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Defining and coaching revision

Eva Yvonne Valentijn

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DEFINING AND COACHING REVISION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts
in English Composition

by
Eva Yvonne Valentijn
August 1990
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ABSTRACT

Even though revision is an integral component of the writing process, many high school English teachers have paid little attention to the teaching of revision. Because the current linear model of the writing process places rewriting or revision after writing, many teachers have treated revision as an afterthought. It is no wonder then that students treat revision as an unimportant element of the writing process. They do not recognize that revision is an opportunity to reformulate, restructure, and negotiate their intended meanings.

Since revision gives students a chance to improve their texts, it is important that teachers encourage this element of the writing process. High school English teachers must first define revision more broadly. They must emphasize the recursiveness of writing and encourage the writing of multiple drafts. They also must become aware of affective and cognitive factors which hamper and of those which promote the revision process. Knowing that students need encouragement about their ability to write enables teachers to motivate their students. Understanding that students need to acquire cognitive skills such as the ability to read texts critically or diagnose problems in their texts thoroughly makes teachers aware of the
multitude of skills they need to teach if their students are to revise their papers.

Three teaching strategies—peer response groups, writing conferences, and self-assessment—can help instructors teach the revision process to their students. Although these strategies require more skill, time, and energy to implement than traditional methods such as lectures and evaluations of finished papers, high school English teacher may find that their efforts will have positive results: Students will improve their texts.

Coaching revision is not easy to accomplish, yet teachers must meet the challenge if they are to see improvement in their students' writing.
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CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING REVISION

Introduction

High school English teachers are expected to motivate and improve student writing, but historically the high school setting has developed a tightly regulated system which impedes access to the best pedagogical conditions. Unlike college instructors who have opportunities to create and use current research, secondary school teachers have limited access to composition theory and practice. While preparing their students for freshman English or the work world, they focus their energies on teaching the writing process, their strengths being prewriting and writing. Because they tend to handle the revision process cursorily, many high school teachers are disappointed when they view the results of their request for student revision.

Instead of finding significant improvements in their students' texts, these secondary teachers often discover that their students have simply made minor corrections in their texts. Such fruitless results are enervating to both teachers and students. Both groups question the value of putting any energy into revising. While some teachers and many students may question the benefits of the revising, most experts in the field of composition agree that revision is an essential component of the writing process.
They point out the differences between skilled and unskilled writers. While skilled writers reshape and reformulate their ideas when they revise, unskilled student writers edit by merely making changes in words, spelling, punctuation, and grammar (Sommers, "Revision" 121-6). Although most of these experts believe that students miss an opportunity to improve their writing when they fail to revise, some studies show that the texts of students actually became worse when they attempted to revise (Hansen 1978; Bracewell, Scardamalia, and Bereiter 1978 in Hillocks 44). This confusion about whether or not revising is worthwhile stems not only from its complexity as a process, but also from the various interpretations of what it means to revise. In attempting to clear this confusion, I will define revision, examine the affective and cognitive factors which block the revision process, and suggest teaching strategies primarily aimed at the high school English teacher that encourage revision. Since high school English teachers can build the foundation for better student writing by teaching the revision process, it is essential that they become empowered with the knowledge of revision.

**Defining Revision**

Defining revision is not easy because people disagree on what it is. Students, teachers, and experts in the field of composition define the process differently. Since
revision is a process which is multi-faceted, a precise definition may not be possible. A description of the various viewpoints will illuminate the different ways of interpreting the process of revision.

Students tend to define revision very narrowly. Nancy Sommers, in her article "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," discovered that students do not even feel comfortable using the terms revision and rewriting. Students use functional terms instead. These terms distinguish the functions of the changes they make when their teachers ask them to revise. Words such as scratch out and do over again, reviewing, and slashing and throwing out are indicative of their concern with making word-level changes and avoiding redundancy in their written language (121-122).

While students tend to see revision as a simple mop-up procedure, composition teachers often define revision in other terms. Many teachers who teach revision as a part of the writing process believe revision to be the last stage in this process. In following either George Rohman's model of prewriting, writing, and rewriting or James Britton's model of conception, incubation, and production, teachers forget to acknowledge the recursiveness of shaping written language. As a result of these linear structures, teachers believe revision to be a distinct stage after a first or second draft, and they treat it as if it were not a vital
element of writing (Sommers, "Revision" 119-20). Sommers suggests what happens to revision as a result of the linear models of writing:

By staging revision after enunciation, the linear models reduce revision in writing, as in speech, to no more than an afterthought. In this way such models make the study simply the repetition of writing; to pursue Britton's organic metaphor, revision is simply the further growth of what is already there, the "pre-conceived" product. The absence of research on revision, then, is a function of a theory of writing which makes revision both superfluous and redundant, a theory which does not distinguish between writing and speech. ("Revision" 120)

Sommers findings reveal that teachers' pedagogical definition of revision is often limiting. Although teachers expect students to improve their texts when they ask students to revise, their pedagogy seems to deemphasize the importance of the process. Is it any wonder students fail to view "revision as a process"? (Sommers, "Revision" 123).

While writing instructors may not successfully teach their concept of revision to their students, experts in the field of composition have delineated the nature of revision more carefully. Most experts agree that revision is a separate activity from editing. They believe that revision is a complex and generative act which allows a writer to discover meaning. Donald Murray, in his article "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," differentiates between internal and external revision. While the latter form of
revision focuses on proofreading and correctness for an audience outside oneself, the former, internal revision, emphasizes the complexity and recursiveness of writing. In internal revision, a writer attempts to change the text for himself or herself. Murray's description of the process reveals how writers create new meanings:

They [writers] read what they have written so that they can deal with the questions of subject, of adequate information, of structure, of form, of language. They move from a revision of the entire piece down to the page, the paragraph, the sentence, the line, the phrase, the word. And then, because each word may give off an explosion of meaning, they move out from the word to the phrase, the line, the sentence, the paragraph, the page, the piece. Writers move in close and then move out to visualize the entire piece. (92)

Murray's description reveals revision to be a complex process wherein the writer focuses attention to the minute as well as larger parts of the writing. The goal seems to be an analysis of the text for the sake of meaning; the writer considers his or her entire text as he or she makes improvements. Unlike students who look for word-level changes or teachers who believe revision to be an afterthought, experienced writers see revision as a way of writing.

Most theorists and experts agree that revision is a process which enables writers to re-envision their texts. In reseeing their work, writers often notice incongruities between what they had intended to say and how they had executed their intentions (Sommers, "Revision" 125), or
they discover some new meaning of which they had not been aware at the time they were writing (Murray 87). Because writers find dissonance or new meanings, they rewrite in order to clarify or further explore their meanings. Even Linda Flower, John R. Hayes, Linda Carey, Karen Schriver, and James Stratman, in "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision," claim that writers revise when their texts are not sufficient. They believe revision is "a strategic action, adapted to the necessities of the task" (19). They further assert that writers who diagnose their problems are more capable of revising their texts than those who simply detect these problems. These theorists believe that revision is a part of a problem-solving procedure (47-8).

Other theorists have related revision to invention. Unlike many teachers who believe revision to be the obligatory stage after drafting, these experts maintain that revision is more than an afterthought; it is a process which begins even before a writer places a word on paper. These people believe that revision occurs as we begin the dialogue with our audience or with ourselves. Ann Colley, in "Revision and Otherness," describes the process of revision in the following way:

Paradoxically, revision commences before the actual writing. Even before writers set pen to paper (fingers to keyboard), fragments of phrases, images, and voices emerge and start to qualify intention and invention... Revision resides
within the so-called "pre-writing" stage when the
dialogical moments are already active. Few
students, though, acknowledge this reality or work
to sustain the various voices that sound within
them. (2)

Here Colley suggests that revision is an ongoing
process that can hardly be separated from invention. Her
emphasis on the dialogical aspects of writing indicates
that writers are successful to various degrees in engaging
the various voices within themselves to help them make
changes in their texts. The act of revision for Colley is
recursive, involving continuous reformation of ideas
throughout the writing process.

Since many high school teachers and students may have
not incorporated the researchers' broad definition of
revision, it is important for these two groups to move
beyond seeing revision as an afterthought. Limiting
options and even styles of revision may hamper pedagogical
strategies, and, hence, even discourage students from
clarifying their content and meaning. For students,
revision should be defined as the changes writers make in
order to improve their texts. Broadly defined, it can be
considered both as a part of the recursive process,
occuring at any time while writing, or as a point of
departure after a draft is completed. Because experienced
writers vary their revision strategies to accommodate
writing situations, teachers must help students develop
many revising strategies which suit the variety of
situations which challenge them. Consider these examples of two experienced writers whose revision strategies are at opposite ends of the spectrum. One writer slowly and painstakingly produces one draft. After much thought and planning this writer drafts the text, proceeding from the first word to the last. Revisions may include scratching out and substituting during this phase. After the draft has been completed, the writer only corrects the text for surface errors. In contrast, another writer may begin composing without much preparation or thought. This second writer may begin drafting rapidly to discover ideas. He or she easily creates multiple drafts and spends time finding the best selections of writing. For this writer, revisions include adding, deleting, and reorganizing materials. This writer uses drafts to discover meaning.

Although most experienced writers position themselves somewhere between these two poles, varying or even changing strategies to accommodate the situation, these two examples suggest the importance of using a multitude of revision strategies (Walvoord 84). Students need to learn that revision is an ongoing, recursive process. They also must recognize that revision often requires writers to produce multiple drafts; texts may need to be changed dramatically before solutions emerge. It is prudent to produce both revision strategies and the attitudes which foster the desire to improve communication.
After defining revision broadly, it is important for high school English teachers to understand the revision practices of unskilled and skilled writers. Understanding the revising processes of these two groups helps teachers to understand the pedagogical task which confronts them. **Revision Practices of Skilled and Unskilled Writers**

One reason researchers in the field of composition examine revision is that skilled writers produce better texts; they are able to reformulate and restructure their writing. Unskilled writers need to learn both the attitudes and skills which enable experienced writers to improve their texts. Skilled and unskilled writers differ in their attitudes towards revision. Most experienced or professional writers regard revision as an opportunity to discover, explore, and expand their texts. They realize that language shapes meaning (Fitschen 17), and they are well aware of the nuances of language. Thus, they are eager to reformulate their ideas more precisely. Playwright Neil Simon, for example, expresses his delight with the process of revision:

> Rewriting is when playwriting really gets to be fun . . . In baseball you only get three swings and you're out. In rewriting, you get almost as many swings as you want and you know, sooner or later, you'll hit the ball. (Murray 85)

Revision for Simon is joyful because it enables his eventual success. Although all writers may not be as upbeat about revision as Simon, they still "accept
rewriting as a condition of their craft; it comes with the territory" (Murray 85).

