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Modeling How We Think When We Write

Roy Andrews

All of us have had the frustrating experience of reading “final drafts” of student papers that are filled with underdeveloped ideas, unclear sentences, unnecessary words, and punctuation errors. If we ask these students how they went about making their papers, in most cases we find that they did not revise and edit. Many students do not leave time to even read their papers before passing them in. This practice is generally interpreted by experienced writers as procrastination. I have found, however, talking with students who visit the Reading/Writing Center, that, in fact, the reason they leave no time for rewriting is not procrastination, but lack of experience. They either do not know how to revise and edit, or they think adult writers do not need to. They are being logical when they leave no time for activities they do not know how to do or think they are grown up enough to skip.

Having discovered this, I regularly show students how experienced adult writers produce publishable writing. Last fall, after writing a *Clock* article, I collected all my drafts. I share these with students and talk about what I was thinking when I made certain changes and decisions. Students invariably are surprised and fascinated. I show them the first scribbles I made, the initial rushed “outline,” and my struggle for a first sentence:

This is the time of year...("No, sounds like Christmas.")

When I was ten years old...("No, sounds like 'when I was a boy...'"")

There was one kid...("No, sounds too slangy.")

Paul Williamson batted over .600 in the little league... ("No, sounds like a biography.")

Lately I've been thinking a lot about baseball and writing... ("That's it. I'm not sure why, but that's it!")

At this point the students have already learned that my article evolved from scribbled thoughts and that my mode of thinking when writing was trial and error.

Next I show them my rough first draft, which I wrote quickly on the computer. I talk about the revisions I made in pencil: circled blocks of text to be omitted or moved, new sentences and paragraphs written between the lines or in the margins. I show them the draft after that with sentence and word changes written in pencil on the fair copy, and the draft after that with just a few small corrections. ("See," I say, "here in this late draft I finally saw that World Series should be capitalized. I never could have seen that earlier when I had bigger things to think about.")

And finally I show them the printed article cut from the newspaper. They always are quiet as it sinks in that this nice looking printed article did not come from me easily and fully formed.

I am envisioning a college where students know that all of their professors struggle with words when writing. I am imagining a college where the students regularly see that all of their professors

consider and reconsider, imagine effects and test them out, weigh options and make decisions every time they write. Granted, everyone writes in his or her own way: some do multiple drafts; others write more slowly and edit as they go; some make all their changes on hard copy where they readily show; still others work on computer screens or in their heads where only the last of the experiments, reconsiderations, and fine tunings show. But everyone who writes well does a lot of deliberating, and it is this mode of thinking that, most unfortunately for inexperienced writers, does not show in the printed pages students read in books, magazines and newspapers, both in and out of classes.

Students are taught to revere the clear, final thinking of accomplished writers, but they are rarely shown or even asked to imagine the rough experimental thinking that was done by these same writers during the act of writing. They cannot see how the best writers thought while writing, so they do not know how to do it themselves. They imagine most professional writers got it right first try, so that is what they attempt.

Students, I believe, will model the mode of thinking that results in fine writing if their professors regularly share that mode with them. Even if professors share only a page or two of an article, book, or written speech, if they are willing to demonstrate how they thought while working, this will improve the way their students write. For many students, these demonstrations by their professors will be an encouraging revelation.

•••you mean your writing doesn't just come out perfect?••••
(1997)

An Afterword

My sense is that not as many students at PSC now, six years after I wrote “Modeling How We Think When We Write,” believe

that good writers get what they want to say down right on the first try. It's just a sense, I know, without any objective empirical backing, but a solid enough sense to encourage me to speculate on what might have brought about such a change in belief.

Speculation #1— Over the past six years there has been an increase in entering PSC students who have practiced trial-and-error thinking while writing in secondary school. More secondary school teachers are teaching that it is normal to have rough early drafts. (My daughter's third grade Plymouth elementary school teacher taught her to call early drafts "sloppy copy" and expect them as part of her writing process.) Increased access to computers in secondary school has made teaching this kind of revising and rethinking much easier to do.

Speculation #2— More PSC professors across the curriculum are giving writing assignments with multiple stages, and therefore rethinking, structured into them. Some of these professors read their students' early drafts and comment, inspiring the students to rethink, while other professors have been successful requiring that early drafts be read by peers (either in peer review sessions or out of class) or by a writing consultant at the College Writing Center.

Speculation #3— More PSC professors tell or show their students that when they themselves write they do a lot of trial-and-error thinking. Some professors share stories of their own experience writing in order to rationalize assignments they are giving with multiple stages structured into them, and some professors write assigned papers along with their students and then report on the deliberation and trial-and-error thinking they did while writing.

Just a couple of hours ago, I reread my article "Modeling How We Think When We Write." I felt compelled to respond, and yet when I tried to write this afterword I was frozen. It took me a

while to realize, sitting on the couch in the College Writing Center, pencil in hand, clipboard on my lap, (now I'm revising on a computer) that I was stuck because I was thinking I could get this written right on the first try. It took me a while to really listen to my self of six years ago and proceed, as a good writer should, by trial and error.