**Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk**

# FINDING GRANDMA'S WORDS: A CASE STUDY IN THE ART OF REVISING

ABSTRACT: *Most basic writers are not adept at revising their work, often limiting revision to surface changes at the word or sentence level. Research on composing suggests that many writers are hampered in their efforts to revise by their inability to re-examine the content of their writing and by misguided attempts to follow rigid "rules" internalized from teachers and textbooks. The author reviews the research on revising as it relates to a case study of the revising processes of one of her basic writing students. The resulting analysis yields insights into the complexities of revising and suggests possibilities for more productive teacher response to student writing.*

With the wide acceptance of the process approach to composition in the 1970s, revising assumed a heightened importance in the teaching of writing. Teachers began offering comments on early drafts of students' essays in the hope that they would substantially revise their writing—reconceptualizing, reorganizing, or expanding their earlier attempts at making meaning. Yet often the results, as evidenced by subsequent drafts, were disappointing. Why, teachers asked in puzzlement and frustration, is true revision so rare in student writing? This question assumed particular poignancy for teachers of developmental students since basic writers—those most in need of improving their writing through revising—appeared to be the least able to do so (Flower et al.; Perl "Composing Processes"; Pianko; Sommers "Strategies"; Wall and Petrosky). And a lack of facility with revising seemed to prevail whether the students were writing in a first or second language (Raimes; Zamel).

---

*Rebecca Mlynarczyk is assistant professor of English at Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York, where she teaches developmental courses in reading and writing. She has conducted numerous workshops on teaching reading and writing and has published in* TESOL Journal, College ESL, *and* College English. *She is coauthor with Steven Haber of* In Our Own Words: A Guide with Readings for Student Writers *(St. Martin's Press).*

© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1996

Nancy Sommers' research has given us some insights into why substantial revision is so rare among inexperienced writers. The student writers interviewed by Sommers, all of whom were college freshmen, didn't even like to use the word "revision." Instead they re-labeled their revision activities as "scratching out and doing over again" (380), "marking out" (381), or "slashing and throwing out" (381). All of these student writers viewed revision as making changes on the sentence level or, even more commonly, the word level. The following quotation from one of the freshman writers is representative: "I read what I have written and I cross out a word and put another word in; a more decent word or a better word. Then if there is somewhere to use a sentence that I have crossed out, I will put it there" (380-381).

The view of revising articulated by the experienced writers in the Sommers study (professors, journalists, and editors) was dramatically different. The experienced writers described an ongoing, global process. As one experienced writer observed, "[Revising] means taking apart what I have written and putting it back together again. I ask major theoretical questions of my ideas, respond to those questions, and think of proportion and structure, and try to find a controlling metaphor. I find out which ideas can be developed and which should be dropped. I am constantly chiseling and changing as I revise" (384).

What explains the drastic differences in how student writers and experienced writers view revising? Ironically, the same teachers who complain that their students are not able to revise their writing substantially may be contributing to the problem. Sommers concludes that inexperienced writers "see their writing altogether passively through the eyes of former teachers or their surrogates, the textbooks, and are bound to the rules which they have been taught" (383). It is probably no accident that students who are able to revise their work most effectively are those who have done the most self-sponsored writing (Wall and Petrosky 115), in other words, writing without teachers.

A study by Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford confirms the hypothesis that most teachers have not yet discovered how to frame their comments on student papers in ways that will encourage thoughtful and thorough revision. In this study of teachers' written responses on 3,000 student essays, Connors and Lunsford coordinated a team of experienced writing teachers who examined the "global comments" on the student papers. The team studied only comments that were "rhetorically oriented and not related to formal or mechanical problems," comments that referred to the rhetoric, structure, or overall success of the piece of writing (206). The majority of teacher responses—77 percent—did deal with these global concerns. However, only 24 percent of the comments were concerned with the content of the paper, and only 17 percent provided generalized reader response, using words such as "like" or "dislike" (207). Most of the comments offered

at the beginning or end of a paper were devoted to justifying a final grade (213). Only 11 percent of these initial or final comments seemed informed by the view that the paper represented part of an ongoing process of becoming a better writer (213). Overall, the researchers who analyzed the teacher commentary "found very little readerly response and very little response to content" (217). The findings of this large-scale study are indisputable: teachers need help in learning to respond to student writing in productive ways. Connors and Lunsford express the need for studies that would make teachers "aware of their separate roles as readers, coaches, and editors" (219) and suggest that one way of doing this would be through "`thick descriptions' of teacher-responders at work, in their full context" (219).

This essay provides such a description through a case study in which I explain how an analysis of my interactions with one of my basic writing students led me to an enhanced understanding of the teacher-responder's role in helping students revise effectively. But first I will review the theoretical foundations underlying my analysis.