In fact, Barbara Tomlinson, in "Tuning, Tying, and Training Texts: Metaphors for Revision," discovered that authors' metaphors for revision reveal not only the dimensions of revision, but also the perceptions experienced writers have of revision. In her review of over 2,000 published interviews with literary figures, she found hundreds of examples of figurative language used to describe the composing process, including revision. She believes that these metaphors reflect how individual writers express their view of revision. James Dickey, for example, believes revision is arduous. He uses the analogy of refining ore to clarify his notions of revision. Dickey believes that he needs to transform his text in order to find what is worthwhile (61, 72). According to Tomlinson, Dickey's metaphor appears to have several entailments which are as follows:

- Revising is hard work on resistant material.
- Revising requires reformulating and transforming material.
- Revising turns low grade material into a valuable product.
- Revising can be frustrating. (72)

Both Dickey's perceptions of revision and Tomlinson's interpretation of Dickey's metaphorical story suggest that writers project their own psyches in the writing process.
Tomlinson, also, distinguishes between those who use metaphors depicting large scale and smaller scale changes. Those authors who use metaphors such as refining ore, casting, sculpting, and painting handle their texts as a whole rather than as discrete parts. These metaphors further suggest that the writers are attempting to rework an inorganic substance so that it will become a precious aesthetic object. The text appears to be so flexible that the totality of the text can be changed (73-5).

In contrast, those writers who describe revision as fixing things, sewing, and tying things off emphasize revision on a smaller scale. These writers do not emphasize reformulation. Instead, they emphasize the following:

The tasks are more those of craft and rule, rather than those of heavy labor or art; they make fewer demands on physical strength or artistic talent. The products are not so valuable aesthetically or as commodities; and they do not have the kind of communicative function that artistic objects do. These stories stress the superficialities of the text; they are stylistic rather than formal, local rather than structural. (74)

These writers interpret revision differently because they view their original texts to be less flexible than those who view their revision as part of an artistic endeavor (75).

Unskilled writers express a different view of writing. Many inexperienced student writers have a distinct distaste for revision. They regard revision as a punishment rather
than an opportunity. They complain when their teachers ask them to rewrite; they do not really want to correct all those red marks on their paper (Zemelman and Daniels 171). They have no idea that they can clarify or shape their meaning through language (Fitschen 17). Moreover, the mandate to revise reminds them of their own incompetence as writers. After all, they believe good writers do not write more than one draft (Walvoord 84).

In addition to maintaining different attitudes towards revision, skilled and unskilled writers revise differently. Skilled writers are not afraid to make global changes in their texts. They reformulate and reshape their texts as they pursue their meaning. Nancy Sommers discovered in her case study of 20 student writers and 20 experienced adult writers that these experienced adult writers make more substantive changes; they are not afraid to add, subtract, and even reorganize large sections of their text. Experienced writers manipulate their work to resolve the incongruities they discover. In fact, they actively exploit the dissonance in their writing to discover meaning. Not only are these writers bold enough to uncover the dissonance in their work, but they have the knowledge and strategies to solve the problems they find (Sommers, "Revision" 124-6).

Skilled writers, furthermore, explore their texts from different perspectives. In reviewing their work from a
multitude of views, they think critically and even anticipate the response of their audience which, according to Sommers, "functions as a critical and productive collaborator—a collaborator who has yet to love their work" ("Revision" 25).

Ellen W. Nold suggests that skilled writers are more likely to revise to fit their intentions than unskilled writers:

In revising to fit intentions, however, they must match their texts against decisions they made while forming their intentions. If they have no intentions, they have nothing against which to evaluate their writing. If they have intentions, writers ask: Does this text serve my purpose? Does it reflect my meaning? Does it fulfill the needs of my audience? (19)

Nold's concept of revising to fit intentions suggests that skilled writers use the revision process as an opportunity to become more conscious of their goals and to clarify their intent. Her concept further suggests that experienced writers have a sense of purpose as well as the ability to critically reflect on their text.

While skilled writers may make global changes when they revise, unskilled writers usually make insignificant local changes. Sommers, in her case study, found that students tend to make lexical changes in their text. Even though they attempt to avoid the needless repetition of words, they show no concern for adjusting contextual repetition. Unlike experienced adult writers who revise to
discover their meaning, inexperienced student writers seem to have a predefined meaning to which they attempt to fit in the details of their writing. ("Revision" 122-4).

Unskilled writers fail to explore their subject from different perspectives. They do not subject their paper to an analytical process because they do not have the critical thinking skills needed for revision (Martin 11). Because they lack strategies of revision, they spend less time than experienced writers evaluating "their writing against their purpose and intended meaning (topic)" (Nold 18).

Moreover, unskilled writers do not anticipate audience reaction. Since students correct their texts for teachers whose marginal notes indicate violations of rules, they focus on rule-based revision (Sommers, "Revision" 124). In this type of revision, the writers check their texts against memorized rules of punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and usage (Nold 18).

Since students and experienced writers differ in their definitions and approaches to revision, teachers must accept the challenge of teaching this process to their students. Not only do teachers need to define revision broadly for students, but they also must impress them with the wide variety of successful revising practices employed by experienced writers. Realizing that the revision strategies of experienced writers varies, it is clear that the pedagogy needed is not simple.
The Pedagogical Problem of Teaching Revision

While the revision practices of skilled and unskilled writers are, for the most part, disparate, it would be a mistake to consider these models as absolutes. The distinction made between these two groups is somewhat reductive. Other research indicates that experienced writers do not always revise their drafts extensively.

Carol Berkenkotter, for example, studied the revision practices of Donald Murray, a professional writer. She discovered that Murray does not always make great revisions in his texts. He actually spent 3%, 3% and 0% of his time revising three separate articles about topics with which he was familiar (132). She also found that Murray's planning strategies could not easily be separated from his revision practices. She explains the difficulties she had in determining the extent of Murray's revisions:

To say that Mr. Murray is an extensive planner does not really explain the nature or scope of his revisions. I initially developed code categories for revising activities; however, my coder and I discovered that we were for the most part double-coding for revising and planning, a sign that the two activities were virtually inseparable. When the writer saw that major revision (as opposed to copy-editing) was necessary, he collapsed planning and revising into an activity that is best described as reconceiving. (134)

Berkenkotter's difficulties in pinpointing revision reveal that revision cannot be regarded as a discrete stage. Not only did Berkenkotter note the merging of revision into other stages of the writing process, she also
found that Murray used different writing strategies for different assignments. Murray was able to dictate off the top of his head when he wrote about totally familiar subjects; he could not do the same with less familiar subjects. We may logically assume that professional writers change their writing techniques and their revision strategies from assignment to assignment.

Mimi Schwartz, in her article "Revision Profiles: Patterns and Implications" further suggests the pedagogical problem revision presents. Although she admits that revision is "conceived as a complex creative act that everyone must master, if, like the professionals, one wants to write really well" (549), she brings up two anomalies regarding revision. First, professional writers do not always revise extensively. She points out that journalists often write one copy of their articles and that some novelists, such as Zora Neale Hurston, write entire novels with only a few minor revisions. Secondly, Schwartz also states that "there are no uniform patterns that constitute 'expert' revision" (549). In setting up nine revision profiles, she defines the various revision styles of the students and professional writers she studied. In her first set of profiles, she focuses on how writers enrich their language. While overwriters condense their text when they revise, underwriters expand their text (551-4). In the second set of profiles, Schwartz reveals how writers...
reformulate the structure of their text. The restarter discards his text and begins anew; the recopier accepts his text, making only a few minor changes; the rearranger makes a new structure from the original text; the remodeler renews his original text line by line. Finally, the third set of profiles entails content reassessment or the reasons why writers make changes in their texts. The censor, who looks to his audience and purpose, the refiner, who seeks authenticity, and the copyeditor, who assesses his text against rules of correctness, reflect different revision concerns. Schwartz indicates that in the first two sets of profiles, a writer will often choose one strategy over another. However, in the third profile, a writer usually balances all three strategies if he or she is concerned with creating an effective piece of writing (554-8).

Schwartz, moreover, maintains that usually writers will have one dominant strategy in each of the three profiles, but that they will often shift from text to text or even within the same text depending on their writing and revision concerns. The shifting, Schwartz points out, may be "desirable and even necessary if writers are fully to develop their expression" (550).

Berkenkotter, Schwartz, as well as other experts in the field of composition show that revision is a complex act which is as individual to the writer as it is to the text. Their findings reveal that high school English
teachers cannot expect the same performance from each of their students. Because revision is individual, teachers need to convey the complexity of the act, the multitude of strategies that comprise revision, and the various approaches other writers take when they revise. Since revision is not a simple skill which can be taught with a singular strategy, teachers must expose students to the many facets of revision. At the same time, teachers need to provide students with a reason to revise. In other words, teachers need to motivate their students to accept the challenge of revision.
CHAPTER TWO

AFFECTIVE AND COGNITIVE FACTORS WHICH DISCOURAGE REVISION

After defining revision and noting the general differences between skilled and unskilled writers, it may be worthwhile to examine why unskilled student writers often fail to revise. Their failure cannot be reduced to a single cause. High school English teachers must realize that both affective and cognitive factors play a part in blocking the revision practices of unskilled writers.

Affective Factors

While young children with good eye-hand coordination experience joy when they express themselves in writing, older students often lose this joy. These older students frequently find writing distasteful. What happens to the motivation of these children as they grow up? Linda Miller Cleary discovered what happens to students' attitudes towards writing as they continue their education. In her article, "The Fragile Inclination to Write: Praise and Criticism in the Classroom," she describes 40 eleventh-grade high school students' attitudes towards writing. She found that a student's willingness to write was shaped by his or her perceptions of past writing experiences (22-3).

Cleary's case study also surprisingly reveals that both "praise and criticism were both culprits in reducing
that inner motivation for writing" (23). Cleary shows that most students recognized some praise as empty. Other students, usually high achievers, became hooked on praise and good grades. Because the extrinsic rewards became more important than the writing experience itself, these good students felt less joy writing (24-5). Cleary corroborates research indicating that negative reinforcement inhibits student motivation. She discovered that both competent and less competent student writers suffered from what they perceived to be negative teacher response. Even though those students who felt good about themselves as writers bounced back when the criticism stopped, their intrinsic motivation, Cleary notes, diminished. On the other hand, unsuccessful writers often became defensive when they experienced failure. In fact, some discontinued their writing (23-4). Cleary sums up her finding about positive and negative feedback in the following words:

"Teachers' feedback, both positive and negative, can be empty or, worse, destructive to intrinsic motivation. Prolonged negative response decreased intrinsic motivation for writing for both the successful and unsuccessful. Praise and rewards received by successful writers hooked them on continual teacher approval or made them lose respect for the teacher. In either case, writing became drudgery. Only when positive response took the form of encouragement about competence did students who felt bad about themselves regain an inclination toward written expression. Students were then willing to work hard because they saw that effort gave results. (25-6)"
Cleary's words suggest that teachers have to be careful in their responses to students. Teachers must reduce the praise and criticism they give to students. Because the focus of these two responses is on what students produce, rather than on who students are, students are likely to feel slighted. In contrast, encouraging students about their competence motivates them to write further. This encouragement neither flatters nor debases them. Moreover, encouragement helps students to set goals for themselves. Knowing that their teachers believe in their abilities causes students to think more positively about themselves and their pursuits.

