

Workshop 8: Teaching the Power of Revision

Jack Wilde's Reflections

Introducing students to revision

I think that probably one of the biggest ways in which writers can grow and that they change in middle school is to start to understand the power of revision. I think up to middle school for an awful lot of kids the main issue is fluency. By fifth grade, or fifth or sixth grade, many of our kids with the right kind of practice, with the right kind of routine, can be fluent. But that next step of taking that fluency now and trying to shape those first drafts, those early drafts, into an effective final piece is a huge step because they, like many of us as adults, want the writing to be over. So they feel, I'm done—it's an extensive first draft and I'm done. We've got to find ways to help them realize, no, you're not really done; you've actually just taken the first big step and you've got one more big step to take, and that is now reseeing your piece and recasting it so it will be more effective.

And the ways, I think, to get it that sort of way, and ways that have worked for me, I think the first thing that has been critical for me is what the first writing topic we do in the fall. The first writing we do every year is personal experience stories. And the reason why I think that is critical is because then they have a template to hold their writing up to. So when they finish a draft they've got this draft, and we start to conference it, because that's an important part of getting it revised, is conferencing, is feedback. But when a child asks them a question or says, "You know, I'm not clear about this part," they can take that writing and hold it up to what really happened when they went sledding down the hill and hit the tree, or when they went on the trip to Florida and rode in a swamp boat. So they've got something to call on.

So I think thinking about what you're going to have your kids write about first in terms of how that can help them experience revision is critical. I think for me the next thing that's been critical is the conferencing, is having this continual feedback from their peers as well as from the adults, the teachers asking them questions, pushing them not to be a nudge but to make the writing better, and I think, starts to implant in them that sense of, "Oh, there is something I could add. And that's not hard." I put that in because my experience, at least, is that most revision for children in middle school has to do with adding information, that they tend to underwrite

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And then I think that the third step that's important for my kids in getting them to make revisions is to require them to do it. It's not an option. Because, again, I've got a number of kids who still want the writing to be over. They hear the questions: they want to ignore them. So what I do is, they actually get a conferencing sheet and on that sheet they're told they have to make at least three changes to their story. And there's nothing magic about the number three. But what I do want to do is have them get their foot in the revision door. And then the other thing I like about the sheet is they actually record all the revisions that they make, and by doing that I can turn a negative—what they initially see as a negative—into a positive because all of the kids come up to me and say, "Look, I've made 35 changes to my story." And they've got them all accounted for on this sheet. So I think it's critical not to overwhelm them. I could have said to them make 15 revisions, and they wouldn't do it or they would balk at it. But by just saying three, that seems reasonable. And what they don't know is it's like trying to eat one potato chip, that once you take that one taste of revisions then you're going to say, "You know what, the paper really isn't done because I could also change this, and, oh, I could change this and it would make it a lot better." Their foot is in the door and they're going to revise the piece.

Importance of publication in revision

Obviously, another driving force in revision is your connection to the piece, is whether what you're writing about matters to you. And we can get it to matter in a couple of different ways. So first, is the child choosing something he or she cares about? The second way in which we make it matter is that there is always some kind of publication, but "publication" used in the broadest sense. So the piece doesn't just end with a grade. When we finish the persuasive pieces some of them are going to the principal. That's a kind of publishing. The principal will come into the room and talk about their pieces and give them feedback; and, in some instances, change some school practices as a result.

At the end of their animal papers we had an open house where they had to share their paper not only with their own parents, but with another student and his set of parents. In the fall when we finished our personal experience stories, the story didn't end with a grade. Their conference group met as a group with four students and four sets of parents and they shared, each one of them shared their story.

One major part of the impetus toward revision is that we put this ultimate audience

So, again, part of the impetus toward revision is, I've got this ultimate audience out there; I'm doing this not only to please my teacher but, also, this audience is going to hear me. And the audience always consists to some extent of peers as well as of significant adults.

Teaching editing in context of students' writing

Editing is certainly another critical aspect of the whole writing process. And it's ongoing, so it certainly doesn't get solved at any one grade level. And I think, again, what's important is you embed that work on conventions in the student writing so that it's happening at critical points where it matters to them; that that's going to heighten their ability to use conventions. It doesn't help me to learn something about how to position myself for skiing if it's midsummer and I'm standing in my living room. That's not where it's going to work. Where it's going to work in terms of how I'm going to turn my hips or do those things is when I'm on the hill and I'm facing this hill and I'm going to go down or I'm halfway down it. And I'm going to do the same thing with my kids in their writing. To punctuate dialogue, if I do it as just this abstract subject because it's the third week of October and that's when I'm supposed to do it, then it doesn't carry that much significance to them. But if they're in the midst of writing dialogue and that dialogue is going to be read by the principal, and in some ways the principal is going to judge whether he's going to hear or respond to that piece in an accepting manner, that's when it counts. Okay? That's when the child is metaphorically standing on the hill in his or her skis and ski boots.

So I'm going to do it in context and I'm going to try wherever possible to help them figure out what tools they already have to help them solve the problems. So for an awful lot of punctuation, the best tool my kids have is the book that they're reading in their desk. So kids will say to me, "I can't remember whether the comma goes inside the quotation marks or outside the quotation marks." Look in the book you're reading. The book you're reading has been gone over by a line editor so it's been corrected as best it can be and that's going to tell you where that punctuation mark goes. So the book they've got in their desk helps them a lot.

The second thing that helps them are their peers. Okay. So before they can come to me to ask me to help them with punctuation and/or spelling—and we do have spell checkers, which are a tremendous help; and I love spell checkers because they will reward good attempts. So their reward—like in horseshoes there are points for learners—is to go to peers. So I will define two or three peers who become the grammarians in the class. Because again, what a lot of

kids would like to do is, they would love to just come to me and have me fix it. And what I say to them, "No, you can't ask me first; you've got to go to Shane or you've got to ask Rachel." And I don't necessarily pick the best grammarians or the kids who know the most conventions. And suddenly this child has a responsibility he or she didn't realize they were going to get in fifth grade. And immediately that makes Shane pay attention to punctuation in ways he didn't before because his peers are going to be asking him. I do give him tools. So I've got a couple of books that show punctuation rules so that if they don't know the answer themselves I show them how to use those tools. But the child has to go to the book in their desk first and to this peer before they can come to me. There's that sort of hierarchy exists.