she felt weren’t necessary. “I picture it in my mind, and cut out things that don’t fit.”

“Cut out whole pages,” I said.

“Yeah, I know,” she said, and smiled. “It gives me the idea to put in something better.”

Listening to these students talking about writing, I was excited by their enthusiasm and by how much they were able to say about how they wrote. I was intrigued by the differences among them and drawn to the similarities, looking for a pattern that might tell me more about what to do in the classroom to encourage other students to develop their abilities the way these four had.

Certainly these four students had confidence in their abilities. Even Lesly and Marjorie, who said they didn’t think of themselves as writers, had a sense of looking for something in their revision, and some faith that they could find it. Lesly “pictured it in her mind,” Marjorie “just got a feeling,” but Lesly knew how to move towards that picture, and Marjorie recognized that “feeling” and went along with it. Both Jon and Randall expressed confidence in their strengths as writers, in liking what they write, and in their sense that they had power to “impress” or affect the reader.

Does a group, by providing a listening audience who discusses with the author his/her work in progress, help a sophisticated student reviser? While all of these students had criticism of their groups, each indicated that at some point the group had said something helpful. For example, Jon said “they laughed at that part,” Lesly said “they said it was too much of a soap opera.” Although groups were a factor in the writing process of these students, along with other classroom conditions, it was not the strongest factor in determining development of writing techniques and strategies.

The writing process of skilled student revisers remains almost as much a mystery to me as it was when I started. Each of these students developed different techniques along the way, suited to their own needs. They discovered things about themselves as writers, and acted on these discoveries. Essentially, each student finds her own way.

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