The symbiotic relationship between teachers and students should be recognized as perhaps one of the most influential factors in shaping students' attitudes towards writing and rewriting. Well-intentioned teachers sometimes destroy the self-esteem of writers. If a student dislikes writing, it is no wonder that revision becomes anathema to him or her; it is a double whammy.

Many teachers with their pedagogy, response to students, and attitude towards revision inadvertently discourage students from revising. These teachers affect the attitudes of students who, in turn, postpone or avoid their writing as well as their rewriting. The motivational factors which often deter student revision must be taken
into account by those who wish to successfully teach the writing process.

The pedagogy used by instructors to teach the importance of revision is often insufficient. As Sommers points out in "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," the linear models of the writing process often treat revision as an afterthought. If teachers convey revision as an unimportant step in writing, it is not surprising that their students are not inclined to revise. An additional shortcoming is that teachers tend to treat writing assignments casually. They often forget to explain writing assignments and the writing process expected. Because these teachers do not reward writing in progress and only ask for final products, they invite not only procrastination, but also the one draft assignment that was done the night before the due date. Accordingly, these teachers elicit casual responses from their students (White 78-84).

Some teachers also impede student motivation by treating revision as a punishment. When teachers ask students to revise either a rough draft (yes, some teachers do look at rough drafts) or a final draft, students may balk. In interpreting the request for revision as the teachers' way of expressing that the assignment was not executed properly, students feel that their punishment is the correction of errors. Some who do not like looking at
the mistakes on their papers may request a change of subject matter. Others complain that revision is futile because they will not receive a better grade for extra effort. Since students do not understand the reasons why revision is important, revision becomes an unappealing and purposeless exercise (Zemelman and Daniels 171).

Teacher evaluation of student texts often fosters negative attitudes towards revision. Although most teachers believe their responses to student papers will improve student writing, this is not always the case. Nancy Sommers describes in "Responding to Student Writing" the responses of 35 university instructors who wrote on first and second drafts. What she discovered was that teacher comments were mostly hostile and mean-spirited in comparison to the comments of a computer which had been programmed with the Writer’s Workbench. Moreover, Sommers found that teacher responses were frequently arbitrary, contradictory, and confusing. Sometimes the comments were not text-specific; they were merely directives that were vague and general. Teachers would also treat rough drafts as if they were end products. In focusing on errors made in diction, style, and usage on first drafts, they gave students the message to correct their errors. The result of this type of evaluation was that students not only corrected their errors, but they also would forget their own purposes and goals in writing. Furthermore, in
completing the tasks the teachers set forth, students would frequently lose ownership of their own texts (149-54):

Since the teachers' comments take the students' attention away from their own original purposes, students concentrate more, as I have noted, on what the teachers commanded them to do than on what they are trying to say. (151)

Teachers further discourage revision by maintaining the power in the classroom. Their authority often invalidates process pedagogy. It is difficult for students to feel free to make choices and solve problems because their teachers are the ultimate arbiters of what is good or bad writing (Onore 231-4). Since revision is risky in this classroom situation, not guaranteeing improvement, students often prefer to play it safe by correcting errors. John J. Ruszkiewicz, in "Revision and Risk," indicates that even when students recognize choices in writing situations, they often will not reconsider their writing. He believes that students choose to keep their original text not because they are lazy or lack concern, but because they fear the risk:

We might attribute this entirely predictable behavior to laziness or to lack of concern for the larger issues of development, structure, and concinnity the teacher has addressed in the marginal and final comments. Yet it is more likely and vastly more important pedagogically to consider that these students may simply be playing the odds, plotting the incentive for change against the choices available to them and going with the sure bets. (46)
Cognitive Factors

Revision requires more than motivation; it also requires knowledge and ability. Those who might be eager to improve their texts still may be thwarted in their attempts to revise if they are neither aware of the problems in the text nor of the strategies which can solve them. Because revision requires so much of students—-an awareness of audience, knowledge, critical thinking skills, and strategies to solve writing problems--it is easy to understand why students dislike revision. Their lack of knowledge may create a sense of futility and fear. Cognitive factors also play a role in discouraging revision.

Students who lack awareness of audience may have difficulties in revising. Unskilled writers often do not know how to employ an audience to gain a new perspective on their written drafts. These writers who either do not engage their readers by projecting the readers’ attitudes, expectations, and questions, nor engage their readers at an opportune time may limit their ability to revise. In fact, in 1988, Duane H. Roen and R. J. Willey discovered in their research that writing improves if writers pay attention to their audience when they revise. In their experiment which included 60 university freshmen, Roen and Willey randomly assigned three treatment conditions: one group paid no attention to audience; the second group paid attention to
audience before and during drafting; the third group paid attention to audience before and after revising. The results of their experiment revealed that the writers in the third group improved the quality of their writing more than the writers in the other two groups. Roen and Willey's findings indicate that writers need to attend to audience in order to improve their writing and that the most opportune time to attend to audience is during the revision process. Unskilled writers may not benefit from their own cognitive efforts if they are concerned about audience before they need to. Roen and Willey believe that the writers who attend to audience before revision may be hampered by a constraint they cannot handle at such a time. Their study reveals that those students who attend to audience as they revise are more able to negotiate the new constraint because they are "now ready to do so after they had devoted cognitive resources to other constraints" (82).

Revision is also thwarted because students have difficulties in reseeing their texts from different viewpoints. Ann C. Colley, in her article "Revision and Otherness," asserts that writing is dialogical and that "the nature of 'otherness' is crucial to understanding revision" (3). She maintains that writers need to listen to and trust the voices within themselves. In engaging in this internal dialogue, Colley believes that we forecast needed revisions:
We cannot help but project ourselves into the receiver's, the occasion's, or for the matter, the tradition's presence and listen for the responsive tones. We seek acceptance, and in this way begin our revisions. (4)

Students may also fail to revise because they lack critical thinking skills. Unskilled writers often do not see their writing from a new perspective because they do not subject their texts to any analytical process (Martin 11). They neither know how to generalize about aspects of their drafts nor how to construct holistic goals for improving their texts. The strategies which they bring to bear to the revision process are so weak and ineffective that their writing does not improve (Windhouver 88-90).

'Linda Flower, John Hayes, Linda Carey, Karen Schriver, and James Stratman, in "Detection, Diagnosis, and Strategies of Revision," suggest that unskilled writers may not effectively revise because they do not have the knowledge and intentions necessary to improve their writing. They believe that revisers need knowledge to recognize and solve the problems within their texts. Revisers also need productive intentions to enable them to use the knowledge they possess. Intentions enable revisers to use this knowledge in defining the problems within the text and in bringing the criteria and goals to bear in the process of evaluation (19-20).

Flower et al. use a cognitive model of the revision process to express the idea that revision requires more
than a detection of problems. In fact, they differentiate between those who detect and those who diagnose the problems in their texts. Those who only detect problems usually cannot represent the text to themselves clearly. They may not understand the goals, constraints, and criteria which are brought to bear upon the text. They, moreover, lack a clear sense of purpose and audience. In contrast, those who diagnose are able to place their problems in a conceptual category and call upon additional information about the problem: their diagnosis suggests a solution (27-42).

Flower et al. also maintain that those who are able to diagnose and evaluate their problems revise rather than rewrite their text. In other words, those who simply detect their problems are not able to revise because they have not analyzed and categorized their problems. They rewrite, meaning that they make another attempt to produce the text anew. Contrarily, those who diagnose are able to revise. They are able to categorize the problems in their text, use problem solving procedures, and use relevant experiences from the past in order to solve the dissonance in the text (43-53).

Revision is not a simple task. The process requires motivation, knowledge, and skill. In order for unskilled writers to succeed at revision, it is essential that high school English instructors not only encourage their
competence to write, but also teach them revision strategies.

The three strategies which have been used to coach revision are peer response groups, writing conferences, and self-assessment. While peer response groups and writing conferences have been employed by high school teachers, self-assessment, for the most part, remains unexplored territory at the high school level. Since these strategies may offer teachers some insights into the teaching of revision, it is worthwhile to show teachers what these strategies entail, why teachers implement these strategies, and what problems teachers have in implementing them. At the end of each chapter, some recommendations will be given to those teachers who wish to try these strategies.
CHAPTER THREE

PEER RESPONSE GROUPS

High school English teachers can use peer response groups to coach revision. Teachers create small groups of students who react to each other's rough drafts. This small group interaction provides students with a forum where they define their writing problems and seek solutions to them. In collaborating with others, students not only experience the tentativeness of writing, but they also may learn to make modifications to improve their texts (Spear, Sharing Writing 4-6). Teachers implement these groups because students need to resee their texts from their audience's viewpoint. They also need to become aware of the set of criteria by which their texts are judged. The following information provides teachers with knowledge about employing this collaborative strategy in teaching revision to high school students.

Why Teachers Implement Peer Response Groups

Composition teachers implement peer response groups for a variety of reasons. First, the students in class become a community of writers when they participate in collaborative groups:

Peer-group work is probably one of the most complex methods for teaching writing. But it's also one of the most rewarding, because students simultaneously write for a real audience, become a
real audience, talk over alternatives, learn from one another by comparing similar efforts as well as by receiving suggestions, get to know their classmates well, and form a working community. (Zemelman and Daniels 186)

Zemelman and Daniels' words indicate the versatility of peer groups. The community of writers gives students a greater purpose to write. Since their texts will be read by their peers, not only by their teachers, students have an incentive to write more thoughtfully. Additionally, in giving and gaining different perspectives on writing, students learn to become better readers as well as better writers. Kenneth Bruffee suggests that writers in peer response groups learn to develop "mature judgment" and "to write helpful criticism" (142); they also learn to judge their own work more competently as they learn to judge the works of others.

Secondly, peer response groups promote audience awareness. According to Cynthia Onore, collaborative learning, of which peer response groups are a part, helps students to recognize the impact of their work:

In arguing for a process pedagogy, we are arguing at the very least for a writer's right to his own texts and not so subsidiarily for the right of the classroom community to interpret and feed meanings back to the writer. Paradoxically, while a focus on meaning-making requires individual ownership of a text, it simultaneously requires that a writer negotiate with that community his or her intended meanings so that neither pure idiosyncrasy nor tyranny results. The power relationships within the classroom are thus fundamentally altered: language and learning are not commodities to be deposited in one writer or another, a process
Friere terms the "banking concept" of education. Rather, the classroom community becomes a "problem posing" environment in which meanings must be exchanged—made and shared—with other members of the community so that the full impact of one's own words can be fully felt. The process, then, cannot be linear but must be an ongoing negotiation between writers, their own texts, and other readers in the class. (232)

Onore's words reveal how collaborative learning, i.e., peer response groups, function. In perceiving their texts from the perspective of an audience, writers gain insight into readers' needs and into their own writing problems. Writers also become aware of the criteria used to judge their writing. This set of criteria, according to Rise Axelrod, is neither teacher-centered nor student-centered, but it "centers on the process of negotiating interests and values between these two groups."

