TEACHER COMMENTS IN THE REVISION PROCESS

I can't stand it when John rolls the paper I have just returned to him into a ball, assumes a foul line stance, and scores two points—paperball landing with a thud in the circular hoop of file 13. I have just spent hours carefully grading those papers. Clever me, I had penned the most astute remarks. And for what? John had ignored my written comments. That's a cruel act!

Sound familiar? Frustrated? Well, I was too until I made a discovery that I hope will solve the John problem for me and maybe for others. Marian Mohr, co-director of the Northern Virginia Writing Project, led a two-day revision workshop at the Pennsylvania Writing Project Advanced Institute—Summer, 1983, at West Chester University. At one point she commented that she collects student drafts shortly after their fluency stage begins and makes assessment comments and questions, avoiding evaluative comments. Evaluation is reserved for later. At another time she had us do a focused free write relating an experience in our teaching about a student who wouldn't revise. I wrote about a student who had refused to revise a paper on which I had commented "nice job" in an early draft. The student, although bright and articulate, was a typical reluctant revisor who took any opportunity to by-pass the revision process. My "nice job" had been her out. She capitalized on it.

It wasn't until the next day that Mohr's comment and my free writing experience focused for me. When it did, I discovered what for me had been the missing link in the process writing program. What I discovered was that I was playing my role in the revision act of the program in the wrong scene.

And let's not kid ourselves. Although revision is student-centered, the teacher does have a role in the process, in all its facets—peer-conferences, roving and/or sit down oral conferences, and written comments. But it is in the written comments that I believe the teacher personally can be of greatest service. Here the teacher can be a motivational inspiration for even the most reluctant revisor. But when entering the writer's world the teacher must be careful with how and what he comments about the writing. What I discovered was that I had been entering at the wrong time. Oh, I was making some O.K. comments, but I was doing it at the wrong time. My expertise as well as my resource value was diminished.

After twenty-three years of teaching I am convinced that students don't revise, not because they don't want to, but because they don't know how. Also they never learn to appreciate the importance of revision. Sure, they give lip-service to revision. Many will even say they worked hard on it. But on close examination one finds that at
best students only haphazardly make content or editorial changes and at worst they simply rewrite, perhaps more legibly, the first draft.

So let’s examine more closely the teacher comment-assessment feedback in the revision process to see how it can help the student discover ways to revise.

WHAT IS THE PREMISE

Revision is the key to successful writing. It is the single greatest advantage the writer has over the oral communicator, permitting reflection and refinement.

The teacher plays a key role in students’ learning how to revise, and teacher commenting on papers is a powerful force in that learning process. Teachers should enter the revision process directly through comments only after prewriting is completed, usually after the student feels he has a readable draft.

The sacrosanct concept that teachers should comment only on a finished draft in an evaluative way is foolish. Revision is not an end activity. Incentive for revision is lost at that point, for the child views the work as “finished” and is reluctant to write anymore. (No wonder John threw away that paper. He was finished with it!) Also if the teacher requires correction beyond this point, the student often associates this “end revision” as punishment. That’s sad.

Most teacher comments on drafts or on final papers steal the writing away from the writer. Often the teacher’s comments are penned in ignorance of the writer’s intention without any sympathetic regard to the writer’s ownership of the piece. This situation is counter productive. The teacher must be careful not to stifle discovery. The student must retain his right to control his own work and make his own decisions. Therefore, teacher comments and questions must be written carefully, designed to help the student clarify his writing. Questions or comments which force responses to satisfy the teacher kill student impetus and make the activity a drab, correcting-the-errors activity which becomes little more than an impotent, unrewarding rewrite.

A key to revision is to get the students thinking about what they write. There is no reason why students can’t revise while taking a shower or riding to school. The revision process is a matter of perspective. If students are thinking about their writing at times other than with pen in hand at their desk, they’re revising. They can add to the draft when they do sit down to the formal task. Teacher feedback through comments can promote this process.

THE TEACHER’S ROLE

Let’s face facts. None of us has enough time to do all that we want with our teaching. Thus one of the first questions a teacher asks about any change in the writing curriculum is “How will this affect my paperload?” The immediate second question is “What do I have to trade off to add this new idea to my curriculum?”

I can’t deny that assessment commenting often requires two readings. But I don’t believe this automatically doubles the paperload. Remember, the student is spending twice the time on this paper. This means that he doesn’t have time to write on as many topics, so he doesn’t have to do as many completed assignments—a reward for him and for you!

What do you trade off? Simple—get rid of some of those busywork writing assignments that never were any good because the kids knew the assignment was of little value. The resultant work was often so poorly done that you spent much more time grading the papers, marking all those errors. I contend it takes much more time to mark errors than to write comments. Kids will respond better too.

So why not read something twice? If the first reading is done well, the second reading may need only mention that a certain problem is still unsolved. Maybe you’ll save some time!

