

Workshop 8: Teaching the Power of Revision

Mary Cathryn Ricker's Reflections

Approaches to revision

I try to promote revision on two different levels. First, I call it revising on the fly and that is where they're revising as they're writing. And so, as I'm roaming I will look for instances where maybe they've written down something that I think is excellent, and so I want them to make sure they include more details right at that moment. And so there are two approaches I will use and they are both very basic, but they both get results.

One is a sensory approach. And so my students are quite familiar with the idea of kind of tracing their hand and using the five senses to tell me more about a moment. So if I'm reading over their shoulder and I maybe see a funny story, I'll say, "You know what, I need to see more sensory detail about that, bring me to that moment." And then, in some cases I might ask them to trace their hand right now and give me how that moment sounded, what you saw in that moment, how that moment felt, how that moment tasted, or how that moment smelled. So that's one way of revising on the fly. And the other really basic way is the five Ws plus H. You know, again, a pretty standard technique for writing but it's amazing. If the students are conscious of the five Ws plus H, they will include more information, they will get more detail, and their stories or their reflections become vivid. They definitely have a color and a characteristic that's absent when they're just trying to rote get down the material.

Teaching reluctant revisers

When I find a student who is reluctant to revise because they think it's already great, you know, I've written down my memory, or I've written down my response and it's already high quality, part of me kind of wants to chuckle on the inside because I used to be that kind of writer. I used to be absolutely in love with my writing and then I would pick it up two months later and think, oh, my gosh, this is what I thought I liked? You know, and then I would realize I needed revision. But with my writing it always took time. And so first of all, I let students know that that's who I am as a writer and they might then recognize that in themselves. And they need to learn who they are as writers as well. And so, if I find a student who is reluctant to revise, what I may do is try—you know, again, kind of revising on the fly, I may then just quickly question them and say,

well, as your reader, then who is this story about, underline who is it. And if they have it, great. You know, what is this story about? Do I learn what you're trying to tell me here? And I'll go through—I can maybe I can go through the five Ws plus H as an example and if they're missing something, then I'll say, well, I as a reader need to know why this happened or why you feel that way. And then they see the holes for themselves. Whereas I'm not necessarily saying, hey, you need to try this revising technique I just showed you today. If they're not into it, I give them that latitude or I give them the space to revise in their own way, but they will need to see some holes in their writing.

And to be honest, that's one place where the six-plus-one writing traits can really come in handy. Because if we are focusing on voice, for example, and I'm asking them to revise, to pull more voice out of a piece of writing, but we've already done some of the writing traits, then I might say, well, you know, if you already feel your piece of writing has a tremendous amount of voice, then let's go to one of the other traits, and let's look at your piece of writing from that lens, or let's look through that filter and tell me about your sentence fluency, let's look at the very beginning of every sentence and see if there's something about that, that you can revise, and, so, giving them that opportunity as well. So those are fantastic to have in my little bag of tricks.

Addressing mechanics in writing

As I read a piece of writing that I recognize as beautiful, as I recognize as a very strong piece of writing, I struggle with where the voice in that piece begins and where the mechanics need to end. Because I do know that talented writers will massage or manipulate mechanics to create voice. And so one of my questions as I'm reading a piece of writing from an English-language learner is what part of this is a conscious manipulation of mechanics to create this fantastic voice that might be intentionally a fantastic immigrant voice or it might intentionally be a fantastic teenage voice. Or what part of that is unintended mechanical error. And students never want to have mechanical errors in their writing, but at the same time, until you've mastered all the conventions, they show up in your writing. So students try to be very conscious of that, but if they haven't made one of those conventional rules of their own yet it might fly by them.

So one of my constant struggles is, how much do I let go because I know they'll pick it up as they read, as they write, and as they revise? And how much do I make that my own mini-lesson as I'm roaming with them? You know, I don't need to give a class of 32 students a lesson on capitalization if I'm just having

two or three students misunderstand capitalization. That's where the roaming becomes powerful and the mini-lessons within roaming become powerful. That's one of the ways I try to help students who are English-language learners who may find that writing comes easy to them, but the mechanical corrections, the editing, does not come easy to them. Working with them on a short mini-lesson tends to be very beneficial.

And, also, a little give on my part—and as English teachers, I've talked to a lot of my friends who are English teachers and we always have trouble with mechanics. And we have one camp of English teachers who say everything needs to be perfect all the time; and we have another camp that thinks, no, it's fluid, we let them learn as they go, and I like to be in the middle. I like to respect the fact that students never want to intentionally make an error in their piece of writing but I also like to believe that if I give them that love of writing and if they can get that love of reading then those—they are going to learn the conventions themselves. And I think there's a real balance there.