

Teaching Writing in the High School: Fifteen Years in the Making

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Two years ago, I had the opportunity to teach an English methods course. As soon as these future teachers discovered I spent my days teaching high school English, they eagerly made a request: they wanted to hear about how English *is* in the real world of high school. I had every intention to infuse my practical experience with theoretical knowledge found in seminal works on literature and composition. I had every intention to make the course relevant and authentic. I had every intention to provide my students with practice at lesson planning and assessment. But I had not intended to disturb my philosophy on the

teaching of writing. After all, I had been teaching for almost fifteen years. I figured I had earned semi-veteran status.

That experience ushered in a lengthy period of self-reflection. The end result is a revised vision of what it means to teach writing to high school students. The next time I have the opportunity to work with future teachers, I will be prepared to share the following advice on what it means to teach writing in the twenty-first century.

About the Process Approach

In college, I was privileged to take a course on the teaching of writing by an extraordinary professor of composition. It was the early 1980s. The process approach had unfolded out of theory into practice, showing up in high schools and college methods courses across the country. My professor actually practiced what she preached. I kept a portfolio, which contained works in progress, abandoned beginnings, and letters from my professor providing me with specific feedback on revision. Toward the end of the course, I selected one of the works in progress to “finish.” I learned that one never finishes a work in a single semester course, but the journey

towards a semblance of completion can be rewarding nonetheless.

Then came my first year of teaching. It became quickly apparent to me that my students needed structure. Somehow, my conception of the process approach transformed into a linear approach: prewriting, writing, and revising. On day one, they brainstormed on a think sheet, which resembled a fill-in-the-blank worksheet. Two days later, they were expected to come to class with a completed rough draft. Students would pair up and, using a very specific peer evaluation sheet, provide suggestions for revision. A final draft would be due the next day.

My college professor, who condoned portfolios, conferences, writing groups, multiple drafts, rewrites, and other metacognitive endeavors, had betrayed me. She had no clue what it meant to teach writing in a high school. Her version of writing as a process was too messy and too idealistic for the realities of secondary education. And after all, my students were prewriting, writing, and revising. They were experiencing the process approach.

My false sense of contentment was short-lived. Within a few short years, I realized the limitations of viewing writing in such a linear manner.

“The process of writing is much more recursive than linear,” I began explaining to my students. And with that said, I proceeded to walk the walk. Prewriting for my students often occurred in writing groups, on the bus ride home from school, or even in the shower. The think sheets were retired. Substantial class time for writing started to become part of the lesson plan. And as my students wrote, they were encouraged to stop occasionally and think, talk, dream, and write some more. First drafts, second drafts, working drafts, partial drafts were all woven together to create a new conception of process writing. The lines separating writing and revising blurred. Some works were never finished. I even shared some of my academic and personal writing. We were a community of writers.

Too often, idealism is short-lived. It was hard to be a community of writers in five classes. It was difficult to place a circular model in a square. Grading periods, progress reports, other curricular demands—the contents of the square were formidable. And what about mechanics? Mini-lessons for 125 students? In the midst of my disillusionment, I prepared to teach English methods to idealistic pre-service teachers. Not wanting to dampen their spirits, I put aside my questions and concerns. Instead, I was prepared to talk the talk, even if the walk was more of a hobble as of late. But their request to hear the truth changed all of that. Their request made me reflect upon my journey as a teacher of writing, and an opportunity was created for me to redefine my teaching.

The answer was not to abandon the idealism. Instead, I began the process of adapting it to meet the realities of high school—its students, teachers, community, administration, parents, and curriculum. Today, I have a slightly different conception of what it means to teach writing as a process.

About Prewriting

Prewriting asks a writer to create and organize thoughts. These two demands are often paradoxical behaviors. I still believe that prewriting cannot take place in the span of twenty-five minutes on a fill-in-the-blank think sheet. It is much more of a contemplative, cerebral process. It deserves inspiration. It needs time. It is the foundation. It is thought. How could I have reduced all of that to a canned work sheet? I find that talk is essential to prewriting. When students are choosing or forming their top-

ics, I often build time into the lesson for small group discussions. These conversations enable students to think through a topic to determine if it will work for them. For those assignments that ask students to create their own topics, preliminary talk is essential. They need the opportunity to share their ideas and receive constructive feedback as they proceed to shape their topic. Often, these conversations reveal the need to revise a topic and, in some cases, choose a new one.

At some point, talking needs to make room for writing. Writing during prewriting will look very different from student to student. Personally, I have never been able to web. Maybe it's my fear of spiders. I do a funny sort of outline. Instead of an A and a B, and a one and a two, I use dashes, dots, or any other type of funky shape. It is important to talk with your students about the many different brainstorming strategies, from listing to freewriting, and help them to determine for themselves which strategy works best.