**Theoretical Perspectives on Revising**

Much of the literature on revising has focused on assumptions about audience, and many compositionists have been influenced by the views first articulated by Linda Flower in an article entitled "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." According to Flower, ineffective writers often fail to communicate adequately with their readers because their prose is writer-based. These writers use a kind of shorthand language "whose meaning is still to an important degree in the writer's head" (30). While Flower recognizes writer-based prose as an important, sometimes essential, stage in the writing process (34), she feels that the key for effective writing instruction is to encourage students to transform their writer-based prose into reader-based prose, translating their inner meanings into language that is more readily accessible to an outside reader (Flower "Revising," "Writer-Based").

Since teachers provide the primary audience for student writers, the tendency to focus most suggestions for revising on the needs of the reader is entirely understandable. Yet this may not be the most productive strategy for encouraging thoughtful and substantive revision. Indeed some have suggested that the most helpful thing teachers can do is to teach students to ignore audience, at least in the early stages of writing and revising (Elbow; Elbow and Clarke; Rankin). I believe that nurturing substantial revision requires teachers to suspend temporarily their needs as readers and focus instead on the writer's needs, encouraging students to return to the meanings that are in their heads but not yet on the page. Two theories of composing have influenced

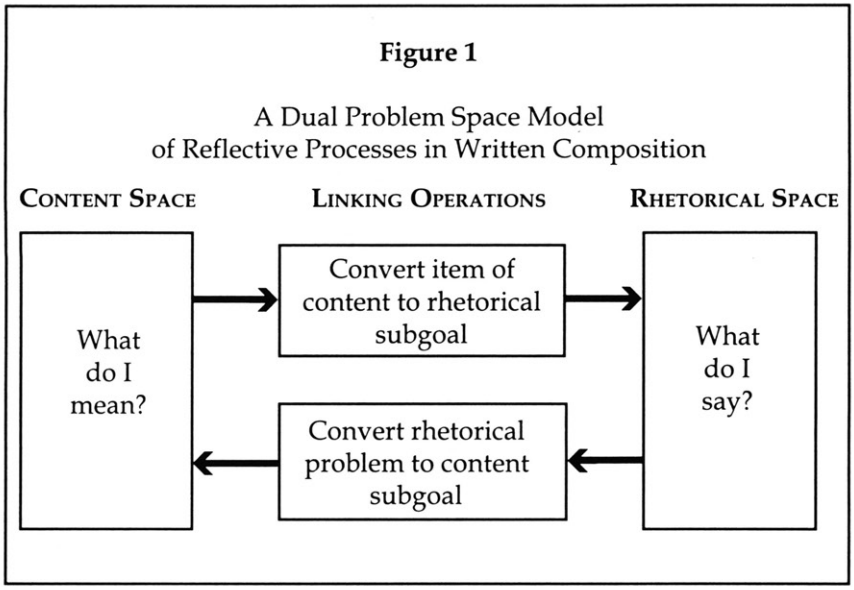
my thinking on revising: Perl's concepts of retrospective and projective structuring ("Understanding") and Scardamalia, Bereiter, and Steinbach's view of composing as an interaction between the content space and the rhetorical space. While the key concepts of these theories are not identical, they relate to and inform one another.

In "Understanding Composing," Sondra Perl develops a model of composing as a recursive process in which writers return again and again to three elements: first, to certain semantic units—phrases or sentences in their evolving texts; second, to key words or a notion of the topic; and, third, and most important, to a "felt sense" of their intended meaning. This third element, which Perl labels "retrospective structuring," is highly important to skilled writers. As Perl explains, "Once we have worked at shaping, through language, what is there inchoately, we can look at what we have written to see if it adequately captures what we intended" (367).

Perl contrasts retrospective structuring with another mental process she terms "projective structuring" (368). This type of structuring involves "the ability to craft what one intends to say so that it is intelligible to others" (368), a process that clearly relates to Flower's concept of reader-based prose. While not denying the great importance of projective structuring for all writers, Perl feels that misguided attempts to meet the needs of readers frequently cause problems for inexperienced writers. These writers often become fixated on what they think others want them to write, neglecting their own felt sense of the topic. In trying to meet the needs of these vaguely defined readers, they often attempt to follow previously learned rules or internalized criteria for assessing completed texts. In Perl's view, this approach represents a diminishing of true projective structuring, in which writers "draw on their capacity to move away from their own words, to decenter from the page, and to project themselves into the role of the reader" (368).

Facility in writing, for Perl, depends on an easy ability to move back and forth between the two mental processes, retrospective and projective structuring. She explains: "We rarely do one without the other entering in; in fact, again in these postures we can see the shuttling back-and-forth movements of the composing process, the move from sense to words and from words to sense, from inner experience to outer judgment and from judgment back to experience" (369). Research indicates, however, that inexperienced writers often engage in a limited form of projective structuring, neglecting the need for retrospective structuring in which they assess how well the evolving text captures their intended meaning.

