Reading Practices as Revision Strategies: The Gossipy Reading Model

No one questions that revision is a good and necessary part of the writing process. But like many things that are “good for you,” writers, especially young writers, resist making it part of their routines. But when a high school teacher adapts a reading strategy for revision, he stumbles upon the quintessential revision strategy: one that is both “good and good for you.”

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There’s a now-famous Life cereal ad that used to run on television when I was a kid. In it, three brothers sit at a breakfast table, faced with an unknown cereal, while one brother ominously intones those dreaded words: “It’s s’posed to be good for you.” The older two foist the unknown comestible upon little Mikey, who, they speculate, “won’t eat it. He hates everything.” Miraculously, Mikey “likes it,” and proceeds to gobble up his bowl as a voice-over extols the virtues of Life cereal. I suspect that all teachers of writing are on the constant lookout for the pedagogical equivalent of Life cereal. I’d like to relate one moment from my career that paralleled Mikey’s unexpected enjoyment of something good for him.

I teach in the English education program at California State University, Chico, and am a former high school English teacher as well as a teacher-consultant for the Northern California Writing Project. It was in the latter capacity, coteaching a revision workshop with Rochelle Ramay as part of a 120-hour professional development institute that I experienced the sudden, unlooked-for success. The institute’s participants, all high school teachers from various academic disciplines, had been learning and practicing a number of strategies for helping their students read and write more effectively. One of the reading strategies we had modeled and taught was a variation of the “reciprocal teaching” practice described by Jim Burke in The English Teacher’s Companion. Teachers using this cold-reading strategy put students into pairs, and the students then take turns reading aloud to one another. The nonreading student is encouraged to stop the reader at any point in order to make predictions, ask questions, clarify meanings, draw inferences, summarize points, make connections, visualize ideas, point out discrepancies, and so on (44). Because in practice this means that the reader is often disrupted, as a group we began referring to this particular strategy as simply “interrupted reading.”

The “Life-cereal” moment began during lunch one Saturday. Rochelle and I had planned on spending the afternoon of the institute with revision. I suspect I’m not the first teacher to notice that, while revision is certainly as “good for you” as the cereal, it can also be viewed by students with suspicion and dislike. We were talking about what to do to make the process less intimidating. The institute’s participants had already written a first draft of a paper that took a position on contemporary public education. We wanted to provide them with a positive peer feedback experience that would help them revise these early efforts. Like most teachers of writing, Rochelle and I both have some successful methods for implementing peer revision workshops but also are on the constant lookout for some peer revision panacea. On the day in question, we came up with something new to try.

We’d been hammering the point during the institute that what we want to produce are not just students who are good readers of literature, or good readers of schoolbooks, but readers who can successfully tackle “text” in all its myriad forms. The reading strategies we introduced were meant to
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give students a range of approaches at their disposal when they are faced with a new text to read. We reasoned that reading a fellow student’s paper is just another situation in which we ask students to make meaning from a new text. Why not employ the already familiar reading strategies as revision strategies?

We came up with a name for this blended strategy: gossipy reading. It was a transformation of interrupted reading into peer response. We asked our institute participants to form groups of three. One person would volunteer a paper for scrutiny, which would be read aloud by the remaining pair. As with the interrupted reading strategy, one person would read aloud, while the other would stop the reading to call attention to details, raise questions, predict, make connections, etc. Through this process, the readers would talk about the paper, how it was working, what meaning they were making, what they found confusing, and so on. The pair doing the reading, in other words, would “gossip” about the paper. The paper’s writer, meanwhile, listened and read along, but was not allowed to respond in any way to the comments made by the gossiping pair. The writer was forced to listen to the ways readers constructed meaning from the text he or she had produced. When the paper had been read and discussed in its entirety, then—and only then—was the writer free to join the conversation.

What happened in practice was remarkable. The institute’s participants, having already practiced interrupted reading numerous times, felt at home tackling their peers’ papers in this way. Gone was the burden, so often foisted upon members of peer revision groups, of suggesting ways to “fix” the paper. Instead, group members simply had to read the piece aloud, interrupt whenever they had comments, and talk about the ways that they made sense of the paper’s ideas. When Jenn and Monica gossipied about Louis’s paper, for instance, they immediately noted that the opening of the paper was confusing:

Monica: Stop for a second. I don’t get who’s talking here.
Jenn: Me either.
Monica: And who’s Williamson?
Jenn: That’s Louis!
Monica: It is?
Jenn: Yeah—last name.
Monica: Oh. But I still don’t know who’s saying this.
Jenn: Let me keep going. It’ll probably tell in a second.

As a result of this interchange, Louis was able to focus on the way he began his paper. He not only knew that the introduction needed work, but he also knew what effect its original form had on readers. The process had shown him what he had to do to meet his readers’ needs. The draft that had been “gossiped” began with a long quote from a former teacher who wasn’t identified until the end of the paragraph; in his revision, Louis broke up the quote at the point where Monica had interrupted, naming the speaker and clarifying the questions raised by the gossipers.

Through this reading-as-revision process, writers had the opportunity to hear the thoughts that went through the heads of their papers’ readers as they worked out a paper’s meaning for the first time. Insight into what needed revision simply arose by hearing the readers talk about what did and didn’t make sense. Wrap-up discussions among all group members helped writers clarify and gain advice about how to go about the revision process itself.

In part, of course, this strategy worked well because the participants were all dedicated, professional teachers—the ideal class. They had also practiced, and in many cases taught, the interrupted reading strategy. When I first tried gossipy reading with a class of English education majors, I met with less success, mostly because we hadn’t, at that time, done much practicing of interrupted reading. My students also took the “gossipy” aspect of the strategy a little too literally, imbuing their read-alouds with comments borrowing from the nastiness gossip often thrives upon. Rebecca and James, for instance, were “gossiping” Michael’s write-up of a classroom observation when they noticed a problem with overusing pronouns:

James: Hold on. There are too many “he’s” in there.
Rebecca: Yeah. I can’t tell who’s doing what. Who just went back to his desk, the teacher or the student?
James: The student. It must be. The teacher’s still working with that group, right?
Rebecca: Oh, yeah. That’s confusing, though.
James: Well, what do you expect from Michael? He’s always clueless.
Rebecca: Did you see what he’s wearing tonight? Talk about clueless!

While this sounds quite negative, it was actually playful banter; all three were part of a cadre of friends and were being light-hearted rather than mean-spirited. However, it brought home to me that the use of the term gossip served to put the focus more on the group’s social dynamic than upon the paper’s ideas. I considered renaming the strategy to obviate this problem but decided

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against it because students are attracted by the idea of gossip. It’s a genre they certainly understand, and it helps situate the reading and writing practices within “the social dimension” of reading, so labeled by Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, and Hurwitz, in their book Reading for Understanding (24). Still, in subsequent uses of the strategy, I addressed the issue of appropriate topics for gossiping prior to the revision workshop, and things have since gone more smoothly.

The gossipy reading strategy for revising papers has since become a staple in my classes. Rochelle has used it successfully in her high school classes as well. And the students? They’re a little like Mikey in that cereal ad. Expecting the same old thing from revision, they surprisingly discover that there are ways to experience revision that they can like, even though it’s good for them.

References


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