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ENGL 3818

Revise. Reflect. Transfer. (no, don't transfer schools, read it, & you'll understand)

We are taught to compose at a young age. At only a few years old, young children clumsily grip gel pens and begin to scribble barely eligible letters and iterations of their name. They continue the process, a cognitive connection between brain and hand, through all of elementary, middle, and high school, adding methodical taps on a keyboard into their composition process. They are taught terms like "literacy," "audience," and "rhetoric" that hang in the air like suspended fragments unconnected. Each writing situation is a separate event. They enter college and take a one- or two- sequence composition class that reiterates the formulaic writing of their high school English classes. They go through the motions but seem to have no conception of what they are doing. They do not reflect, they do not revise, and as a result they do not know how to translate what they have learned in first year composition classes into different writing situations.

Historically, revision follows the model that the student is the novice and the professor is an expert. In a publication from 1982, Nancy Sommers describes the mixed-messages that students receive from teachers, "to edit and develop, to condense and elaborate," which represent the failure of their comments to direct genuine revision of the text as a whole (151). The all-powerful professor shoots out lightening bolts with his/her pen, slashing words, adding "So what?," and notes to "explain" in the margins. By the time they are finished, the student's paper is covered with more red ink than a battlefield, and students remain confused and embarrassed about their continued inability to write in a way their teacher approves of. Rather than take a second look at their writing, they often opt to quickly tuck their rejected paper inside a folder or

toss it in the trash without giving it a second look. In an article from the 1960s titled "Composition: Why? What? How?," Burack suggests that revision "will follow honest, pointed criticism" (506). However, anyone who has received a sub-par or disappointing grade understands how it is often not a student's immediate response to get their paper back and revise it, especially if the original grade is final.

The process of revision, although often misunderstood and distorted in a classroom setting, remains a valuable aspect of composition studies. Andrea Muldoon argues that revision is an important tool for improving one's writing skills and fostering critical thinking about content in any discipline (69). However, Muldoon also points out that historically, the field of composition places the "'flawed' apathetic student" in contrast to the "enlightened teacher," who preaches that revision should be the natural response to (often negative) feedback. However, as pointed out by Dylan B. Dryer in Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies, points out that unlike speech, "writing is not natural" (29). Despite the difficulties in revising, many professors within the field of composition use small group peer-review and feedback which is proven to help students understand the social aspects of the revision process (Jeff Sommers 119). In recent years, there seems to be a move toward a more democratic revision process between students, which involves the less rigid structure of student-professor feedback alone.

In addition to the misapplication of revision in the field of composition, reflection has also been overlooked and oversimplified. Kathleen Blake Yancey points out that "reflection has played but a small role in this history of composing" (4). One early mention is in Sharon Pianko's "Reflection: A Critical Component of the Composing Process," in which the act of reflection during composing is identified as "behaviorally manifested as pauses and rescannings"

that “stimulate the growth of consciousness in students” (277). Yancey expands on this idea in a modern context, but instead of counting the number of times a student pauses or rescans a passage, she explores reflection “as a means of going beyond the text to include a sense of the ongoing conversations that texts enter into” (4-5). The redefinition of what reflection entails has important implications into how each student’s writing process and “post-process” is understood. Today, the purpose of reflection and revision has shifted from blunt critique and surface-level editing to a more nuanced goal of growth and exploration beyond a singular writing activity. The article, “Reflection, Revision, and Assessment in First-Year Composition ePortfolios” suggests that using ePortfolios in first-year writing courses can reinforce the use and instruction of revision and reflection as a part of the writing process. The use of ePortfolios also represents a modern move toward the integration of digital literacy and multimodality in the composition classroom. The ePortfolio article also references Kathleen Blake Yancey’s idea that reflection is the metacognitive counterpart to revision. Yancey believes that together, reflection and revision allow writers to stand back and critique their own texts (reflection) and, subsequently, to make changes to those texts (revision) (Desmet et al. 19). Reflection and revision are two sides of the same coin and each contribute to a writer’s ability to learn and grow beyond an isolated writing event.

Since many composition articles were written in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the concepts and focus of the field continue to move away from the binary student-professor relationship that involves performance and critique. In “Reflection Revisited: The Class Collage,” Jeff Sommers argues that “reflection cannot be isolated as a solitary final act in a writing course with any great degree or hope for success” (123). Yancey encourages students to participate in the writing classroom not as objects of study but as agents of their own learning through the process of

reflection (5). Reflection and revision are no longer stand-alone exercises that can be inserted as an afterthought into a writing curriculum to radically transform the result of student writing. Instead, they include reimagining the student-teacher relationship and restructuring the class design to integrate and value reflection and revision as an integral part of the composing process. The article "Reiterative Reflection in the Twenty-First-Century Writing Classroom" expands Yancey's idea of reflection to include reflective theory, reflective assignments, and reflective activities. Reflection includes both reflecting inwardly, through the act of thinking about writing practice, and outwardly, through the act of writing about writing practices (43-44). Kara Taczak and Liane Robertson posit a "Teaching for Transfer" or "TFT" course that is designed to help knowledge "transfer" across writing assignments, disciplines, contexts, and situations within and outside of a university. They argue that a reflective framework is most effective when integrated into a writing course that features writing as content and with the intended goal of transfer (44). This course design reflects the "integral role reflection plays in supporting students' successful transfer across writing sites, such as from one assignment to the next inside a writing course and from one course to another" (42). A class explicitly modeled around transfer could help aid the discrepancy and transfer of information taught in first-year writing classes to writing in other disciplines within a university.

Yancey asserts that reflection is a critical component of learning and of writing specifically. She categorizes reflection into three areas: reflection-in-action, constructive reflection, and reflection-in-presentation. According to Taczak and Robertson, "Reflection helps writers get past the idea of what they're supposed to know and move toward the idea that they can access what they know in ways of their own choosing" (60). When students are liberated to

make choices about their own writing, they have more agency over the texts they are producing, and as a result, have a better chance of understanding what they are composing.

An article called "Disciplinarity and First Year Composition: Shifting to a New Paradigm," identifies that there is a broad expectation of those inside and outside of composition that first year composition instruction will contribute to their ability as writers in future contexts" (1). In order for writing to be useful outside of the first-year writing classroom, it must have the ability to transfer into new contexts and writing situations.

Reflection involves taking a step back, thinking about, and critiquing writing after it is written, and revision involves changing, reordering, and restructuring writing. Transfer involves the way knowledge, specifically writing knowledge, migrates between and across classroom environments and in new situations. As modern composition becomes more social, technological, and integrative into academic and professional environments, learning how to access writing skills in different contexts and situations becomes equally important to the teaching of composition in the first place.

The Mouth of the River (The Source of the Knowledge)

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If this didn’t convince you that my 16 years of formal schooling taught me how to write a traditional source paper, then yikes. I guess it’s too late now. Count me in with Johnny.