A major problem that could occur by delving more profoundly into the revision process is the reluctant revisor. Haven’t you heard, “This is exactly what I want to say. And if I spend a lot of time on this, you wouldn’t give me an A anyway because you don’t think I’m worth it.” After you bite your tongue because you know full well the kid’s probably right, explain that you won’t accept the idea that the paper is perfect. In as non-threatening a way as possible review your assessment comments with him. Let him know that he doesn’t have to make revisions on all your comments. But leave no doubt in his mind that revision is necessary. He may be correct that his grade will not be an A, but it won’t be much at all if he doesn’t put more time and energy into his work. Be prepared to carry out your word. He may have to fail. That doesn’t reflect on you. It doesn’t make you a failure. Soon your reputation will be known and this problem should abate.

I think it needs to be mentioned here that teachers must re-think their roles as graders. Teachers must abandon the age-old concept that assessment needs to be corrective and prescriptive. We need to concern ourselves
with assessment that will force students to be aware of their own problems. If we can accept this principle, then we can accept the principle that we can reward students for active and conscientious revisions.

One aspect of the teacher’s role in revision is going to sound like heresy, but here goes! Teachers must abandon the use of editing abbreviations on early drafts, for they are negative error-oriented devices. The frag., cf., agr., trans., sp., awk., etc., are valueless. No substantive changes, no evaluative re-thinking will flow from the mind if it is imprisoned by prescriptive, dead ended editing.

Oh, this is not to say that organization, focus, form, content, coherence, clarity, and all the proper good forms of writing are not to be the teacher’s concerns. They are of utmost importance; the good teacher could never abandon them. Assessment commenting only approaches them differently. I believe that the positive element in assessment commenting has the potential to heighten the writer’s perception of himself as a writer and thus should make him more aware of all facets of good writing. Assessment commenting can also make them important to the student writer.

A final point I would like to make about the teacher’s role concerns writing assignments—make them realistic for the grade and level of instruction. Just as we tell students to narrow and control topics for research, so too should we control our assignments. Recently my classes were studying Chaucer’s ‘Prologue’ to The Canterbury Tales. I gave the following follow-up writing: Create a modern frame story. Briefly describe the characters that would be involved in the story. Then select one of these characters and write a Chaucer-like sketch (comic, satiric, or ironic) of the character. I got marvelous results.

As a matter of fact I’m convinced the student will play with, explore, learn more from, and revise more willingly this topic assignment than one I saw written on the blackboard of a fellow teacher recently. It read: “Compare and/or contrast the character types developed in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales Prologue.” Almost as if to take pity on the poor class, he gave a secondary or alternative assignment. It read: “Analyze the symbols, both religious and secular, in the ‘Prologue’ to The Canterbury Tales.” When I see an assignment like this, I cringe. The student may have loved reading Chaucer’s “Prologue.” He might be bubbling over with new-found knowledge and insights about the fourteenth century. But these topics do not allow the student to develop what counts for him, and secondly, they presuppose he can manipulate heady philosophical literary criticism. What a choice!

GUIDELINES FOR ASSESSMENT COMMENTING/QUESTIONING

Timing is crucial in productive assessment marking. The activity should take place when a truly workable draft is done. If done too early, either the teacher takes too much control of the writing or the teacher will become the only audience for the writer.

Assessment comments/questions should help the student to focus on one or more of the four basic techniques of revision. These four are

1. What needs to be added to the paper?
2. What needs to be deleted from the paper?
3. What materials need to be re-arranged?
4. What words or parts could be improved if you substituted something else?

There is no one right way to write assessment comments. Student age, academic ability of the class, and teacher familiarity with the students dictate the tone and level of the language of assessment questions/comments. At times I’ll joke, harass, kid, bombast; sometimes I’m serious, sympathetic, frank. Most importantly the assessor should be sincere and positive. His remarks should motivate and suggest, but they should not take over the student’s task of revising his own work.

The following papers are examples of student writing on the elementary fourth grade level and secondary twelfth grade level.

I have written assessment comments and questions for each and indicated by a circled number which revising technique I would expect the student to then work on. The number is for the reader’s benefit; I would not put it on a student’s paper.

This fourth grade writing resulted from a discussion about what it would be like to be something other than who I am.

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MY CHRISTMAS TREE

I really liked being a Christmas tree. It was fun. Here is the story.
Once upon the time there was a Christmas tree. This family wanted a tree for Christmas. So the family went to the forest to get a Christmas tree. The tree fell and they tied it to their car. They went home and they put these round things on me. They put lights on me too. They had a happy Christmas. The next day I had boxes under me. The kids opened all the boxes under me that the funny guy brought. Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night.

