

Thomas Newkirk

BARRIERS TO REVISION

*People's problems come not so much
from their ignorance as from knowing so
many things that aren't so.*

Josh Billings

If students use invalid criteria to evaluate their evolving texts, the revision process is disrupted. Either they do not see any need to revise, or they revise in ways that do not improve—and may weaken—their texts. In order to uncover some of the inappropriate criteria that college freshmen use, I conducted case studies of two students in a freshman writing course taught by an experienced teaching assistant. I monitored the changes in the composing processes over the eight-week duration of the writing course. Unlike the traditional writing course where students usually receive only written responses to their work, in this course students met once a week with the instructor to discuss problems and possible revisions. Students wrote a three to five page paper each week and were allowed to choose their own topics. A major revision of a piece was counted as a new paper, and students were graded on their best two papers at the end of the course. Thus, the course structure encouraged revision in a way that traditional courses, which often make revision into extra work, do not.

I met individually with the students once a week for thirty minutes to discuss their evaluation of their work, the changes they had made, future plans for revision, and, in general, any problems they had in writing the piece. I will report on two types of problems these students faced—and, to a degree, overcame—in revising their papers.

INVALID CRITERIA

Patti is a forty-year-old housewife, married to an oral surgeon. Aside

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from helping her husband set up his office, she has had extensive experience in marketing research, and interviewing. With this background, I expected a freshman English course to pose little challenge for her. But it turned out to be a difficult eight weeks for Patti as she wrestled with a question that bothers many freshmen—what is the relation of personal knowledge to that given by secondary sources?

This question came to the fore in the third week of class. Patti's first paper had been a humorous account of the many interruptions in her day. Although her instructor had commented favorably on it, she dropped the topic and the personal approach to her topics. Her second paper was on quitting smoking, and the only line which suggested her personal involvement was this:

Women often smoke to avoid making that final scream of the day.

But in her next paragraph she was back to an impersonal account of the reasons for smoking among young people.

A favorite speculation often proved true is that adolescents smoke to project an image of assuredness to their peers.

When I asked her how she came to write on this topic, she said she had extensive experience with people and groups involved in ending bad habits. (As it turned out, she had gone through a program that helped her quit smoking.) I asked if she had made a decision to exclude personal experience.

Yes. I wanted to take the piece out of the realm of personal experience and write about something objectively, that had a broader base, that was a little more sober. I thought the first paper was rather frivolous.

Patti made it clear that she was concerned, even obsessed, with how her audience would react. Yet her sense of the importance of objectivity worked against her. She was caught between conflicting goals of being objective and being interesting, and at this first point in the course was acutely dissatisfied. She admitted in her next conference that her papers were "by and large, dull."

The conference in the third week of the course was pivotal. The instructor convinced Patti to write the paper on smoking from a personal point of view. The result was Patti's best writing of the course. For example, she wrote of her dependency on smoking as follows:

My whole life clearly was geared to smoking. I would rearrange my errands according to my smoking supply; going there instead of here because the cigarette store was nearby. Smoking only in restaurants where I was comfortable as a smoker. I'd even get huffy when friends who didn't puff preferred me not to smoke in their presence. I'd go outside to smoke. I couldn't even get through a meal without finishing a cigarette for almost every course. I'd wake up with a cigarette. I'd go to bed with a cigarette. It was frightening to realize how addicted I really was. I started to hate myself for being addicted.

Patti grudgingly admitted that she liked the writing in this piece better. She was, she claimed, breaking out of the "Victorian," "high-blown" way that she had been taught. Still there was resistance to the new approach. She was worried about supplying too much information, too much detail, going too far. She was also uncomfortable with using "I":

I really labored not to use "I." And I didn't succeed too much because it was my experience. But I really am trying my level best to write more interestingly.

The major test was yet to come, however. During the fifth week she began her research paper on the stress experienced by dentists. Why did she pick the topic?

I know a lot of dentists' wives and we talk about stress in dental marriages. If you mingle with [the wives of dentists] at all, you're constantly hearing about this.

Yet when I asked her if she would use any of this personal information in her paper, she claimed that what she knew was "shared experience":

The shared stories are not that unique. One touches on another and another and another. They all share certain similarities, certain causes, symptoms, and effects.

She would, she said, rely on information from the books she had located, at the same time admitting that the approach might be "dry." Was she worried about being dry?

I guess I shouldn't be if it's a research thing. But, yes, I guess I am.