Thirdly, Onore's words suggest another benefit of peer response groups. The risk of revising is minimized when process rather than product is emphasized. Onore's assertions are supported by Karen Spear in the Preface of her book, Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes. She states that many studies show that "students' learning becomes richer, more exciting, and more long lasting than it does under teacher-centered conditions."

Finally, when students become experienced readers, teachers may not need to read all the rough drafts of their students. Thus, they are able to focus on other aspects of their curriculum.
Problems With Implementing Peer Response Groups

Although many studies show that peer response groups can be successful, some teachers have found them to be far from ideal. Instead of eager student groups who are excited about helping their peers, groups may be distracted, unenthusiastic, or simply noisy. They may prefer not to discuss their work with members of the group whom they distrust or even with members for whom they feel congeniality. Because group behavior differs so radically from the individualism which our society has so fervently endorsed, both teachers and students are ill prepared to meet the expectations of collaborative learning. In fact, teachers abandon this method because they are not prepared to deal with this problem:

Peer writing groups usually don't work well the first time you try them. As a result, this is probably the single most abandoned element of the process paradigm; many teachers and even a few researchers will tell you that they tried peer editing, and it doesn't work. The basic reason it is so hard to implement is that in our schools, students aren't often taught or encouraged to work cooperatively or to give respectful, insightful, constructive criticism. This is peculiar, since almost all the work of real adult life is done by groups of people--offices, departments, staffs, teams, partnerships, crews--who must work collaboratively and exchange feedback if high-quality work is to be accomplished. (Zemelman and Daniels 191)

Even though groups may not be prepared to handle group tasks, teachers should not give up on the strategy. Teachers must realize that collaborative writing is
becoming increasingly popular in today's society and that they can train students to work together as a supportive community of writers. Also, teachers can help those high school students who feel alienated in the school system and in the specific classes they are attending. By asking students to collaborate, teachers can reduce alienation and promote a willingness to learn (McClure 67).

The degree of student resistance to participating in peer response groups cannot be completely explained, the reasons being varied and complex. However, Karen Spear targets five areas of concern that keeps peers from being effective collaborators:

1. confused expectations about the group's purpose and the individual's role
2. inability to read group members' texts analytically
3. misperceptions about the nature of revision and of writing as a process
4. failure to work collaboratively with group members
5. failure to monitor and maintain group activity. (Sharing Writing 17-18)

Spear's list suggests that students in peer response groups feel inadequate about their abilities and lack the necessary skills to help their peers improve their texts. They often feel confused about their role in peer response groups. They tend to misinterpret responses as either being solely positive or negative, and, therefore, they prefer to give and receive positive feedback. This non-critical stance, which also promotes the group's need for
harmony, governs the tendency of students to affirm their peers and avoid their texts. One study of freshman attitudes toward peer groups cited by Spear in Sharing Writing indicates that students dislike questioning and evaluating their peers' beliefs and opinions. Viewing these as personal matters, they feel it is inappropriate for both teachers and students to evaluate them. Regarding texts as inflexible, they hold evaluation of such opinions as merely subjective bias. Moreover, students often do not understand how to help their peers improve and revise their texts. Because they are used to reading finished products and seeing their own texts as near to finished, they have difficulties looking at drafts as tentative writing assignments. Because they may not read analytically, because they doubt their ability to evaluate, or because they simply do not wish to evaluate, students frequently do not provide constructive assessment (24-6).

Even though students lack the necessary skills and knowledge, peer response groups can succeed. In order to overcome the problems suggested by Spear, teachers must teach their students about peer response groups and the responsibilities of the individuals within these groups. Teachers also must impart to their students the nature of revision and the skills which are needed to assess writing. Once teachers train their students in these areas, they
will find that effective collaboration is not an impossibility.

Finally, another reason students resist peer response groups is that their teachers rely on luck rather than instruction to advance revision. Some teachers who may be disappointed when they find their students openly hostile to each other may not recognize that they are responsible for creating open, trusting classrooms which advance collaboration (Zemelman and Daniels 53). Other teachers who simply hand out checklists with little guidance may shake their heads at students who treat these papers as a fill-in-the-blank assignment (Grimm 92). Some teachers who finally abandon peer response groups because their students do not remain on task may not realize that students often shirk the assignment when they do not know what their teachers expect, how to work cooperatively, and how to give constructive criticism (Zemelman and Daniels 191). Neither teachers' silent expectations nor poorly planned pedagogy leads to profitable collaboration. Teachers must be knowledgeable about collaboration as well as revision before they take on the task of using peer response groups in their classes.

Recommendations for Teachers

Coaching revision through peer response groups can be effective if teachers take time to plan and organize their lessons and strategies. In order for peer response groups
to be successful, teachers must be aware of group dynamics as well as the sequential skills students must master over a period of time. Even though peer response groups require careful planning, the benefits make the effort worthwhile. As students share their writing, they become more aware of how the audience understands their communication. They learn to actively participate in defining problems and seeking solutions. In shaping and testing their ideas, they take responsibility for their own learning (Spear, Sharing Writing 5-6). Students do learn from each other when teachers facilitate learning. The following guidelines may be useful for teachers who want to coach revision using peer response groups.

**Training Students.** If peer response groups are to teach the revision process, teachers must do more than assume that their students know how to interact with their peers and how to react as readers. As participants in peer response groups, students need to feel confident that their reactions and responses are appropriate and worthwhile. Since responding does not come naturally, it must be taught. Teachers must instruct their students how to read analytically, listen capably, and provide feedback purposefully. Used in peer response groups, these skills allow students to discover and create meaning (Spear, Sharing Writing 100, 105).
Reading Analytically. Teaching students to read their classmates' writing analytically is essential to revising. Students must be able to read well in order to comprehend, evaluate, and define problems in their peers' writing. To achieve these goals of comprehension, evaluation, and diagnosing, students must master increasingly complex reading acts. Students reading to comprehend place constraints on the process of reading. They have certain expectations that the text must meet. If they are not met, then readers uncover the apparent dissonance. In reading to evaluate, students impose additional criteria. According to Flower et al., evaluation expands the set of constraints that the mental representation one is building must meet and turns reading into testing (23). The furthest extension of the reading process, reading to define problems, asks students to diagnose and entertain even greater goals and constraints (25).

Since students need to read critically in order to analyze the problems within their peers' texts, writing instructors who wish to teach revision cannot ignore the importance of training students to read analytically. Without such training, students will not know how to approach peer texts.

In her book, Sharing Writing, Spear not only suggests that teachers treat reading as "a process of interaction between reader and text and among readers" (106), but she
also carefully designs some lessons which promote reading skills. First, she asks students to become aware of their own reading processes. She develops their awareness by having students freewrite on their own reading; they are to observe how they read a text and how the text affects them. These freewrites, which allow meanings to evolve, can be used in class and later on in low-risk small groups to reveal a variety of responses as well as the interplay of readers, texts, and meaning. Secondly, Spear suggests that teachers give students questions such as the following to guide their reading:

- What questions came to mind as you read?
- What memories or associations occurred?
- What seems important? Why?
- What seems least important? Why?
- What expectations or preconceptions do you have? Why?
- How did you respond to passages that seemed difficult to read?
- How did difficult passages affect your understanding of the whole text? (Sharing Writing 107–8)

Thirdly, after building a foundation with freewrites, Spear recommends that teachers ask their students to write a precis, a condensation of a text which presents the thesis and supporting ideas. Writing a precis helps students learn about controlling ideas and the relationship between main ideas and the overall purpose. She believes that the precis helps build a larger frame of reference. It advances small group work because it gives students a
common topic about which to write and discuss (Sharing Writing 108-9).

Spear also gives teachers some recommendations in training students to read more analytically. Spear advises teachers to carefully sequence their activities to help students read more actively. At first, teachers may use the precis as part of the reading process with students sharing their reading protocols and reading difficulties. Later teachers may want to shift the emphasis of the precis from part of the process to a product, giving students an opportunity to read actively and refine their ideas. To guide students' reading, Spear gives several techniques to facilitate the reading of the precis or any draft of writing. Students may freewrite on each other's drafts, summarizing ideas, noting sources of trouble, and explaining their responses to the work, or they may write notes of response in the margins of the draft or on a separate piece of paper. This type of reading allows the writer to become aware of their readers' responses. Another technique Spear recommends is the reading summary. After students independently summarize a draft in one sentence, they compare the variations of summaries in groups (Sharing Writing 109-11). In realizing the similarities and differences in interrelations, students learn that responding to texts is individual and communal.
Not only does Spear suggest a variety of techniques in training students to read analytically, she also urges teachers to use a single topic or thematic approach in class. This approach helps students who may feel insecure about their reading, writing, and responses. They gain greater confidence in their abilities to respond as they acquire knowledge about a single subject or theme. Reading tasks are less overwhelming when students know what they are discussing. Moreover, students are more able to reason logically and understand reading and writing as a "basis for intellectual development" (Sharing Writing 113) when the content is flexible enough for individual choice and when the context is substantial enough to develop coherence and a foundation of information.

Listening Skills. Not only do students need to learn how to read analytically, they need to hone their listening skills if they are to make recommendations to their peers. Frequently students fail to remember what was said during a session. They leave class with "only vague impressions of what group members had said about each paper" (George 322). Students also tend not to assimilate their peers' recommendations. The suggestions presented in complex discussion many times would not be recognized by the listener. Instead students quite often would distrust peer commentary when they began revising their essays (George 322).
Since most students experience listening as a passive, silent activity, they need to become aware that listening is an interactive process which focuses discussions, clarifies ideas, elicits the flow of ideas, and uncovers meaning. Students need to recognize that good listeners participate in discussions by making verbal responses and using body language such as nods and eye contact to sustain the conversation. Good listeners are collaborators, suspending their preconceptions and judgments while concentrating on the speaker's message (Sharing Writing 116-18).

Spear provides a few strategies that improve listening skills. She first recommends that teachers avoid controversial issues in the beginning of the school year because these topics create non-listening, a judging of people and statements. Instead, Spear suggests that students observe people listening to each other in class, at home, and on television. They can listen to panel discussions on PBS and to popular talk-show hosts. She hopes that students will discover that good listeners listen as good readers read, using the context of the discussion to predict where the speaker is heading and to weigh, review, and intuit information (Sharing Writing 121-2).

Spear believes students need practice in small groups to enhance their own listening skills. She focuses on a
progression of skills—attending, reflecting, drawing out, and connecting. Teachers can encourage students to attend to details by having students summarize their peers' talk about a single topic. Students may only present their agreement with their peers. Not only does this activity focus attention on details, but it also builds cooperation. Reflecting can be encouraged by having listeners paraphrase the comments of speakers. Drawing out is also useful in peer response groups. By eliciting more information from speakers, listeners can help focus discussion and speakers. Teachers can train students to draw out by forcing them to keep a peer on the same topic for five minutes.