Back when I relied on canned think sheets that reduced writing to a filling in of blanks, I noticed two effects. Of course their writing lacked a certain depth and voice—a result of the think sheet. However, their writing was organized. I now realize I went to the other extreme. Because I didn't provide a schema to facilitate the organizational process, students often created in-depth works that meandered. Now I build into the process a place where we consider organization. That point should not come too early, for it might thwart the creative process. But we must remember that prewriting consists of two acts: creating and organizing. Before students embark on the act of drafting, I encourage them to look at their prewriting and determine a game plan, a strategy. I do not have a tangible schema to offer them. However, for those students who struggle to find order amongst their ideas, I dig out a fill-in-the-blank think sheet that outlines an entire essay structure. These students can plug *their* ideas into the sheet. In this case, the sheet is not inhibiting thinking; it is facilitating organization.

One day, I gave my sophomores an open-ended assignment. We had finished reading a novel. Instead of providing them with my usual specific, step-by-step topics, I encouraged my students to create their own. I thought I would be greeted with cheers. I thought my gift of autonomy would be greatly appreciated. I thought wrong. The assignment was met with frustration, anger, confusion, and

empty gazes. While some had to have their hands held, many rose to the challenge. But the quality of much of the work was mediocre at best. I realized that the majority was dependent on my leading questions embedded in the prompt to organize and develop the end product. Today, I try to provide students with both types of topics. A specific, detailed prompt ensures that students will grapple with concepts inherent in a particular piece of literature or unit of study. More open-ended topics encourage intellectual independence. Students need both experiences.

A final point about prewriting concerns the purpose and audience. I ask my students to consider these components of the process while they are thinking about their essay. A clear conception of purpose can often facilitate the act of brainstorming. Sometimes, attention to audience is better left until the actual drafting stage when questions regarding syntax, diction, and tone are being considered. Other times, students need to know something about their audience as they think and talk about their topic.

About Writing

Once students have generated ideas and considered an organizational structure, they need to draft. Writing is a deceptive term when educators use it to describe the three stages of the writing process. One prewrites, writes, and revises. This implies that one does not really write during the beginning and ending stages of the process. That is why I have begun to use the term drafting. Semantics aside, the word better reflects my philosophy of teaching writing. In a denotative sense, drafting means the act of composing, subject to revision or refinement. Connotatively, the term implies a creative act. The term better captures the recursive element of the writing process.

As students draft, they continue to plan and organize. Thinking and writing occur during this part of the process. When students draft, they are not continuously writing. Instead, the act is interrupted with pauses where students revisit their purpose, change their focus, brainstorm additionally, or talk through a trouble spot. My role during this part of the process is to provide them time and support to compose. Often, I set aside drafting days. In theory, these opportunities should allow me to monitor my students' progress, act as a facilitator, and con-

vey to my students the importance of writing. Some days, these goals are achieved. But other times, students spend most of the period socializing. You know the day is a bust when the room begins to resemble a study hall! Why does this occasionally occur? Part of the problem is the computer. Many of our students compose at the keyboard. Without computer access in the classroom, their process is disrupted, and a drafting day is not meeting their needs. Another part of the problem is due to the often messy nature of the process. If I designate a certain day for drafting, I am riding under the assumption that all of my students have successfully thought about and outlined their topics. I enter the class with this naive belief that every student is at the same point in the process—ready, willing, and able to begin the process of drafting. In reality, students are at different places in the process. And because the process itself is so recursive, one person might be ready to write the first draft at the beginning of the class hour only to find herself needing to brainstorm due to a block.

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These realities do not negate the need for or benefit of drafting days, but today I approach these days with a more realistic and flexible notion of what might occur. Recently, my sophomores worked on their own writing projects. They chose their topics and determined the mode, audience, and so forth. Drafting days during the earlier part of the process were only marginally successful. However, toward the end of the process, I built in two additional drafting days, which were much more successful. Most students had written a first draft, received peer feedback, conferenced with me, and revised extensively. These two drafting days occurred at a time when most were trying to write a second or third draft. Some students were doing a lot of additional writing. Others were adding smaller portions of new text. Still others were at a standstill and needed time to determine a new direction. Students were very ap-

preciative of these drafting days, for they afforded them time and support.

Another purpose for drafting days is to monitor the process and ensure integrity. Students can find a plethora of essays to choose from on the Internet. To reduce temptation, I have begun using class time for students to write their initial drafts. This way, I can monitor their ability to write independently. These first drafts are often taken to finished products, but occasionally these drafts are evaluated on a student's ability to write independently.

While I have increased the amount of time students write in my class, I also require a significant amount of drafting time out of class. In or out of class, drafting is primarily a creative experience for my students. During the drafting experience, students will need to rethink their ideas. They will also want to rework what they previously have written. But I try to encourage them to be open-minded. I want them to create.