Another model of composing—one proposed by the cognitive researchers Marlene Scardamalia, Carl Bereiter, and Rosanne Steinbach in an article entitled "Teachability of Reflective Processes in Written




Composition" — helps to explain why this recursive movement tends to be so difficult for inexperienced writers.

This model, which is based on the work of psychologist Allen Newell, views writing as a process of problem solving in which writers need to shuttle between two problem spaces: the content space and the rhetorical space (see Figure 1). The content space is concerned with beliefs. It is here that "one works out opinions, makes moral decisions, generates inferences about matters of fact, formulates causal explanations, and so on" (176). The content space often impinges on daily life and is not just activated when planning a composition. Much of our everyday thinking occurs in the content space. As soon as we commit an idea to paper, however, we have moved into the rhetorical space, which relates only to writing: "The knowledge states to be found in this kind of space are *mental representations of actual or intended text*— representations that may be at various levels of abstraction from verbatim representation to representations of main ideas and global intentions" (176, emphasis in original).

The model proposed by Scardamalia, Bereiter, and Steinbach coincides with many previously developed cognitive descriptions of the composing process. For example, Collins and Gentner state:

> It is important to separate idea production from text production. The processes involved in producing text, whether they operate on the word level, the sentence level, the paragraph level, or the text level, must produce a linear sequence that satisfies certain grammatical rules. In contrast, the result of the process of idea production is a set of ideas with many in-

> ternal connections, only a few of which may fit the linear model desirable for text. (53)

That there is a rough congruence between this view of composing and the ideas of Perl seems fairly obvious. Retrospective structuring occurs in the content space while projective structuring is more closely connected with the rhetorical space. Scardamalia, Bereiter, and Steinbach assert that reflection in writing occurs when there is interaction between the two problem spaces, which is roughly analogous to the turn-taking of speakers in a conversation. This view helps to account for the differences in the processes of experienced and inexperienced writers. Whereas skilled writers readily shuttle back and forth from one space to the other, unskilled writers succeed in transferring information from the content space to the rhetorical space but are unable to make "the return trip" (178). This results in "a simple think-say process of composition" and restricts revision to surface changes that remain limited to the rhetorical space (178). Inexperienced writers, when asked to revise, do not plunge back into the content space to explore their ideas more deeply. Rather they limit their revision to such concerns of the rhetorical space as changes in wording or mechanical corrections.

Through their comments, teachers often encourage this premature fixation with rhetorical concerns. Because they do not have access to the students' felt sense of the ideas they are trying to express, teachers often focus instead on matters of structure, form, or correctness, ignoring important questions in the content space, which might encourage students to reexamine their intentions and revise more substantially.

The views of composing summarized here—like all theoretical models—represent a simplified view of highly complex and little understood mental processes. Looking at revising with these theories in mind does, however, help to explain why substantive revision is so difficult for many writers. Let me turn now to the case study to illustrate how these processes came into play for my student and me. This description of my own practice illustrates some of the pitfalls and possibilities inherent in teacher response to student writing. Thus, I offer it not as a model of exemplary teacher response but as a starting point for conversations about how to respond to student writing more effectively.

## The Case Study: Revising Observed

This study was focused on the revising processes of a student in a developmental writing course I taught at a large urban college.[1] This student, whom I will call Nadine, had moved to the United States from her native Haiti at the age of ten and was twenty years old at the time

of the study. She was taking this course for the third time because of her difficulty in passing the university-wide essay exam designed to assess "minimal competence" in writing. I hoped that the extra conference time Nadine would receive as a result of participating in the case study might help her finally to succeed on this test, and she did, in fact, pass the exam at the end of the semester. Fortunately for me, Nadine proved to have a keen understanding of her own thinking and writing processes as evidenced by the "metatexts" she wrote reflecting on what had happened in each conference and by the careful way in which she annotated transcripts of the conferences with her subsequent thoughts.[2]

Although Nadine and I held weekly half-hour conferences throughout the semester, the case study focuses on the first two of these meetings, which were audiotaped and transcribed. In the initial conference we discussed Nadine's plans to revise the first draft of an essay in which she had described an experience from her past. The complete essay appears below:

> When I was about six years old my Grandma past away. At that time, I did not know quite what death meant, except for the stories that I have been told by grown ups, which didn't shade [shed] much light on it. They use to say that when someone dies, they just go to sleep for a while and someday they will come back. I use to think if they put the person that's sleeping under the ground how will they come back. I mean, why don't they put them on a bed until they wake up. I use to say to my mom, "Why don't you give Grandma something so, she can dig herself out when she woke up because if she's under the ground she never get up?" Mom use to say that God will provide Grandma with what she needs to come back.
>
> So, day after day I would ask God to provide Grandma with the things that she needs to come back.
>
> Every morning Grandma and I would get up at the crack of dawn to go fishing. In the way, we would play a game of throwing small marked rocks as far as we could and than determine where it fell. It was a nice game between [me] and Grandma. She always let me win. Also, while fishing we would play a game of describing our favorite places.
>
> Grandmas favorite place has always been the river, which we fish in everyday. She used to say that there's no other place in the world were she rather be than right there, where the grass stays greener all year around, where the river stays bluer than blue and never dries, where the bright sun covers the blue sky with it's colorful wings; where the wind blows calmly and gently and where the fish will never go away. In addition, she would say, "that's purity, that's heaven my dear, that's eternity."