The most difficult listening skill is connecting. It entails a set of cognitive skills, remembering speakers' ideas, perceiving similarities and differences, making inferences, and synthesizing information. Connecting allows the group to achieve coherence and order to the ideas that the group has yielded. These connecting and revising skills, such as expanding, clarifying, defining, and showing similarities and differences, need to be gradually taught and developed. Teachers may encourage connecting in classroom discussions, asking students to explain the connection made between their own comments and those of the previous students. Students can also chart the connections made in class on a tally sheet or use large
or small group sessions to discuss the results of connecting (Sharing Writing 123-6).

**Teaching Students to Respond.** Besides acquiring reading and listening skills, students must learn how to respond to peer writing if peer response groups are to facilitate revision. Revision requires a reseeing, and, frequently students need an audience to read, evaluate, and diagnose the problems in their text. Creating an opportunity to resee becomes a problem in peer response groups because good feedback is often difficult to elicit from students. While some feel inadequate to provide feedback, others do not have the skills to judge texts. Moreover, students neither want to give or receive feedback because feedback generally means more work. Since students prefer not to give feedback, teachers must both show the value of feedback in the revision process and teach students the necessary skills. Spear urges writing instructors to teach students how to give supporting and critical feedback. The distinction between these two types is emotional as well as developmental.

Teachers should begin training students how to respond by using supportive feedback. This feedback focuses on writers expressing their attitudes towards their drafts and group members making descriptive and reinforcing comments. Supporting feedback is generally beneficial when used for the first half of a term. Students must give writers two
to three comments about what they liked in a draft. This requirement forces readers to operate on a cognitive level as they read carefully to find what is praiseworthy, but it also motivates the writers to explore ideas. Because writers solicit responses by asking their peers about the strengths and weaknesses in their texts and other questions they have written beforehand, they do not feel "that they will lose ownership of their work by needing to act on every suggestion their group makes" (Sharing Writing 142). A result of writers requesting information is that peers become less concerned about maintaining group harmony, and they tend to give more helpful suggestions when the writers make inquiries (Sharing Writing 131-44).

The second type of evaluation Spear recommends is challenging feedback. The best teachers give this type of feedback routinely when they ask students for clarification, identifying hidden assumptions, challenging generalizations, and citing counter-examples. Because students have had little opportunity to evaluate in such a manner, teachers having taken this responsibility for it alone, students do not know how to provide this kind of feedback. However, students can learn to give challenging feedback as well as supporting feedback. Spear urges teachers to ask students to compose a list of challenging questions and to negotiate criteria needed for evaluating texts.
Studies indicate that if students use a set of criteria and apply it to the writing of others, students are more likely to make more effective revisions. In fact, this finding suggests "that the criteria learned act not only as guides for revision but as guides for generating new material" (Hillocks 160). This set of criteria which must fit the specific writing assignment given helps students realize the standards they must meet (Sharing Writing 148).

Training students to be responsible and effective group members is necessary if peer response groups are to facilitate revision. However, teachers need to accomplish other tasks if they wish to coach revision. Teachers must become proficient in organizing groups, defining tasks, and evaluating group effectiveness. The following guidelines may be useful for teachers interested in using peer response groups.

Organizing and Preparing for Peer Response Groups. Coaching revision through peer response groups can be effective if teachers take time to plan and organize their lessons and strategies. In order for peer response groups to be successful, teachers must be aware of group dynamics as well as the sequential skills students must master over a period of time. Even though peer response groups require careful planning, the benefits make the effort worthwhile. As students share their writing, they become more aware of
how the audience understands their communication. They learn to actively participate in defining problems and seeking solutions. In shaping and testing their ideas, they take responsibility for their own learning (Spear, Sharing Writing 5-6).

**Grouping Students.** High school English teachers who are aware of collaborative learning strategies vary groups according to the students in the class, the nature of the task, and the teachers' purposes (Spear, Sharing Writing 152). These teachers may differ in opinions about forming and maintaining groups. Walvoord asserts that there are two ways to establish groups. One way is to assign students to a permanent group for a period of time such as a semester. Another way is to form new groups upon each occasion. The advantage of the former grouping is that students build the trust needed to share their writing and ideas; the disadvantage is that some groups may not work well together. Even though Walvoord believes teachers must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of these groupings, she still maintains that permanent groupings are better for students who are reading each other's drafts because group members over time become less fearful when exchanging papers (111). Mary Healy prefers not to group students by ability or temperament. Instead, she allows students to choose their own groups. Although this friendship grouping
may be messy at first, she maintains that it allows "maximum involvement with one another's writing" (273).

The numbers within groups also tends to vary from teacher to teacher. Karen Spear believes that teachers should be flexible in dividing the class into groups. The task and the purpose of such a task should guide the formation of groups. She maintains that pairs are usually more suitable for introductory tasks and that odd numbered groups tend to stimulate discussion and prevent stalemates of evenly divided groups (Sharing Writing 152). In contrast, Zemelman and Daniels have other considerations. They believe that three per peer response group is good because it allows the writer to receive two opinions. Also, it helps control the time spent reading papers in each reading session. However, they acknowledge that four may be a "more realistic number" at the high school level because students may be absent or pulled out from class (187).

Methods of Reading Drafts. Another apparent difference in the way teachers handle peer response groups is in the way they handle group reading. While some instructors prefer to have students read their rough drafts aloud to group members, others prefer silent reading. The difference cannot be accounted for only by teachers' tolerance for varying noise levels. The nature of the task frequently determines the method used. While some tasks
are easier to accomplish by having students listen to the text, other tasks can be accomplished more efficiently by having students read the text silently (Hawley 120). For example, if students are to read for sentence completeness or for the rhythm of the language, it makes more sense that teachers ask students to read aloud. On the other hand, if students are to choose the main ideas of paragraphs, reading silently is more efficient (Haviland).

Recognizing Group Dynamics. High school teachers need not only focus their energies on organizing groups, they also must have realistic expectations of group behaviors. They cannot expect students to be absolutely quiet and completely focused on the task of revision. Teachers need to be aware of the role of group dynamics in peer response groups. Groups function better if task and maintenance activities are balanced. In addition to focusing on their official purpose for which they are grouped, the task, students need to devote some time to off-task activities which are socioemotional in nature. Talking, laughing, eating, sharpening pencils, dividing tasks are some of the social interactions which facilitate group performance. Although some teachers see some groups stuck in this type of behavior, they should not completely quash it. Maintenance activities are natural and obligatory in group work. Trust is built as students share themselves with others. They are more willing to share their work when
they feel comfortable in a trusting classroom environment (Zemelman and Daniels 51-4).

Recognizing Developmental Stages. Teachers additionally need to be aware that peer response groups take time to develop. They do not just happen. In fact, peer response groups pass through some important developmental stages when teachers effectively coach students in these small groups. Jeffery S. Copeland and Earl D. Lomax, in their article "Building Effective Student Writing Groups," suggest that teachers lead their students through four developmental stages. These stages are apprehension, initial success, constructive criticism, and independence. In Stage I, teachers attempt to build the trust among group members. Apprehensive students who feel as if they are strangers need to feel comfortable with each other. Copeland and Lomax recommend that teachers at this time explain the purpose of the group at each stage of the writing process, allow their students to talk to one another, and facilitate teamwork by either playing language games or holding group contests. They maintain that urgency in these games and contests contribute to better teamwork. In Stage II, Initial Success, teachers must make sure students have positive group experiences as well as successful initial writing experiences. One way to build a positive foundation is to have students write short sections of a group paper. At this time, teachers might
provide students with a response key, a list of questions which produce neutral or positive responses. The personal responses will contribute to discussion, and, thus serve as a basis of trust.

In Stage III, Constructive Criticism, students begin to look for more significant work to accomplish. During this stage, the teacher can help students devise more and more detailed response keys appropriate to the assignments. These keys, serving as a springboard for discussion, need not limit discussion. As students gain experience and become better judges, they will rely less on the keys. During this time, Copeland and Lomax indicate that teachers should provide students with guidelines for group work to avoid a few students dominating discussions.

The final stage, Independence, is achieved when most groups feel they do not need guidance. The teacher, at this point, becomes a roving resource person. Copeland and Lomax encourage some variety of routine. They suggest that students read one or two exceptional papers to class, use selected papers as a basis for discussion, and put together samplers of the best writing (99-105).

Defining tasks. Peer response groups are more effective if teachers clearly define the tasks students are to complete. Revision tasks which are open-ended and which have no clearly stated objectives are likely to be unsuccessful (Spear, Sharing Writing 170). To ensure a
greater degree of success, teachers should use some sort of guide sheet for each assignment. This guide sheet should facilitate evaluation; it should not merely require students to fill in the blanks. Furthermore, this guide sheet should vary with each assignment and give students specific tasks to complete that are relevant to the particular assignment. Students are able to specifically respond to the specific tasks asked of them. They are able to note whether the introduction captures their interest, where they got lost, what the controlling idea of the paper is, and what the main points of the paragraphs are. Such specific instructions as these help keep students on-task (Haviland). Because they know what tasks they are to complete, they are less likely to be distracted by other topics and activities. Tasks can also be delineated by the writers themselves. If writers initiate discussion with their own questions and concerns, peers will respond; students are eager to help, not criticize each other. A combination of these two strategies might elicit valuable responses for the writer.

After students receive feedback from their peers, teachers may find it useful to give students another assignment. Instructors might ask students to respond to each of the evaluations given and draw up their own revision strategy (Martin 12). This lesson allows students
to consider the opinions of others; it also forces students to plan their next draft.

Evaluating Group Effectiveness. In order for peer response groups to succeed, it is important for group members to evaluate the interactions within the group. The knowledge gained helps students "to maintain their response groups and to solve specific writing problems" (Spear, Sharing Writing 156). One way to encourage evaluation is by asking one student in a peer group to function as an observer of group interaction. This observer can take notes and give peers data concerning their interactions. Checklists or tally sheets help observers evaluate specific kinds of behaviors (Spear, Sharing Writing 156-8). Another way in which teachers can evaluate group interaction is for teachers to give groups tape recorders. On these machines students can record their conversations and judge the interactions for the benefit of group maintenance (Walvoord 114). Teachers may wish to evaluate the recordings. Students may also evaluate their peer groups openly in class discussion or privately in journals. Finally, teachers can observe students in their groups and suggest better ways for students to complete their assigned tasks (Spear, Sharing Writing 158).

Peer response groups can be effective in the teaching of revision if teachers organize and plan their strategies well. Students learn they need not rely solely on teachers
to evaluate their writing. They also become more motivated to revise when they are forced to make decisions about their writing based on the responses from their peers. The community of writers facilitates this revision process. Though this community of writers is effective in motivating students to improve their writing, it is not the only method. The writing conference has merits too.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE WRITING CONFERENCE

Although peer response groups can effectively teach revision, it is not the only strategy which facilitates the revision process. Some writing teachers believe that the writing conference is one of the most promising methods of encouraging students to evaluate their writing. Some teachers even insist that this one-to-one teaching strategy is more effective than group instruction. They maintain that learning to write is a personal process and that the conversation between teacher and student is more relevant to students because the students' own writing becomes the center of focus (Carnicelli 106). Teachers, moreover, are able to respond to the student-writer on an individual basis. Because the instruction is personalized, the feedback and strategies given in a writing conference are more complete than that which is given by other methods. In preparing to implement the practices of writing conferences in the classroom, the following guidelines may determine success.