As promised, the first draft was almost devoid of the personal observations that in truth formed the basis of the paper. In the conference

on the paper, the instructor pointed out the places where more documentation or support was needed, and assured Patti that she would not need to worry about footnoting this material. One of the spots he pointed out was an unconfirmed generalization stating that the dentist is the victim of a cultural stereotype. Her revision compared the ways doctors are portrayed on shows such as “Marcus Welby” and the way the dentist is portrayed on “The Bob Newhart Show.” She concluded with the “ultimate insult” to dentists:

The ultimate insult occurred in the now-classic movie, “Born Yesterday,” when Judy Holiday, in a fit of temper shouted, “You...you...you... DENTIST.”

In commenting on what she had learned through writing the final piece, Patti made her declaration of independence:

I have learned, yes, through personal experience and observation about how dentists are regarded and about how the community puts pressure on the dentists or the doctors. That was a bone of contention when writing this. *There are certain things that I have learned.* And I don't have to look them up in research books or textbooks because I've lived it... At the beginning I kept trying to take things out of the personal. I'm better off writing about something I know personally. Because I can write with more authority and I can write more convincingly. But I was afraid to. I would think, “Well, I know this, who cares, big deal.”

At first, Patti's criteria of “objectivity” prevented her from drawing on pertinent personal experience. She construed objectivity to reside in researched information which she felt was solid and valid, and she excluded first-hand experience which she felt was inconsequential, unauthoritative, even common. She also felt personal information and researched information should not be mixed. These misconceptions about the nature of objectivity and the hierarchy and incompatibility of different kinds of information kept her from attempting an analysis of personal experience that she could do authoritatively.

It would be easy to say that prior instruction is to blame for Patti's reluctance to write from personal experience; Patti herself gave that explanation. But there is, I feel, something more fundamental at the root of this hierarchy, some authoritative quality of print. Plato, in his attack on writing in the *Phaedrus*, noted the special quality of written language.

... writing involves a similar disadvantage to painting. The productions of

painting look like living beings, but if you ask them a question they maintain a solemn silence. The same holds true of written words; you might suppose that they understand what they are saying, but if you ask them what they mean by anything, they simply return the same answer over and over again.¹

Writing, according to Plato, lacks the dynamic quality of the dialogue and for that reason is inferior.

But for students the opposite seems to be true. The very assurance of print intimidates. The fixed quality of print belies the uncertainties that went into its production. Then too, there is the look of print—neat columns, carefully spaced words, binding, copyright date. If the truth is to be discovered, the student reasons, it will look like something printed in a book. Compared to printed texts, all other forms of language, particularly the “shared stories” Patti mentioned, seem hopelessly tentative and unreliable.

There was another area where Patty applied invalid criteria to her text. She chose to leave out pertinent information and detail for fear of boring the reader. While it is possible to bore readers with too much detail, students rarely have this problem. In fact, their prose usually is anemic and underdeveloped. This deficiency is often explained by the inability or unwillingness of the writer to view the text from the point of view of the reader; the writer acts egocentrically and fails to provide information useful and necessary for the reader.

I used to explain holes in the text by egocentricity, but I am now convinced there is often a different reason. A graduate student of mine once asked an eleventh grader what provisions she made for her audience. She answered:

I usually give less detail and more vague descriptions so I won't bore them.

A college freshman made the same comment on a paper she wrote about an inspiring high school teacher. She notes that the paper does not say all she wanted it to:

I'd like to mention his patience, how he'd work after school, how he'd go and find you just to talk to you. He was different from other teachers and if I said all that it would just be boring to the reader.

¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, Walter Hamilton, translator (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 97.

One of Patti's fears about writing from personal experience is the fear of digression:

... in trying to tell all, I found myself digressing too much... I didn't know how to divide the information and how far to go before it became too boring, and too detailed and ridiculous.

Lack of detail then does not arise solely from obliviousness to the audience. It is often the result of a conscious, but misguided attempt, to satisfy the audience.

These writers are applying a rule for conducting conversations to written situations. They are writing for an audience—but an audience of listeners, not readers. Speakers take turns; those who do not recognize when their turn is up are bores. If, for example, you ask me what my grandfather was like, I will try to sum him up in a few sentences:

He was a German Protestant farmer. I never saw him angry, not in the twenty-five years I knew him. Died at the age of 91.

And that may be all. I have finished within my contracted time. If you want more, you will ask. But if I embark on a long detailed description, you are likely to drift off. I would be providing too much detail, cutting off your opportunities to participate in the conversation, and well on the way to being a bore.

When we ask students for detail and elaboration, we are asking them to violate a rule of conversation, asking them, in fact, to act like conversational bores. The job of the teacher is to convince the student that while it may be a bad thing to “talk like a book,” it is not necessarily a bad thing to write like one. The principle of economy which governs selection in conversation runs counter to the economy that governs the setting forth of details in writing.

RESISTANCE TO REVISION

Patti accepted revision as part of the writing process. Although her early revisions often made for little or no improvement, she did not resist the act itself. Anne did.