> When I miss Grandma to much, I go down the river to listen for all the sounds and all the other things that she saw. I see us there playing and laughing with one another and that gives me confort.[3]

Before the first conference with Nadine, I had read this draft and responded by answering the five questions on a response sheet distributed to all students. Most students had received response from a student partner, but since there had been an odd number of students in class that day, I had served as Nadine's partner. In response to the question about what I liked about the essay, I noted that "I loved the paragraph about the river," but when asked to comment on the opening, I wrote: "Maybe you should start with the part about the river." In answer to what I would like to know more about in the next draft, I wrote: "How you finally came to deal with your feelings about death."

At the beginning of the first conference, rather than encouraging Nadine to return to the content space by asking her whether she felt the first draft adequately expressed her meaning, I instead launched into my own concerns as a reader, matters of the rhetorical space.[4] Prefacing my comments with the brief statement that "I really liked the essay very much," I continued: "We were talking about your paper yesterday in class. And we were saying, I was saying, that maybe it could be better if you worked on reorganizing it a little bit and changing the order of the paragraphs." Subconsciously, I must have felt uncomfortable about being so prescriptive. I shifted from "we" to "I" when I realized that I was really talking about my ideas, not Nadine's, and I kept qualifying my remarks: "I don't have anything specific, you know, exactly in mind," and "I don't know for sure." But I did, in fact, have a specific organizational plan in mind and asked Nadine to read her essay aloud using this new order.

Analyzing the transcript of the conference, I tried to understand why I had been so directive. One possible explanation is that I was trying to use the conference time efficiently. It's quicker to make a direct suggestion than to get the student to figure things out for herself. But in this case, the end result—wresting control of the writing from the writer—clearly did not justify the means. A more valid explanation for my approach derives from the power dynamics of teacher-student relations. As Anne Greenhalgh explains, "In principle, a response to a draft not only delivers a message at the semantic level but also plays out the social relationship between reader and writer, teacher and student" (402). Whether the teacher is responding in talk or in writing, there is a tendency to assume the voice of "the authority" who knows best how the student should go about revising.

Nadine's behavior, too, followed a pattern typical in teacher-student interactions. She did not question my right to appropriate her

text and instead dutifully read the essay aloud in the order I suggested. After she finished reading the essay, we continued to deal with matters of the rhetorical space, but my comments became more honest and less directive as I focused on my confusion as a reader. A brief excerpt from the transcript gives the flavor of this part of the conversation:

Rebecca: I had a question here, because when you say, "I go down to the river," is this a river here in New York?

Nadine: No, in Haiti.

Rebecca: In Haiti. So, how old were you when you would go down to the river and think about this and feel some comfort?

Nadine: Like, oh, seven, between . . .

Rebecca: Mm-hmm. So let's see, she, oh right, so she died when you were six, and a year or maybe two years?

Nadine: Two years.

Rebecca: Later you had finally gotten to the point where you had understood what it meant.[5]

At this point the dynamics of the conference changed dramatically. I seemed to feel that I had "done my job" as teacher-reader by dealing with the confusion of chronology and perhaps had signaled to Nadine by my comment about understanding the meaning of her grandmother's death that it was now safe to talk about the content of the essay. Whatever the reason, our talk was transformed as Nadine began to struggle with the felt sense of her ideas. Immediately after the passage quoted above, she began speaking very quickly and intently:

Nadine: Because this would explain when you're six years old and your mama says she will come back and God's gonna provide her with whatever she needs to come back.

Rebecca: Right.

Nadine: And I was there, there, you know, praying to, you know, you know, give her what she needs to come back because, you know, I miss her.

Rebecca: Right.

Nadine: And so I was, since I was six, you know, still waiting. A year go by.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Nadine: And day after day I would say, you know, "Please," you know, "she's gonna come back."

Rebecca: Uh-huh.

Nadine: And after that, when she's, you know, when I stayed for a year, you know, and she hasn't been back, so . . .

Rebecca: Mm-hmm. Right.

Nadine: I kinda, you know, later on, you know, every morning I wake up at the same time that she usually get up.

Rebecca: Uh-huh.

Nadine: Play the same game—by myself.

Rebecca: Awww.

Nadine: Alway. And then we go and I would sit by the river.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Nadine: Go fishing and listen to, you know. It's like you can't hear it. It's like sitting there.

Rebecca: Uh-huh.

Nadine: But you can't see or hear what's going on.

Rebecca: Right.