Why Teachers Implement Writing Conferences

One of the benefits of the writing conference is that it changes the relationship between teachers and students. When teachers take a personal interest in their students'
writing, students no longer feel the fear and hostility they often do when teachers pose as an authority figure. It is the teachers' sincere concern about individual students in class which establishes teachers in the role of helper, collaborator, or coach. When students stop viewing their writing teachers as the only arbiters of good writing, the writing process is nurtured (Harris 21-2). Students will undoubtedly risk more knowing that their teachers understand their writing problems and their attempts to overcome them. In fact, the "direct personal focusing that happens in a conference is what makes it one of the most powerful things a teacher can do to promote growth in writing" (Zemelman and Daniels 25).

Another benefit of the writing conference is that it provides students with better feedback than that which is given through other strategies including peer response groups. This teaching strategy permits teachers to diagnose the students' problems more readily and then to respond to their individual needs. In contrast to the time spent giving lectures or correcting papers, teachers can give students more information in a shorter period of time. Because students are present, sensitive teachers know when they are not making themselves clear. Furthermore, because individual students are handled on a one-to-one basis, teachers are more able to tailor their responses to their students' needs. Depending on the student, teachers might
be more tactful or forceful in their approach. Teachers can also diagnose the students' problems better when they understand the goals and opinions of the students (Carnicelli 106-7; Harris 15, 18-21).

An additional benefit of the writing conference is that students comprehend with greater depth and clarity the comments made by their instructors. Students are able to question their teachers, clarifying what they do not understand in a conference. Even though students may disagree with their teachers, they are more able to accept the teachers' evaluation of their writing, knowing the spirit of understanding which it is given. When they understand the point of view of their teachers, students are more able to gain insight into their writing. As a result, students become increasingly confident about themselves as writers (Carnicelli 107-9).

Those teachers who advocate the writing conference maintain that it saves teachers time. While some teachers completely replace instruction time with conferences, others reduce class lectures and discussions to make more time available for such conferences (Harris 18). Thomas Carnicelli argues the following about the efficiency of the writing conference:

The conference method is not only the most effective way to teach writing, it is also the most efficient. It can increase a teacher's effectiveness with no increase in teaching time. In some formats, it can increase the teacher's
effectiveness while actually decreasing the amount of teaching time. (110)

Roger Garrison, an instructor who totally dispensed with class instruction and utilized conferences to teach writing during the early 1970s, had no classes for which to prepare. Neither did he read papers at home. He read the papers during conference time. By eliminating preparation for classes and reading of papers at home, Garrison’s format for teaching writing in conferences became a model for teaching writing in the least time-consuming manner (Carnicelli 110). Other writing teachers who cannot schedule fifteen to twenty minutes per student save time by briefly conversing with students while they write in class (Harris 18).

Finally, those who recommend the writing conference believe it promotes self-learning. Some teachers allow students to set the agenda for the conference. These teachers encourage students to make judgments about their writing as well as take responsibility for their writing. Students then learn to accept or reject the opinion of their teachers. Sometimes they learn to combine their views with their teachers’. Teachers can encourage students to make the final decision (Carnicelli 109-10). Moreover, Richard Beach thinks that the writing conference helps students learn how to critically evaluate their writing. He believes that teachers can assist students to
recognize the problems in their text; teachers can also demonstrate how to assess writing. In modeling assessment, teachers can guide students in selecting certain strategies which solve the problems that appear in their papers ("Showing Students" 127-9).

Problems With Implementing Writing Conferences

Even though studies show that writing conferences can help students improve their writing, some teachers have found them problematic. Management of students and time often poses quandaries for teachers interested in pursuing the conference method. High school teachers may fear losing control of their class while they are involved in a conversation with one student. Teachers are also concerned about the additional time and energy needed to conference with 120-180 students. Some wonder how they can manage additional hours of talking with students; sometimes they do not realize that they need to drop other less necessary parts of their curriculum before they incorporate this new strategy (Zemelman and Daniels 184-5).

Another problem that faces writing teachers is the manner in which to conduct a writing conference. Due to lack of experience or knowledge, these teachers may be reluctant to continue with writing conferences when they attempt to respond to everything on their students' papers. The result of such a lack of focus is that the conference becomes "long, aimless, and ineffective" ("Time for
Questions" 155). Often teachers do not know how to share their reactions to their students' papers. Some teachers take over the conversation completely, talking constantly, delivering lectures, and comparing the students' texts against ideal texts which they have in mind. Since they set the agenda without listening to their students' ideas, the conversation becomes one-sided and ineffective; students' needs are not completely met ("Time for Questions" 154-5; Newkirk, "The First Five Minutes" 323-4). Yet teachers can overcome these shortcomings. It is possible for teachers to learn more effective techniques to facilitate writing.

**Recommendations for Teachers**

Coaching revision with writing conferences can be very productive. Writing conferences require less planning than peer response groups, and teachers can engage their students in these conferences in the beginning of the school year. However, teachers must be knowledgeable about conferencing techniques if they want to motivate their students to revise. If teachers are skilled in conferencing, conferences can become advantageous for both students and teachers. Students who are confronted with writing difficulties receive expert advice. And since students receive encouraging feedback that is relevant to their particular problems, they are more motivated to continue writing. In addition, since many teachers
encourage students to find their own answers, greater student independence is achieved.

The Role of Teachers. Writing instructors need to become more aware of what constitutes an effective writing conference. They need to become more fully aware of both their actions and roles. They cannot afford to make inadvertent and unconscious mistakes. They need to productively communicate with all their students. They must be both sensitive to their students' feelings and skilled enough to teach their students to assess their own writing; they need to point out the criteria they use to judge papers. Aside from teaching students skills, teachers need to listen carefully to their students.

Because writing is often personal, teachers may find themselves to be sounding boards for their students' unsettled feelings. Although teachers could avoid dealing with their students' confusion, hostility, depression, and/or self-deception, it may not be wise to do so. The conference is a human encounter in which students may test their teachers' willingness to help them overcome their defensiveness. According to Grace Ganter, it is important that teachers avoid seeing students as problems. Instead, she hopes teachers will view these students as individuals who need guidance. She states the following:

It's important to remain open to the emotional experiences which students have as they learn, to recognize that all students have potential to think
well of themselves, as well as the right to struggle to fulfill their potential. This requires respect for the dignity of the individual student, understanding the difficulties students may have in realizing their capacities for self-observation, and the acceptance of common human defenses that students may need to use as they work their way through their learning difficulties. (38)

Furthermore, the capacity of high school students undergoing adolescence to observe themselves may not be very well-developed. They may even fear knowledge of themselves. Since writing may require self-expression and the attendant ability of self-observation, students may feel vulnerable and defensive. Teachers do students a service when they empathize with the plight of these students who shy away from self-observation (Ganter 38-9). Such understanding helps students feel less threatened and more capable of pursuing the assigned writing task.

Karen Spear corroborates the importance of understanding in the teaching of writing. In her article, "Empathy and Revision," she maintains that empathy helps students to revise. Empathy, according to Spear, allows students to reconsider the ideas presented in their own text. She states that "people understand what they mean largely through the understanding they receive from others" (156).

Spear recommends that writing instructors serve their students in the same way as therapists serve their clients. In serving as an audience to their students, teachers are
able to reflect the meaning of their students' ideas. Teachers also are able to inform students how their ideas work. Students become more willing to explore their material when their teachers understand them or their writing (157).

Although studies reveal that teachers have empathic attitudes towards their students, they generally do not know how to communicate empathically. In fact, teachers often retard learning with their poor communication skills. Empathy modifies not only the role of teachers as therapists, but it also encourages students to talk and learn. In communicating empathically, teachers temporarily suspend their role of judge and become fellow explorers instead. Again, students are more likely to discuss their problems when their teachers are open and understanding (158-9). Spear emphasizes the results of employing empathy in the writing process:

The results of accurate empathy in therapy are closely related to what we seek to bring about through the teaching of writing: proficiency in verbalizing complex issues, in refining subtleties in meaning, in attending to rich supporting detail, in discovering an authentic voice, and in exploring ideas that are real and meaningful. (158)

Spear encourages teachers to begin empathic communication with the paraphrase. In focusing on the students' words, teachers show that they have actively attended to the statements made by their students. The paraphrase encourages students to talk. Because the
paraphrase reflects understanding, students are less likely to become defensive. While a statement such as "You can do better" might offend, a statement such as "You feel frustrated" relieves students. The teacher's acceptance of the problem affirms the students' responsibility for their problem. Also, this acceptance recognizes that the students and the issues which confront them are worthwhile. As teachers become more involved in their students' thinking, higher levels of empathy can be developed. Teachers may move beyond the paraphrase of surface content as they begin to reflect on nuances, subtleties, and implications that have not been quite realized by their students. Teachers may question, comment, advise their students and even periodically summarize recurrent themes (Spear, "Empathy" 159-60). According to Spear, the result of empathy is that teachers model and elicit "the kind of sustained critical thinking that is the foremost prerequisite for revising" ("Empathy" 160).

In addition to handling the affective domain, teachers have various tasks they need to accomplish in writing conferences. These tasks include getting to know students, diagnosis, instruction, and sometimes evaluation. While some conferences could focus on one task, teachers might organize conferences around several tasks. Like the recursiveness of writing, the conference can move back and forth. Initially, teachers need to focus on getting
acquainted with their students. Teachers need to make the human connection and know their students' interests and attitudes towards writing. Another task entails assessment of the students' needs or difficulties. During the beginning of a conference, it is important that teachers diagnose their students' problems. Later on, this initial diagnosis should be reconsidered in terms of its productiveness. According to Muriel Harris, the major portion of the conference is devoted to instruction which includes answering questions, solving problems, and teaching. The last task which may be included in a writing conference is evaluation. There are various types of evaluations that are possible. Harris cites Sarah W. Freedman's conclusions about evaluations which occur in the classroom. Teachers may guide students in the evaluation of their own writing. Teachers and students may evaluate both the students' writing processes as well as their texts. Teachers may give grades on the written product. Although many teachers disagree with the evaluation of products during conferences, some insist that it allows students to notice the close attention teachers pay to the details of writing (Harris 40-5).