Anne was a 17 year-old freshman with an SAT verbal score of 550. She considered herself a writer. She would wait for the moment when she was in the right mood, struggle with the opening sentence, and then “it would just come bubbling out” of her.

Interviewer: When it's bubbled out, is it what you want?
Anne: Yes, it's what I want.

She would not subject her writing to any test for accuracy or effectiveness. When I asked her to compare her first paper, a disjointed piece on, ironically, the writing process, with what she had written in high school, she said that she would give her paper on writing an A:

It's not that it's better. I always write A's. This is almost as if I'm talking aloud, thinking on paper. In all my English courses that's how I carried it through. It always depends on what mood I'm in, but it always comes out good.

It followed, of course, that she did not want to change anything. At times she even asserted that comparisons of quality were impossible. During the third week of the course, she wrote a maudlin piece of fiction about a girl going blind. When I asked her if the paper was better than her earlier ones, she replied:

I cannot say better. I do not choose that word. Because all of the papers I put myself into, I really put myself into. I can't play one against the other. They are all so real to me, but I've written on other topics and they come out just as good.

She even refused to acknowledge a conscious component in composing. In the blindness paper, she began without a lead preparing the reader. When I asked her if this innovation was a new experiment, she replied:

No. It depends on my mood. There is no new way or old way of writing for me. It depends on my emotions.

To acknowledge conscious experimentation would have been to admit the possibility of critical judgment. To acknowledge trying a new way of writing would imply dissatisfaction with the old way. Anne simply rejected the premise of my question.

During the third week she expressed, for the first time, uncertainty about her work:

Anne: When I read this paper, I can feel myself into it.
 I don't know if anyone else can feel themselves into
 it. I try to write so they will, but I can't tell.

Interviewer: Is this a new concern?
Anne: It's not a real concern because it gets the feeling to me. I mean, I don't want any of my stuff published. *The only problem is, I've got you and Cindi to read these papers and I want to transmit some of the feeling to you.* But if you don't get it, I'm not going to cry over it. I'm just concerned with how I feel.

Anne's real breakthrough came during the fifth week of the course when she wrote about a traumatic experience—the shooting of her mother by her father. The piece began, like Delmore Schwartz's short story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," with Anne in a movie theatre watching a film of the shooting, of her father blocking her mother's car with his, of Anne and her brother running for help, and of hearing the shots while huddled in the bathroom of a nearby house. The accounts of the shooting and the aftermath had none of the maudlin affectations of her piece on blindness.

Her reaction to the piece, clearly her best of the course, was one of dissatisfaction:

...there's so much I'm leaving out and there's so much more. I mean we still get letters from him [her father] and there's the trial, one thing after another... And there's so many little things you notice, *but when you sit to type them out they don't have the significance that they had at the moment.*

She sensed the disparity between the experience and the depiction of the experience, and that disparity became the motivating force for revision. I asked if she was still satisfied with her earlier papers:

I was satisfied with them. There was no great point to them. There was no emotional breakthrough. They were papers. But this, I would like to work at this.

Her plan for revision was to begin with an account of the trial and to flashback to events that led up the trial. It was an ambitious plan, one that she was not able to follow.

The revision, almost an entirely new paper, included the shooting scene but began with the early trouble in the family and ended with current problems her mother is having. The piece opens with the early conflicts between Anne and her father:

As a little girl, I spent hours crying in the bathroom because of my daddy. He would call me names varying from “princess” to “stupid” or “liar.” He would hit me, bruise me in his father/child wrestling games. He would swear and curse my mother one minute, act contrite the next minute, and on the third, he’d be believing the lies with which he excused his behavior. He’d ignore me one minute, cuddle me the next, and then shove me away. It hurt. It always hurt.

The piece ends with the postscript of “till death do us part” which her father adds to all letters he still sends her mother. The only evaluation of the paper that Anne made was a short note on the title page:

I am still dissatisfied with this because it lacks total honesty. There are some perspectives that I can’t or am unable to express concisely on paper.

At the beginning of the course, Anne seemed to be operating under a misconception that I will call “fusion,” most clearly illustrated in the story of the Russian peasant who was informed that scientists had determined the exact distance to the stars. That did not surprise the peasant. What he could not figure out was how scientists had learned their names. There was a fusion of word and referent. Young children often show this trait when asked, for example, if a horse could be called a “cow.” The child will say, “No, because a horse is a horse.” Unless this unity is broken, revision is impossible. If the word carries the essence of the referent, anyone who asks for a revision is challenging the essence of the experience depicted.* Many of us retain vestiges of this primal view of language—our association of our selves with our own names, for instance. But for Anne the fusion extended far beyond names. Her paper on blindness was not simply one possible fictional account, not one alternative among many: for Anne it was blindness itself. Language fused with referent in the same way names fuse with personal identities. In order to revise, Anne had to accept a more flexible view of language and choose among alternative accounts of the same experience.