Nadine: It's like the things that you used to do.

Rebecca: Right.

Nadine: Everything's comin' back to you. And, you know . . .

Rebecca: Right, right.

Nadine: And, you know, that makes me feel better.

Rebecca: Like a flashback of the old days and like her spirit was there.

Nadine: [overlapping with Rebecca] Back . . . back.

Rebecca: Her. You were comforted by the memories . . .

Nadine: Memories of . . .

Rebecca: Uh-huh.

Nadine: Of her.

Greenhalgh astutely observes that in analyzing teacher responses to student writing, we need to think not only about the teacher's role but also about the teacher's voice (401). In this conference I spoke in two distinct and almost diametrically opposed voices. First there was the voice of authority—the expert who felt free to evaluate, interrupt, and impose prescriptions. The second voice, the one just quoted, was that of an empathic listener. And it was this second voice that was actually more useful in helping Nadine to revise her work. By listening to Nadine and showing interest and support, I encouraged her to move back into the content space to engage in further retrospective structuring of her ideas.

Immediately after the excerpt quoted above, however, I shifted again into the voice of the authoritative evaluator: "Well, good. I think basically that order works pretty well. And if you can add those things when you rewrite it, I think it'll be even better than it was to begin with." In attempting to understand why my voice changed so dramatically at this point, I speculated that perhaps I was made uncomfortable by the emotionally charged nature of the conversation. But as I read further in the transcript, it seemed more likely that I used the authoritative voice to interrupt in order to redirect the conversation and share something of my own childhood experiences with loss and grief. Just after the statement quoted above about rewriting the essay, I said:

Rebecca: Uh. It's really unusual that you remember this so well. My father died when I was nine and my sister was six. And I'm not as aware of my own feelings about death as you are. And it's unusual for a child, but it's good

Nadine: [overlapping with Rebecca] A lot of people have died in my family, though.

Rebecca: Yeah. So, you were, you had experienced it. Yeah. I think you do a really good job of describing how a child views death

Nadine: [overlapping] Especially when . . .

Rebecca: And how the parents try to be kind. They don't want to hurt you, you know. So that's why they say things like, "Oh, she'll come back," and they, some people believe it in a religious sense that, you know, Judgment Day, these people will come back, or we'll all be together in heaven, or whatever. But [pause] that is sometimes very confusing to children 'cause they expect the real person to come back sometime soon.

Nadine: Mm-hmm.

Rebecca: And it's a real confusing thing. So you do a good job of showing how a child reacts to this kind of explanation.

In some ways, this part of the conference is more difficult to explain than the earlier segments. Here I am maintaining control of the discussion, not welcoming Nadine into a dialogue. But I am also not prescribing or directing as I had in my suggestions about reorganizing the essay. It's as if I, too, have now stepped into the content space to do some retrospective structuring.

When I first began to study the transcript, I saw my move away from Nadine's essay to express my own thoughts about children's perceptions of death as a flaw. But as Perl explains, moving away from the actual written text is extremely important in order for retrospective structuring to occur: "... the move is not to any words on the page nor to the topic but to feelings or non-verbalized perceptions that *surround* the words or to what the words already present *evoke* in the writer" ("Understanding" 364-65, emphasis in original). Thus, I came to see that following Nadine into the content space signaled my concern with the ideas of her essay and perhaps helped her in reformulating the concluding paragraph of her second draft, the most heavily revised and expanded part of the essay. Here is Nadine's revised essay:

"Memory of Grandma"

> In Haiti, every morning Grandma and I would get up at the crack of dawn to go fishing. In the way, we would play a game of throwing small marked rocks as far as we could and than try to determine where they fell. It was a nice game between Grandma and I because she usually lets me win. Also while fishing, we would play a game of describing our favorite places. But I had so many, I would ask Grandma to go first.
>
> Grandma's favorite place has always been the river, where we would fish everyday. She used to say that, there's no other place in the world where she would rather be than right here "where the grass gets greener year around, where the river stays bluer than blue and never dries, where the splash of soft colors from the sun covers the blue sky like a Robin spreading its colorful wings, where the calm and gentle wind blows among the trees that stand higher than a mountain top, where the creatures of nature take turn in playing their tune, which at times shifts the early morning mood, where there's always purity, eternity and that is where heaven lies my dear." I miss Grandma so much.

> When I was six years old my Grandma passed away. At that time, I did not quite [know] what death meant, except for the stories that I have been told by grown ups, which did not shed much light on it. They used to say that when someone dies, the person just goes to sleep for awhile and someday that person will come back. I used to think if that person that's sleeping under the ground wants to come back, How will that person come back. I mean, why don't they put them on a bed until he/she wakes up? I used to say to my Mom, "Why don't you give Grandma something so she can dig herself out when she wakes up because if she's under the ground she will never get up?" Mom used to say that God will provide Grandma with what she needs to come back. So day after day I would beg God to provide Grandma with what she needs to come back but Grandma never came back.
>
> Finally, I realized that she would not be back. I did the only thing that I could at the time, I cried and cried. When that didn't help me deal with the fact that Grandma was gone, I would wonder down the river. I sat in the same spot Grandma and I used to sit and I started to play our favorite game. Before I would leave the river, I would use Grandma's words, "that's purity, eternity and that is where heaven lies . . ." That was the only thing that help me to accept the fact that Grandma was gone in reality but not gone from my heart and mind.