**Training Students.** Although students do not necessarily resist writing conferences, they may sometimes become disappointed with the results of their interaction with their teachers. Since they may not know what is
expected of them and what to expect from a properly-conducted writing conference, it is important that students understand the nature of writing conferences. Students need to be aware of the goals and purposes of this individualized teaching strategy. They need to realize that the writing conference is a strategy intended to encourage students to evaluate their own texts. Teachers want to promote revision through the process of reseeing ("Time for Questions" 153). Because teachers are interested in improvement, students cannot expect their teachers to dwell on surface errors or rewrite their texts. Instead, students should expect their teachers to make them aware of the criteria by which their writing is judged:

The instructor is not to rewrite the essay but is to guide the student carefully towards a sharp awareness of purpose and audience and to share with the student some of the techniques to enhance communication. (Zelnick 50)

Students also need to be made aware of their role in the writing conference. Most teachers expect students to take the initiative and to take control of their texts (Newkirk, "The First Five Minutes" 317-8). Students need to realize that the responsibility of writing is theirs; they need to be cognizant that teachers eventually expect them to become self-sufficient as writers. In order to make good use of the writing conference "students need to learn that it is their job to ask and answer their own questions" (Harris 28). Students, furthermore, need to be
aware that teachers have different conferencing styles. While some teachers will automatically shift complete control to their students, others will guide the conference until students are more secure about their writing (Harris 28).

Students experiencing the writing conference need to be aware of the way they approach their writing instructors. To focus on this topic, teachers might wish to initiate a conversation about how to approach people. Sometimes students alienate their teachers, bringing up topics that reveal either a lack of interest in writing or a dislike of those who teach. The result of such an interaction may put teachers on the defensive. Sarah Warhauer Freedman and Melanie Sperling discovered that a teacher they observed during writing conferences was more likely to give praise to her high-achieving students than to her low-achieving students. Although this particular teacher thought she treated all students the same, the teacher gave high-achieving students "more expository explanations" in "a more formal, 'written-like' register" (128). The teacher, furthermore, solicited greater invitations to return for future visits to those who were high-achievers (128). Knowing that teachers may be more likely to respond positively to students who are ready and willing to learn, students need to be aware of the importance of being attentive and polite.
Managing Time. High school English teachers may have difficulties scheduling writing conferences in their curriculum. Since these teachers usually have full classes and a limited amount of time to teach the expected high school curriculum, writing conferences need to be arranged so that teachers do not become overburdened. Although some teachers may wish to conference after school, it is probably less of a burden if they limit conferencing to class time. One method to employ is the brief conference during daily or weekly writing workshops. Teachers can stop at students' desks and hold brief conferences with them. At this time, they may read students' work or simply respond to students' questions. Another method would entail conferencing in class over a three to four day period. This type of conferencing may be accomplished periodically, every six weeks for example (Harris 48-51). Even the time within the conference is managed by setting a clear agenda.

Setting Agendas. Once the time problem has been solved, teachers intending to use the 10-15 minute conference in class need to make appointments with their students. They also need to stress the importance of being prepared for the conference. Thomas Newkirk asserts that a conference without an established agenda may wander aimlessly and leave participants feeling that they have wasted time. Newkirk recommends that both teachers and
students set the agenda on one or two concerns; input by students in the opening minutes acts as a lead and serves to give the conference direction that is mutually acceptable (Newkirk, "The First Five Minutes" 318, 327-8).

Carolyn P. Walker and David Elias argue that the agenda determines to a large degree the success of writing conferences. They conclude the following about the agenda:

In successful conferences in this study the agenda is formulation and articulation, by both participants, of the principles of good writing and evaluation of the student's works against these criteria. The main concern is always the student's paper--an analysis of the ideas it develops, how well it has succeeded, how it can be improved. (281)

According to Walker and Elias, student participation is essential; however, the amount of student talk is not a determining factor in successful writing conferences. Nevertheless, the researchers discovered that a complete takeover by tutors or teachers make conferences unsatisfactory to both participants. Focusing on the teachers' concerns rather than on the students' texts excludes students from participation in the evaluation process (281-2). Furthermore, Walker and Elias discovered that conferences which included numerous "requests for explanations about the paper's content or the writing task or process" (281) are not successful. When teachers and students are both confused, it is difficult to find satisfaction in the discussion.

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Solving Problems. It is obvious that teachers handle writing conferences differently. There is no one set model for these meetings. Both teachers and their students have individual preferences and needs. However, in getting students to rethink their work and to take responsibility for their writing, teachers must avoid taking over for their students. Instead, they must function as both audience and writing expert. To encourage student revision, teachers must also guide student problem solving with their questions. One method used to assist students is presented by Richard Beach. He directs his students by demonstrating assessment procedures. Even though Beach allows his students to set their own agenda, he actively participates in conferences. The conference, for Beach, is the proper forum for getting students to practice their assessing techniques with their teacher. He describes his approach to individualized teaching in the following words:

1. Determine a student's own particular difficulty by analyzing his or her use of certain assessing techniques in a conference.
2. Demonstrate the stages of assessing: describing, judging, and selecting appropriate revisions.
3. Describe the different components of the rhetorical context--purpose, rhetorical strategies, organization, and audience; show how each component implies criteria for judging drafts; and select appropriate revisions.
4. Have the student discuss problems and/or practice the use of certain strategies just demonstrated. ("Showing Students" 129)
The steps focus on solving the students' writing problems. Teachers and students participate in diagnosing and solving the problems.

In the first step, Beach determines the problems which are frustrating his students. He attempts to figure out if their problems stem from their self-concept or psychological orientation. If students are becoming overwhelmed by their problems, Beach demonstrates how he copes with a problem. In determining the difficulties of his students, Beach tries to be aware of how they define their role as a writer in an academic situation, whether his students use overly rigid rules to assess their writing, and whether they are metacognitively aware of their own writing processes. If students are lacking in any of these areas, Beach demonstrates his own role, relativistic attitudes necessary for writing, and a systematic process which helps students in self-assessing ("Showing Students" 127-31).

Beach's second step promotes techniques for assessing. The model for assessing includes "describing, judging, and selecting and testing revisions" ("Showing Students" 131). To guide his students in assessing, Beach has his students complete a guided assessing form before a conference:

Describing
1. What are you trying to say or show in this section?
2. What are you trying to do in this section?
3. What are some specific characteristics of your audience?
4. What are you trying to get your audience to do or think?
5. How would you describe your organization or type of writing?
6. How would you describe your own role or orientation?

Judging
7. What are some problems you perceive in achieving 1, 2, and 4?

Selecting appropriate revisions
8. What are some changes you would make to deal with these problems? ("Showing Students" 133)

He then allows his students to set the agenda by having them react to their draft. He notes whether or not his students have difficulties in assessing their work. If they have difficulties, Beach, using the students' persona, shows how to assess their draft. After showing his students a certain technique, he expects his students to make their own judgments ("Showing Students" 133-4).

Beach's model of assessing often poses difficulties for his students. Although students may believe that assessment only involves judgment, Beach teaches his students the value of describing their goals. In recognizing their goals for writing or the audience for whom they are writing, students are often able to discover the dissonance between their intentions and their text. When students are unable to articulate their goals, Beach articulates the goals for these students after he has heard his students discuss their papers. Beach also has his
students describe the rhetorical strategies they are using, the characteristics of their audience, the genre, and the writer's role. In defining each of these elements, students begin to realize that their texts are a series of rhetorical moves. If students have difficulties in describing, Beach again demonstrates how he would proceed; then he expects his students to continue with that which he has modeled ("Showing Students" 135-7).

After students describe, they judge their texts. This judgment involves finding the dissonance between the text and goals. Even though students may distinguish between their text and goals, they do not necessarily recognize the dissonance. Beach reacts as a reader to help students sense the dissonance. Beach moves beyond detection, because he believes that students cannot make the appropriate judgments without the categorization of the problem. Beach also guides his students' specification of criteria such as sufficiency, clarity, validity, coherence, and appropriateness in judging their text. If students make judgments without considering their descriptions, Beach demonstrates again how to use their descriptions in judging their relevancy, sufficiency, and so forth ("Showing Students" 141-3).

After students have defined their writing problem, they need to select a revision strategy such as adding, modifying, deleting, or reorganizing. If students have
problems in selecting revision strategies, they usually have not clearly defined the problem or reasons for it. If this is the case, Beach demonstrates to his students how to go back to the judging stage and how to specify the problems and the reasons for them; the judgment implies the necessary revisions ("Showing Students" 143-44).

Beach limits his demonstrations to one or two techniques per conference. After each demonstration, Beach makes sure his students understand what he has demonstrated. If they have not, he repeats the demonstration until he is sure that students have grasped it.

Beach’s strategy of modeling assessing techniques is essential in the teaching of writing and revising. Students need to recognize the problems within their texts as well as how to overcome these problems. The writing conference offers students an opportunity for feedback. Not only do they learn from their own oral discourse, but they also learn from the expert guidance which is tailored to their needs. Beach concludes the following about his demonstration of effective strategies to improve writing:

If learning to assess drafts is central to learning to revise and improve writing quality, then demonstrating these assessing techniques assumes a central role in composition instruction. In addition, because these techniques are merely formalizations of what skilled writers do when they assess their own or someone else’s writing, showing students how to use the techniques helps them to view written discourse as the embodiment of
intentions within the context of real social and pragmatic purposes. ("Showing Students" 145)

**Evaluating conferences.** After students have completed their conferences, it may be useful for these students to evaluate their conferences. They may either write in their journals or respond anonymously to a questionnaire. Both teachers and students benefit from reflecting and evaluating the procedure. Moreover, teachers might want to monitor their own conferences. By tape recording their conversations (Zemelman and Daniels 168), teachers can assess whether or not they have dominated the conversations, encouraged all students equally, and motivated student revision.
CHAPTER FIVE

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Teachers not only employ peer response groups and writing conferences to coach revision, but some high school English teachers also use self-assessment to facilitate the revision process. Even though teachers believe peer response groups and writing conferences promote self-assessment, it is not merely a goal: self-assessment is a strategy in itself which allows students to evaluate their writing and consider ways of solving the problems within their texts. To promote self-assessment, teachers usually have students use assessment forms or journals. While the former provides students with criteria with which to evaluate texts, the latter allows students to explore their thinking, learning, and writing. While some teachers and researchers have maintained that self-assessment can be useful in coaching revision, the strategy has not been fully explored. At this point in time, self-assessment remains an alternative which may enable students to competently judge their work and revise.

Why Teachers Implement Self-Assessment

Teachers who use self-assessment as a strategy want to enhance their students' ability to evaluate and change their texts. They sometimes find this strategy easy to
employ because it requires less in-class time than either peer response groups or writing conferences. Additionally, self-assessment encourages student independence even though writing instructors still need to teach the set of criteria which is used for evaluation, design questionnaires to guide student evaluation, or provide students with topics to engage their thinking about their writing and learning.

Some teachers use self-assessment because they believe this strategy enables students to look at their texts more objectively. One study supports its efficacy. Richard Beach and Sara Eaton, in "Factors Influencing Self-Assessing and Revising by College Freshmen," show the results of their study of self-assessment abilities of two groups of college freshmen, one which received instruction in self-evaluation and the other which did not. Beach and Eaton discovered that, for the most part, students who received instruction in self-assessment "made significantly more judgmental inferences in certain areas that did students who did not receive the instruction" (168). Gender and apprehension were factors that had an impact on the inferences made. Males seemed to revise less than females, and those who were more apprehensive about writing revised less than those who were less apprehensive.