At this grade the frustration level would probably surface quickly. Therefore I would restrict my assessment to a positive statement and two questions/comments directed toward the revision task. However I have listed below several sample questions/comments which I could have used.
I would like to hear what you thought and felt as a tree. (1)
What do you call the “things” put around a Christmas tree? (4)
In your home which do you do first—trim the tree or put the presents around it? (3)
Who were the family members? Can you tell something about them? (1)
If you started with “Once upon a time . . . ,” where would the first sentence go? (3)

The following twelfth grade writing developed out of a discussion of Beowulf’s character traits. We narrowed our writing to one of the two traits—loyalty and duty—which the student believed were still important today.

I asked them to write about loyalty or duty; they could be theoretical, practical, or creative.

ON LOYALTY

True loyalty, in every sense of the word, is pretty hard to come by these days. It seems everyone is so preoccupied with other things. However, on occasion, one can find examples of it if one knows where to look. Here’s a hint, look in Landenburg, PA. There one will find a cute, little, dumb blonde named Kim. She’s my buddy. She has been for nine years, which is nothing to scoff at in this day and age. Sure, we’ve had our share of, uh, petty grudges shall we say, but through it all, we’ve been the epitomy of loyal friends.

She has lived the life of a gypsy for the past three years, moving all over the country with her family. Personally, her mother is a bit flighty. She likes moving on whims. Be that as it may, the topic is loyalty, so I suppose I should be loyal to it, and get back to it.

Anyway, we wrote each other almost every week, called when we could, and stayed as close as ever. That’s my own experience with loyalty, one among many, but let’s not bore you into a fit of tears.
If one wanted my opinion of what true loyalty is, one would read the book "Still Life With Woodpecker" by Tom Robbins. It's a sort of a love story. The main characters are Princess Leigh-Cheri and Bernard Mickey Wrangle, ahas, "the Woodpecker." They are separated, he's thrown in the slammer, and she keeps up a personal vigil for him until he's released. Now that's loyalty to me; not to mention love. Love and loyalty seem to go hand in hand. If one is loyal to someone or something, a certain amount of love is involved, I think. But then again, what do I really know anyway?

I know that loyalty goes a lot deeper than surface kindnesses. I know that loyalty to oneself is the most important kind of all. And I know that if I can be and have one loyal friend in my lifetime, I'm pretty lucky. Gee, maybe I do know a couple things after all.

After my assessment, the class members had a three day period to make further revisions. Here is the final draft of the paper.

ON LOYALTY

True loyalty, in every sense of the word, is rare these days. It seems that everyone is so preoccupied with their own lives that loyalty to others comes second, if at all. However, on occasion, one can find examples of true loyalty if one knows where to look. There's a hint, look in Landenburg, PA. There one will find a cute, dumb blonde named Kim. She's my buddy and has been for years, nine, to be exact. That's nothing to scoff at in this day and age. Sure, we've had our share of, uh, petty quibbles... "You can be a real jerk, you know that?" "Oh, Shut up! and get out, and don't come back!"... but, disregarding those times, we've remained loyal friends.

She has lived the life of a gypsy for the past three years, moving all over the country with her family. Personally, I think her mother is a bit flighty. She likes moving on whims. But, putting that aside, the topic is loyalty, so I suppose I should be loyal to it and get back to it. During her absence we wrote each other almost every week, called when we could, and stayed As close as we ever were. Being close is easier now because they've moved back. Well, that's my own experience with loyalty, which is one among many I've had in the course of this life.

If one wanted my opinion of what true loyalty is, one would (Continued on page 18)
read the book "Still Life With Woodpecker" by Tom Robbins. It's a sort of a love story. The main characters, Princess Leigh Cheri and Bernard Mickey Wrangle are separated. Bernard, also known as "the Woodpecker," is thrown in the slammer, and Leigh Cheri keeps up a personal vigil for him until he is released. Now that's loyalty to me, not to mention love. Love and loyalty seem to go together. If one is loyal to someone, or something, a certain amount of love is involved, in my opinion. But, then again, what do I really know anyway?

I know that loyalty goes a lot deeper than surface kindnesses. I know that loyalty to someone takes a good deal of effort, and I know that if I can be and have one loyal friend in my lifetime, I'm pretty lucky. Gee, maybe I do know a couple of things after all!

WHAT CONCLUSIONS CAN BE DRAWN?

Teachers of writing are at times the students' worst enemies. Probably it's true that some kids learn in spite of their teachers. But some don't. Much of the problem in writing, I believe, lies in ill-worded comments which, rather than stimulating and encouraging revision, at best limit the students' natural learning through writing and at worst destroy the creativity of the writing, taking life from the work.

Teachers might do well if they likened themselves to high paid executives who get paid for their knowledge, not for their manual output. The teacher should be the consultant, not do the work for the writer." He can do this only if he writes comments that stimulate thinking and give choices to the writer.

J.D. Parsons commented "Curiosity urges you on—(it is) the driving force for the writer." Assessment questioning and commenting inspires that wonderful master key to learning—curiosity.

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