Not all readers will find the second draft superior to the first. What the essay gains in clarity and focus is offset for some readers by a loss of emotional immediacy, the kind of loss that led Peter Elbow to claim that sometimes writer-based prose is actually better than reader-based prose ("Closing" 51). This kind of emotional intensity is often especially evident in the writing of children: "The arresting power in some writing by small children comes from their obliviousness to audience. . . . After all, why should we settle for a writer's entering our point of view, if we can have the more powerful experience of being sucked out of our point of view and into her world?" ("Closing" 54). But it's not just in children's work that we value writing that ignores audience. According to Elbow, teachers sometimes complain about a student's writer-based prose when they would admire a similar "odd but resonant voice if they found it in a published writer" ("Closing" 55).

Other readers of Nadine's second draft will undoubtedly see it as an improvement; many will see the need for further revision. (It was, in fact, the final draft she wrote for my course.) For my purposes here, however, the important thing is to note how the work of the conference led to specific changes in the revised essay. These changes fall

into five categories: 1) surface changes in grammar and wording; 2) addition of a title; 3) reorganization of the essay into chronological order; 4) expansion of "the river scene" in an attempt to capture the grandmother's words more accurately; and 5) expansion of the concluding paragraph about coming to terms with the grandmother's death. Because I am concerned with the global aspects of revising, I won't discuss the surface changes Nadine made, though with very little help from me, she did make several grammatical corrections and refinements in wording.

Although her first draft was untitled, Nadine attached a title ("Memory of Grandma") to her revised essay. While this might at first appear to be a minor addition, it does suggest that Nadine has processed her thoughts more fully and is now more conscious of the meaning and focus of the essay.

In reorganizing the essay, Nadine succeeded in producing a second draft that is more reader-based than the first. She took my advice in restructuring her essay in chronological order, using the paragraph sequence I had suggested. Nadine seemed to appreciate the way in which my confusion about chronology gave her a view of the essay through the eyes of an outside reader. In a metatext reflecting on what she gained from the first conference, she wrote, "I get to talk about my paper and look at it from a different view—much like the reader not the author."

In her own mind, however, Nadine was more concerned with another type of chronology, a chronology of emotion. At the end of the second conference, she explained:

> The questions that you asked me made me think of it. And then it was fresh in my memory, . . . and after that when I went home I tried to change the paragraphs into many different ways. And then, this one seemed better to me, the one that I have right now sounded better to start with the river. Then state that, you know, how much I miss her. And then go to when I was six years old. . . . I didn't want to start with the sad part. I wanted to start with the happy part. Then wait till later and then end with the happiest part. . . . It made me feel better when I wrote it like that because it's so sad to write something and then it makes you feel bad. So, you know, when I ended—I started happy and I ended happy.

What seems significant here is that although I consider myself a perceptive reader of student writing, I had been completely oblivious of Nadine's concern with the chronology of emotion. Yet, to her, this was much more important than the exact time sequence of events.

The issue of the teacher's limited understanding of a student's in-

tentions also arose in connection with the core of Nadine's essay, the river scene where she conjures up the image of her grandmother through the magic of her words. To me as reader, this part of the essay, as developed in the first draft, was fine. I was impressed by the parallel phrasing and poetic language, but Nadine was not satisfied. Next to this section of the essay on the transcript of the first conference, she wrote: "My Grandma like to give life to things that weren't really alive. I did not do a good job here." In explaining how she revised this part, Nadine said, "I looked at the first draft. I tend to add more. I remembered and my memories come back." She annotated this part of the transcript, "That's true. It's almost like see it all again made me feel happy and sad at the same time." Although Nadine was not familiar with Perl's concept of retrospective structuring, she was certainly engaging in this process as she went back into her experience in an attempt to express her inner meaning.

In trying to capture her grandmother's words, Nadine not only contended with the vagaries of memory but also the mysteries of translation. Although the grandmother did not know how to read or write, she was a gifted storyteller whose stories are still treasured by her family and passed down orally in Creole. For Nadine, it was very important to get the words "right." In the second draft, with no help from me, she polished and embellished her grandmother's words—for example, changing "where the bright sun covers the blue sky with it's colorful wings" to "where the splash of soft colors from the sun covers the blue sky like a Robin spreading its colorful wings."