About Revision

Once upon a time, I thought I could get all of my students to shift from drafting to revising in one fell swoop. Today, I know better. I cannot make my students fit into a contrived concept of process writing. Instead, I help them to see that, while they are most likely revising as they draft, the primary function during the drafting process is to create a body of writing. Once they seem to have a "complete" body of writing (whatever that term means), I help them to make the important transition from creating to analyzing. As they begin to analyze their work, they determine what needs to be added, deleted, or rearranged. During this process of revision, my role is to help students learn how to remove themselves from their own work. They need to be able to read their work as an outsider in order to revise. I continue to struggle with how to help them revise their own writing and that of their peers, and I have had marginal success with peer evaluations and writing groups. Too often, I will read a final draft that is quite weak. I then look at the peer evaluation comments. Much to my dismay, the classmate's feedback is virtually useless. The answer is not to abandon these student-centered activities; instead, the key is to help students understand the different intellectual expectations between drafting and revising. Revising requires a breaking down of the text. Such analytical behaviors must be cultivated

in the classroom, and my role is to help students develop these behaviors.

One of the most helpful teaching tools is student models. I will take a student's paper and analyze it on the overhead. I used to use student models after students had written the entire essay, but today I use the models during the process. For instance, after students have written drafts of an essay on *The Great Gatsby*, I will read them and provide comments with suggestions for revision. Before I return the papers, I will identify one or more essays as models. I might take an introduction from one student and a body paragraph from another. Usually, I do not use an entire essay from one student. The purpose is to help students shift from creating (drafting) to analyzing (revising). After we review what makes for an effective introduction, we read the introduction together. This is followed by an evaluation of the model. Finally, I share some revisions, which I would make based on the above steps. While it is important that students engage in the activity, I cannot stress how crucial it is for the teacher to model the analytical steps in the process of revision. I think my students need to see me go through the process. Then I will ask them to work with a partner to revise another model introductory paragraph.

Toward the end of the hour, I return their essays and ask them to revise their first paragraph for the next day. After some sharing with their peers, I move on to the body paragraphs. While this seems tedious and prescriptive, the intellectual process of revising is quite analytical and needs to be viewed as a series of steps. Of course, as the year progresses, I do not have to be so prescriptive as I help students with the revision part of the process. In fact, toward the end of the year I would expect my students to demonstrate such analytical abilities independently, which, of course, is a primary goal for my students to reach.

About Editing

One of the biggest lessons I have learned during my tenure as a teacher is that revising and editing are not the same. When we are examining a draft to determine what needs to be added, deleted, or rearranged, I do not want my students dealing with sentence structure, punctuation, usage, or even style. It is much easier for students to correct spelling or vary sentence openers than it is to examine the quality of an analysis of literature, the description of a

place in a narrative, or the logic behind an argument. When I used to lump the two acts together, students did very little rewriting, opting for the superficial changes that fall under the domain of editing. While the name is somewhat misleading in that professional editors do revise, I think the distinction suits the needs of high school students quite well.

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Research from the 1980s made us abandon the teaching of grammar. These studies suggested that knowing grammar had very little effect on writing. Instead, we were encouraged to provide mini-lessons when the need arose. With over one hundred students, how does a teacher do that? I agree that spending weeks on transitive and intransitive verbs, predicate nominatives and adjectives, gerunds and participles, and compound and complex sentences so that students can identify these terms on tests probably is not the best use of time. But do we really want to ride that pendulum to the other extreme? There are certain fundamental concepts that students need to know so that they can construct complete sentences that are correctly punctuated and free from major errors in usage. We want to encourage our more advanced students to work with language (syntax, diction) to improve their style, but in order for this to occur, students need to know what a dependent clause is, for instance. Believing that moderation is key, I have tried to find a compromise. While I do not spend time having students identify objects of the prepositional phrase, I

do devote class time to the basics of a sentence, clauses, and phrases so that I can help them learn about punctuation, usage, and style. Like any field of study, there are certain basic terms that one needs to learn in order to be successful, so I do devote time to this so that students can work on applying their knowledge to the editing of their work. A word of caution: The application process takes a lot of time. But that does not give me permission to give up and make the erroneous conclusion that a basic knowledge of grammar and usage is unnecessary for editing writing.

A final piece of advice is to develop a scope and sequence during the year, as well as during the entire curriculum. For instance, my ninth graders are asked to demonstrate an understanding of sentence structure during first semester and punctuation during second semester. While I may see errors in pronoun-antecedent agreement, I do not call attention to those errors until students seem to master sentence structure and then punctuation. This is not to say that I so rigidly follow the scope and sequence that I ignore a “teachable moment,” but adhering to the scope and sequence enables me to help my students analyze their prose without being overwhelmed. My role is not to identify every error; instead, my purpose is to give my students the rudimentary tools in grammar and usage in a timely, sequenced fashion so that they can edit their own writing.

Let’s just say that my journey from college to today has been rewarding. The changes were met with frustration and apprehension, but ultimately with satisfaction. When I get the opportunity to share my latest beliefs on the teaching of writing with another group of preservice English teachers in a methods course, I am sure they may learn something from my words. But their real lesson will come from my journey.

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