Moreover, Nancy Zuercher, an instructor of professional writers, found that self-assessment helped her students to learn more about themselves and their writing.
According to Zuercher, students became more confident in their ability to write. They felt as if they could control their writing and themselves as writers. Not only were they more aware of how they learned, but they also learned to enjoy writing (11-5).

Problems With Implementing Self-Assessment

Although teachers and researchers have not widely employed self-assessment, a few problems emerge when students evaluate their own work. First, teachers need to realize that student have difficulty in writing for another audience besides the teacher (Zemelman and Daniels 23). Secondly, some students tend to have problems defining "purpose and audience in terms of specific knowledge, beliefs, and status" (Beach, "Pragmatics" 71). The result of this lack of specificity is that students often make judgments that are global. Because these students do not have the specific criteria necessary to make specific judgments, they cannot resee their texts from the audience's perspective (Beach, "Pragmatics" 71-2).

Beach and Eaton also found that students tend to have difficulties using self-assessment forms when the questions on these forms ask students to evaluate their drafts as a whole. The result of such assessment is that students again make global inferences which do not help them deal with the specific parts of the drafts. Another problem Beach and Eaton encountered in their study was that
students tended to summarize their content when they were asked to discuss the strategies they used in their papers. Beach and Eaton at first believed that their form had flaws, but when they replaced the form with another, more specific one, some students continued with the practice. They still gave summaries to questions of content, function, and audience (151-4, 161-3).

Beach and Eaton, moreover, discovered during their study of self-assessment that there were patterns of behavior that students consistently displayed in self-assessing. They practiced the following:

- Were incapable of describing various functions in their drafts, frequently confusing or conflating inferences about content with inferences about function
- Limited their perspectives as readers by conceiving of their writing primarily in terms of a narrative
- Were concerned simply about "what the teacher wants"
- Applied rigid assumptions about revision to their self-assessing
- Had difficulty applying their goal inferences so as to ascertain dissonance between their intentions and their text
- Had difficulty making inferences about specific audience characteristics and using those inferences to assess their writing
- Using the self-assessing form to cite accomplishments rather than admit problems
- Were cognitively bound to rigid conceptions of text-structure formats, an orientation that often limited their willingness to revise content (169)

These behaviors indicate many of the reasons why students do not revise. They neither detect the problems in their texts, nor do they know how to solve these apparent
problems. Because they limit their audience to the teacher and revision to a set of rules, they seem to narrow the possibilities for changing their texts. These behaviors, furthermore, point to the need for further research. Writing instructors need to know how effective the self-assessment strategy is in the teaching of revision.

**Recommendations for Teachers**

Teachers who wish to experiment and coach revision by using self-assessment must realize the importance of training students to understand their audience and purpose, the criteria by which others judge their writing, and the revision process. These skills which help students to diagnose their writing problems can be encouraged by using the following guidelines.

**Defining Audience and Purpose.** Since some students have difficulties in defining their audience and goals, Beach recommends some teaching techniques which may help students to self-assess. First, Beach suggests that teachers either create audience characteristics for students or have students define their audiences by providing details of their socio-economic status, degree of knowledge on the topic, prejudices, vocabulary, etc. Teachers also may use hypothetical situations to stimulate discussion about the audience. Secondly, students and teachers may analyze a variety of texts in terms of the purposes, strategies used, and implied audience. In
modeling inference processes, Beach recommends that teachers and students who successfully make inferences may show their own strategies or the strategies other writers use to those students who have problems making such inferences. Thirdly, Beach advises teachers to model assessing behaviors in writing conferences. Teachers not only can model inferences about purpose and audience characteristics for those students who have difficulties in making such inferences, but they also can make students aware of their knowledge of the text. After reacting as an audience, teachers can next ask students how they will use the input when they revise. Fourthly, students can discuss and judge social discourse and fictional dialogue in terms of its success or failure. They may formulate their own criteria to judge the degree of success achieved and then use those criteria to judge their own text or the texts of others (Beach, "Pragmatics" 82).

Developing Assessment Forms. Beach also recommends the use of self-assessment forms. Teachers need to develop forms which ask students to describe, judge, develop and test revision strategies. These self-assessing guides should focus on specific parts of the text. Global evaluations are not as effective because they produce generalities, not the specific strategies that promote revision (Beach and Eaton 152). Beach and Eaton maintain that self-assessing forms such as checklists, self-rating
scales, and open-ended questions can be used to help students evaluate and revise their rough drafts; however, they argue that objective scales are weak because students cannot formulate responses to their own drafts. Also, many other forms appear to be weak because students are asked to evaluate their drafts as a whole. The form below which Beach and Eaton used can be used as a model for teachers who want to create their own:

Now that you have a conference draft down, spend some time thinking about your goals in this paper, your audience, what you have done so far, and what you need to do before you turn in a final draft.

In general, what do you want to say in this paper?
What do you want your reader to do or think after reading it?

Now for EACH PARAGRAPH, answer the following questions, using the space below and on the back:

1. What does this paragraph say?
2. What is this paragraph supposed to do in terms of the whole paper?
3. At this point, what do you want the reader to do or to think?
4. What are you going to change? (162)

Using Journals or Writer's Notebooks. In addition to using self-assessment forms, high school English teachers may also use journals or notebooks to facilitate the revision process. In these journals, teachers ask students to think and then express themselves metacognitively, or in other words, to write about their own thinking. This type of thinking and writing not only increases students' awareness of their own steps in problem solving, but it
also gives students an opportunity to evaluate the productiveness of their own thinking (Costa and Lowery 64).

Nancy Zuercher promotes metacognition by having students keep a Writer’s Notebook in which they write daily. This notebook Zuercher asks of her students serves as the essential component in the development of self-assessing skills. Students generally respond to a series of prompts whose primary purpose is to motivate students to experiment, discover, and create meaning. Zuercher relies on five types of assignments to facilitate such learning and self-assessment: metacognition, practice writing, reader response, dialogue, and assessment. These assignments encourage students to evaluate their writing, question, and establish goals for themselves (4-9). Zuercher believes her responses to her students’ notebooks advance self-assessment. Although she had intended to respond weekly to their notebooks, she responded each day. According to Zuercher, "self-assessment would not have occurred as often or as enthusiastically without the daily communication between professor and student" (9).
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

With the advent of the computer and the relative ease of changing texts, the process of revision has become less difficult and more important as part of the writing process. Generally overlooked in the past, high school English teachers are beginning to realize that they must teach revision if students are to improve their writing. Even though these secondary school teachers may feel comfortable conveying the writing process through lectures and marginal comments on the final drafts of papers, they need to recognize that these traditional strategies lack efficacy in process-oriented writing. Students forget lecture content (Costa and Lowry 15), and they rarely learn from teachers' written comments on their compositions (Hillocks 167).

While college English instructors have generally explored revision and the strategies of peer response groups, writing conferences, and self-assessment, this type of exploration has not happened at the high school level. Many secondary school teachers have simply gone through the motions of teaching revision and using strategies which promote revision without the background knowledge necessary to facilitate the writing process. Needless to say, the
results of such efforts are disheartening for both teachers and students.

Because revision widens the scope of possibilities and enhances the ability of writers to communicate with true intent, high school English teachers must not be afraid to explore revision or use the strategies which promote it. Because high school students can learn to revise and understand the recursiveness of writing as well as the importance of revising, teachers need not wait until students enter college to learn about revision. Because revision promotes clearer thinking and communication, it is valuable to encourage this process which bridges gaps in human interaction.

The preceding chapters have centered on the definition of revision, the factors which hamper revision, and the strategies which facilitate the teaching of revision. In order for secondary school English teachers to coach revision adeptly, they need to focus on clarifying the definition of revision, handling the affective domain, and teaching students skills necessary to make improvements.

First, to teach revision properly, writing teachers must first broadly define revision for their students as a recursive process which allows writers to change and improve their texts. Teachers must stress that revision can occur at any time during the writing process, even before one word is set down on paper. Writing teachers
also must convey that many experienced and professional writers often make multiple drafts before they have completed a final version of their text. Another facet of writing that teachers must reveal is the malleability of written texts. Words and concepts are not immobile. They can be changed, restructured, and reformulated to enhance meaning. In order to encourage revision, writing instructors must also distinguish revision from editing. Since students often view revision as making word level changes or correcting surface errors, it is important to differentiate between these two processes and encourage revision as an opportunity to clarify meaning.

Secondly, writing teachers need to handle the affective domain skillfully. Rather than posing as the only arbiters of good writing, teachers must become more process oriented in their teaching. Teachers might consider taking up the role of coach for their students. When students recognize their teachers as interested in helping them improve their writing, students are more likely to risk revising their texts. Other ways to encourage process-oriented teaching is to limit evaluation by using the writing portfolio and to count revision as part of students' grade. Teachers can also give support to their students by encouraging their problem solving abilities. Students need to believe that they can solve the problems that confront them when they write. Often
teachers have limited time and become deeply involved with their teaching commitments. If instructors focused on understanding the students who are struggling, students would feel accepted and more willing to attempt revision.

Thirdly, writing instructors must realize that revision requires cognitive skills. Revision cannot be simply taught as a single skill. It is a complex activity which requires knowledge, diagnosis, and writing skills. Students must learn how to read their own texts as other readers might, recognize the problems which appear in their texts, and know how to solve problems in their texts. To promote evaluation, students must learn the set of criteria others would use to judge their particular texts. Teachers, thus, should consider using peer response groups, writing conferences, and self-assessment to instruct their students in the skills needed to revise.

Although these strategies are slower to develop than traditional modes of instruction, they are pedagogically effective. Rather than teachers performing critical thinking for their students, students learn as they develop an awareness of their audience's needs and of assessment criteria. Teachers who have large classes and a lack of time may find that these strategies may relieve them from some of their overwhelming paper load. Rather than correcting all of their students' rough drafts, teachers help provide students with the feedback necessary to revise
their papers by using these strategies. High school English teachers who incorporate these methods in their curriculum may well realize that the initial time and energy they spend coaching revision pays off. When instructors successfully teach revision, both teachers and students feel a sense of accomplishment. They recognize that their efforts produce results.

However, the school system must help pave the way for writing teachers who want to help their students improve their writing. Smaller classes are needed. When English teachers face more than twenty students per class, it is not surprising that their teaching oftentimes becomes rote and rule-based. New opportunities to learn strategies which help coach writing and revision need to be provided for teachers who are not well acquainted with these.

Additionally, schools need to give teachers opportunities to become acquainted with the research in English composition. Since teachers are often insulated from important composition research, it is no wonder that there is a gap between what researchers have found to be effective and the ways writing instructors teach. Besides needing further education, high school English teachers need to participate in the research of revision. Only then can they become a positive force in revising the future of composition education.
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