Finally, in trying to explain how she came to terms with her grandmother's death, Nadine seemed to be dealing with her own need for retrospective structuring of the experience and my initial response as a reader wanting to know "how you finally came to deal with your feelings about death." And this, perhaps, is where the conference was most helpful as both Nadine and I got away from the words on the page to explore our thoughts about children's views of death.

It seems significant that in her analysis of the second draft, Nadine referred indirectly to the value of both retrospective and projective structuring. In annotating the transcript of the second conference, she wrote: "I like [the second draft] better because it made what I wanted to say about my Grandmother clear and helps to let the reader know how important both my grandmother and things I used to do with her really are."

## Coda: Revising Revisited

Doing the analysis for this case study has caused me to do some serious rethinking about the way in which I respond to student writing. I have learned not to assume that I know more about what my

students are trying to say than they do. As a reader, I would never have guessed that Nadine felt she had not adequately captured the poetry of her grandmother's words or that she was more concerned with establishing a chronology of emotion than with the actual sequence of events in time. If I had begun our conference with an open-ended question, I could have encouraged her to return to the content space of her essay to engage in these important issues accessible through retrospective structuring, issues that were known only to her. I might have asked, "Does this paper express everything you were trying to say about your grandmother?" or "Are there any parts of the paper where you feel something important has been left out?"

Instead, at the beginning of this first conference I focused on the paper's structure—a matter of projective structuring—essentially mandating a new organization and at the same time robbing Nadine of control over her own writing. According to Donald Murray, editors as well as teachers are often guilty of responding to writing in a preemptive way:

> They pounce on first draft writing and make corrections. Since most writers have not discovered their meaning in their first draft, the corrections editors make must come from the editors' own preconception of what the writing should mean. . . . They work in ignorance of the writer's intentions and take the writing away from the writer. When editors or teachers kidnap the first draft, they also remove the responsibility for making meaning from the writer. Writing becomes trivialized, unchallenging, unauthoritative, impersonal, unimportant. (34)

Fortunately, Nadine and I did eventually get to a point in our conference where she was free to return to the content space, but in hindsight I realize that this was the place where we should have begun.

Interestingly, it was when we both moved our focus away from the draft and stopped looking at the actual words on the page that this significant retrospective structuring occurred. In the past, I had always felt vaguely guilty when a conference with a student "degenerated" into "mere talk" not directly focused on a text. The case study has taught me that this kind of seemingly amorphous exploration of ideas may be extremely important in getting writers, especially inexperienced writers, to relax enough to temporarily suspend their anxiety over matters of the rhetorical space and return to the content space, where they can explore the felt sense of their ideas.

In attempting to respond to student writing in more productive ways, I now try to resist the urge to comment on structure or mechanics if I feel the student needs to think more deeply about content. This is not an easy thing for me to do, and I confess to a certain amount of

backsliding, especially toward the end of a semester. As exam and portfolio pressures mount, I am often tempted to try to "do it all" on one draft—responding to structure and grammar as well as content. Yet this case study has convinced me that such all-purpose response sends a confusing message to student writers, who often opt to stay put in the rhetorical space, ignoring the more cognitively challenging issues of the content space.

Broad questions, which can be offered in conference or in written comments, are effective in facilitating the return trip to the content space. I'm thinking of such responses as "When you revise, add one important thing that wasn't included in the first draft" or "Try writing a different ending and see which one you prefer." If a paper seems undeveloped, a useful response can be framed in quantitative terms: "When you revise, make this paper at least two (or three or four) pages longer." In responding to specific content issues, I now make an effort to use questions rather than statements: "Why do you think you feel this way?" or "Can you explain more about . . . .?"

Of course, there comes a time when students need to engage in projective structuring, and helping students see their writing from a reader's point of view remains an important part of my job as a teacher-responder. For example, in the first conference with Nadine when I asked her where the river was located and how old she was when she went there, these straightforward questions gave her a sense of my confusion as a reader, which helped her in revising. In her annotations on this part of the transcript, Nadine wrote that these comments helped her "to make my river scene seem clear" and to "give more direction to where I'm taking the story." Offering honest and open-ended reader response rather than prescriptions about how to "fix" a perceived problem keeps the control of revision where it should be—with the student. Marginal notations such as "I get confused here" or "I don't quite understand this part" help students see their writing through a reader's eyes and leaves them free to devise their own solutions.

If I were asked to sum up what I have learned from this case study, I would say, "It's all about listening." I can't help students move on to somewhere else in their writing unless I've heard them telling me where they came from and where they are now. It sounds so simple. It should be so effortless. And yet for me—and I suspect for many other teacher-responders—learning to listen is the hardest thing of all. Since completing this case study, I often catch myself interrupting a student who is trying to tell me something important or not pausing long enough to let a student enter the conversation or going off on a tangent about one of my pet theories. Sometimes I think I should keep the tape recorder running all the time to keep me honest, to remind me that the writing

belongs to the student, not to me. Despite these occasional lapses, however, this case study has made a qualitative difference in how I respond to student writing. I am less prescriptive in my written comments and more open in the way I conduct conferences.