*This identification of message with referent was brought home to me during a tutorial with one of my students who had written a glowing profile of his brother. His brother apparently had no faults whatsoever. I suggested, perhaps undiplomatically, that to make the portrait more believable the writer might include something of the foibles or problems his brother had. Much later, on the final evaluation of the course, the student wrote, “Mr. Newkirk is a good teacher, but for some reason he doesn’t like my brother.”

The wedge was driven when she wrote about the shooting. For the first time, she knew more about her subject than she could comfortably get down in a rush. Her memory was too vivid, and in testing her writing against her memory, the writing was found wanting. Paradoxically, the more details she gave, the more she was aware of excluding detail. The better she wrote, the more dissatisfied she became. Where language before had the capability to evoke “wholes,” now it seemed only partial. Perspectives were missing.

The final note is intriguing. On the one hand, it suggests a critical perspective, a willingness to subject her work to judgment that was so lacking in the initial weeks. But there is a loss as well. Now that Anne recognizes that the fit between depiction and experience is not exact, the primitive unity between language and experience has been destroyed. Unless she goes on to develop an appreciation for the art and craft of composing she may never be as satisfied with her writing as she was during the first weeks of the course.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

- The criteria that students use to evaluate their writing are often inappropriate. The teacher must explore in depth the criteria that students use to judge their work. Since misconceptions about objectivity, hierarchy, incompatibility, and economy as criteria may cause the student to exclude pertinent personal information, a major job of the teacher is to help the student retrieve that which has been unwisely excluded, for students will often misunderstand and misapply such injunctions as “Be consistent,” “Be objective,” “Be concise.” The fact that students can name relevant criteria does not mean they understand the contexts in which the criteria operate.
- Revision requires a type of critical reading ability that even students such as Anne and Patti, who are evaluated as good readers, do not possess. If reading (and literature) programs always present students with finished writing, canonized in a textbook, the student will be no more able to understand writing quality than a person who spends all his life on the desert will understand dryness. However, when students are exposed to a *range* of writing in the form of published and student-generated texts, and are asked to make judgments about quality, they learn to make crucial distinctions. I am arguing, in effect, that students need to read more bad (or unfinished) writing.
- The students in these two cases may have learned most when they revised. They confronted problems they might have avoided if a new

paper was due every week. If skill in revising is to be a major goal in a writing course, a revised paper should count as a new paper. Students should be permitted to revise a paper a number of times. Courses which merely allow revision while still requiring assigned weekly papers will probably not provide enough incentive for students to do major revising. Revision will not be seen as an integral part of the process, but as extra credit work. Similarly, courses that limit revision to the reworking of inadequate papers to bring them up to a level of acceptability limit revision to a janitorial function.

- A student's ability to sense and diagnose a problem precedes his or her ability to remedy the problem. Patti, for example, sensed that her writing was dull, but she could not initially pin down the cause and revise her work. Many students who seem to have made little progress in their writing may have made considerable progress in their ability to read critically, but that ability has not yet been made operational when it comes to revision. It follows that the written product itself is only a partial indication of what has been learned in a writing course. As one student put it when asked how she had improved her writing in a writing course, "I don't know if I've improved or not. I have a better idea of what I'm after but I'm still working on how to get it."

- Revision, for beginning writers, seems to proceed most easily in personal writing. Donald Graves has noted this tendency in young children who find it easier to recall their own experiences than the experiences of others.² When writers like Anne write from an abundance of information, that very abundance makes options possible. An emphasis on personal writing may seem antithetical to the traditional objectives of required writing courses and to claims that skills in narration and description do not correlate with performance on expository tasks.³ It may be, however, that the argument about narration-description vs. exposition is being made on the wrong footing. Revision of any writing changes the tempo of learning. In John Dewey's words, revision requires an ability to sustain "an attitude of suspended closure," to test a number of solutions for the same problem, to accept failure and inadequacy as a necessary part of the learning process.

²Donald Graves, "Research Update: What Children Show Us about Revision," *Language Arts*, 56:3 (March, 1979), p. 318.

³Andrea Lunsford, "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," *College English*, 41:1 (September, 1979), p. 45.

For Anne the change was dramatic. After she attempted the piece on the shooting, not only did her writing change, but her behavior in class changed as well. The change was described by her teacher as follows:

... (before this paper) the only time she would say anything was if she *knew* it. She would especially say it so it would be ill-timed like the voice of her early papers... But after she had been in the course a few weeks and especially after she'd written this paper, *she actually began to ask questions*.

Both writing and writer were revised.