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# Modeling How We Think When We Write

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All of us have had the frustrating experience of reading “final drafts” of student papers that are filled with underdeveloped ideas, unclear sentences, unnecessary words, and punctuation errors. If we ask these students how they went about making their papers, in most cases we find that they did not revise and edit. Many students do not leave time to even read their papers before passing them in. This practice is generally interpreted by experienced writers as procrastination. I have found, however, talking with students who visit the Reading/Writing Center, that, in fact, the reason they leave no time for rewriting is not procrastination, but lack of experience. They either do not know how to revise and edit, or they think adult writers do not need to. They are being logical when they leave no time for activities they do not know how to do or think they are grown up enough to skip.

Having discovered this, I regularly show students how experienced adult writers produce publishable writing. Last fall, after writing a *Clock* article, I collected all my drafts. I share these with students and talk about what I was thinking when I made certain changes and decisions. Students invariably are surprised and fascinated. I show them the first scribbles I made, the initial rushed “outline,” and my struggle for a first sentence:

This is the time of year...("No, sounds like Christmas.")  
When I was ten years old...("No, sounds like 'when I was  
a boy...")  
There was one kid...("No, sounds too slangy.")  
Paul Williamson batted over .600 in the little league...  
("No, sounds like a biography.")  
Lately I've been thinking a lot about baseball and  
writing... ("That's it. I'm not sure why, but that's it!")

At this point the students have already learned that my article evolved from scribbled thoughts and that my mode of thinking when writing was trial and error.

Next I show them my rough first draft, which I wrote quickly on the computer. I talk about the revisions I made in pencil: circled blocks of text to be omitted or moved, new sentences and paragraphs written between the lines or in the margins. I show them the draft after that with sentence and word changes written in pencil on the fair copy, and the draft after that with just a few small corrections. ("See," I say, "here in this late draft I finally saw that World Series should be capitalized. I never could have seen that earlier when I had bigger things to think about.")

And finally I show them the printed article cut from the newspaper. They always are quiet as it sinks in that this nice looking printed article did not come from me easily and fully formed.

I am envisioning a college where students know that all of their professors struggle with words when writing. I am imagining a college where the students regularly see that all of their professors consider and reconsider, imagine effects and test them out, weigh options and make decisions every time they write. Granted, everyone writes in his or her own way: some do multiple drafts; others write more slowly and edit as they go; some make all their changes on hard copy where they readily show; still others work on computer screens or in their heads where only

the last of the experiments, reconsiderations, and fine tunings show. But everyone who writes well does a lot of deliberating, and it is this mode of thinking that, most unfortunately for inexperienced writers, does not show in the printed pages students read in books, magazines and newspapers, both in and out of classes.

Students are taught to revere the clear, final thinking of accomplished writers, but they are rarely shown or even asked to imagine the rough experimental thinking that was done by these same writers during the act of writing. They cannot see how the best writers thought while writing, so they do not know how to do it themselves. They imagine most professional writers got it right first try, so that is what they attempt.

Students, I believe, will model the mode of thinking that results in fine writing if their professors regularly share that mode with them. Even if professors share only a page or two of an article, book, or written speech, if they are willing to demonstrate how they thought while working, this will improve the way their students write. For many students, these demonstrations by their professors will be an encouraging revelation.

“You mean your writing doesn’t just come out perfect?”