I now suspect that some of my talkativeness in previous conferences resulted from a misguided effort to protect my students—many of them struggling to master a second language—from the embarrassment of not having anything to say or the proper words in which to say it. Through the case study of Nadine, I have come to believe that each of my students has a great deal to say and will find the words if I can only learn to listen.

## Notes

[1]This case study was conducted for a seminar in the English Education program of New York University. I would like to thank Professor Barbara Danish for suggesting the framework for the study and providing insightful commentary. I am also indebted to Ruth McGonigle, a fellow student in the seminar, for her perceptive reading of the transcripts. Two *JBW* reviewers (in particular, Peter Adams) helped me greatly by encouraging me to follow my own advice and return once again to the content space as I completed the final revision of this article. Finally, I extend my deepest thanks to Nadine for giving generously of her time and energy as we worked on this project.

[2]While this case study is particularly relevant for teachers of basic writing, it provides useful insights for teachers and students at more advanced levels as well for according to Flower ("Writer-Based" 30) we can sometimes learn more about composing processes by observing inexperienced writers, whose initial impulses may be closer to the surface and hence easier to assess than those of more practiced writers who continually revise as they write .

[3]I have reproduced both versions of Nadine's essay exactly as they were written. Although there are some surface problems with grammar and mechanics, it is important for readers to understand that these papers were written at the beginning of the semester, and that I had made a conscious decision not to supply Nadine with grammatical corrections.

[4]In conferences with developmental writing students, I make it a point always to discuss the content of an essay *before* dealing with grammar and mechanics. Thus, even though Nadine mentioned at the beginning of the conference that she was concerned about her grammatical errors, we did not discuss these problems until the last five or ten minutes.

[5]The transcript excerpts reproduced in this article make up only a small percentage of the complete transcripts of the conversations I had with Nadine.

## Works Cited


Collins, A., and D. Gentner. "A Framework for a Cognitive Theory of Writing." *Cognitive Processes in Writing: An Interdisciplinary Approach.* Ed. L. W. Gregg and E. Steinberg. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1980.

Connors, Robert J., and Andrea A. Lunsford. "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers." *College Composition and Communication* 44 (May 1993): 200-223.

Elbow, Peter. "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." *College English* 49 (Jan. 1987): 50-69.

Elbow, Peter, and Jennifer Clarke. "Desert Island Discourse: The Benefits of Ignoring Audience." *The Journal.Book.* Ed. Toby Fulwiler. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1987. 19-32.

Flower, Linda. "Revising Writer-Based Prose." *Journal of Basic Writing* 3 (Fall/Winter 1981): 62-74.

_____. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." *College English* 41 (Sept. 1979): 19-37.

Flower, Linda, John R. Hayes, Linda Carey, Karen Schriver, and James Stratman. "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision." *College Composition and Communication* 37 (Feb. 1986): 16-55.

Greenhalgh, Anne M. "Voices in Response: A Postmodern Reading of Teacher Response." *College Composition and Communication* 43 (Oct. 1992): 401-10.

Murray, Donald. "Making Meaning Clear: The Logic of Revision." *Journal of Basic Writing* 3 (Fall/Winter 1981): 33-40.

Newell, Allen. "Reasoning, Problem Solving, and Decision Processes: The Problem Space as a Fundamental Category." *Attention and Performance VIII.* Ed. Raymond S. Nickerson. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1980. 693-718.

Perl, Sondra. "The Composing Processes of Unskilled Writers." *Research in the Teaching of English* 13 (Dec. 1979), 317-36.

_____. "Understanding Composing." *College Composition and Communication 31* (Dec. 1980): 363-69.

Pianko, Sharon. "Reflection: A Critical Component of the Composing Process." *College Composition and Communication* 30 (Oct. 1979): 275-78.

Raimes, Ann. "What Unskilled ESL Students Do as They Write: A Classroom Study of Composing." *TESOL Quarterly 19* (June 1985): 229-58.

Rankin, David. "Audience and the Composing Process." *Journal of Basic Writing 3* (Fall/Winter 1981): 75-80.

Scardamalia, Marlene, Carl Bereiter, and Rosanne Steinbach. "Teachability of Reflective Processes in Written Composition." *Cognitive Science 8* (April-June 1984): 173-190.

Sommers, Nancy. "Intentions and Revisions." *Journal of Basic Writing 3* (Fall/Winter 1981): 41-49.

_____. "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers." *College Composition and Communication 31* (Dec. 1980): 378-88.

Wall, Susan V., and Anthony R. Petrosky. "Freshman Writers and Revision: Results from a Survey." *Journal of Basic Writing 3* (Fall/Winter 1981): 109-22.

Zamel, Vivian. "The Composing Processes of Advanced ESL Students: Six Case Studies." *TESOL Quarterly 17* (June 1983): 165-87.