Revising Revision: How My Students Transformed Writers' Workshop

by

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The revision of writing is bittersweet, pleasure coupled with pain. Eric, my fourth-grade student in a 3/4-grade combination class at Joaquin Miller Elementary School in Oakland, California described this condition well when he wrote the following:

When the teacher said we had to do a revision to publish a story I said 'Aw man' moaning in my head, but after my revision I said it sounds better and then I did more revisions to make the story better.

For another student, Emilene, however, the process was pure agony:

I don't like revision one bit even though it helps. I don't like it because it takes too long and I can never think of a better story. I actually hate to revise.

Yet despite feelings such as Emilene's, revision is a requirement in my class if a child wants to publish a piece of writing. Over time, many students pick up on what needs to be done between first and second draft writing:

I think that's the difference between my first and second drafts was that in the middle of the story I put more details in like what type of dog I had and what color. Jojo is a blondish brown collie and has sad brown eyes. You know more what he looks like. Lena

Whenever I rite something during Writers' Workshop, I always take my writing home, and I read it

over and over to myself. I even read it again to my mom, my grandma, and my dog. In my story My Grandma is the Next Michael Jordan I noticed that I used the words 'then' and 'said' too much so I took out the 'thens' and rote something esle besides 'said' like 'screamed', 'announced', and 'whistpered'.

Mareesha

In my story The House of the Dreaded Unknown I put an arcade in the first draft because I liked that one espicialy. In the second draft I put chess in there instead because at the time I just beat my dad in chess. I loved that the whole ending depended on the guy winning the chess game, Otherwise he was doamed. I feel sort of weird about revision because you can think about one thing and do another.

Sean

But getting students to this point has not been easy. Revision is a difficult, but inevitably a necessary part of the writing process. A writer refining a piece of writing to uncover its essence is like a jeweler buffing a diamond to expose the luster within. Yet many students do not see it that way. They approach their work with such feelings of ownership, so sure that it is perfect the first time around, that they resist making any changes. Even after participating in countless minilessons on revision, watching others model revision, and conferencing with other students and me about an early draft of a piece, some students still recopy the original story over again, word for word.

For the teacher too, because of some students' resistance to change, revision is a difficult skill to teach. Even after over thirty years of teaching, on days when revision is the focus, I often need to go home after school and take a nap before dinner, sometimes never waking up until the next day. Nonetheless the results that spring from successful revision are worth the struggle. Listen to Mellisa's ebullience:

I feel great that I revised it because now I have a great story. I feel like a real published author. I feel like Melissa A. Rowen, author from the outside world!

But we are hearing from Melissa at the end of the process. Along the way many students resist revision, and when they are willing to revise, they have no idea where to start. Because I find so much value in revision, I am continually working to make the process easier and clearer. Thus, when I joined a teacher research group at UC Berkeley, I was naturally drawn to the question: What revision strategies help students improve their writing during writers' workshop? In this article, I want to highlight those strategies that proved successful as I collected data for two years, working first with my fourth-grade class and most recently, with a 3/4-grade combination class.

Defining Revision

In my research, revision has a two-pronged definition. The most common definition of revision is improving the first draft of writing and producing a final draft by subtracting, adding, or replacing words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs. Using this definition, however, the amount and nature of the revision will vary from student to student according to the ability and/or the interest of the writer. My third graders and even fourth graders with poor motor coordination make revisions directly on a first draft; if I were to ask these students to rewrite each paper, they would be overwhelmed by the task, and they would might even learn to dread writing. Most of my fourth graders, however, can write two drafts. But in any classroom, there are exceptions. One overachiever, a bright third grader and a second language learner named Alejandra, ended up with five drafts of her story, "The Dracula Puppy Who Loved Candy Instead of Blood," each draft quite different from the previous one. Passing her desk during Writers' Workshop, I rarely saw her face, only the top of her head, as she labored, pencil in hand, writing one page after another. As we conferenced, she noted parts she loved

in different drafts, and later on, cut and pasted them onto her final draft.

The second definition of revision involves a larger vision: the improvement of writing from one final draft to another, a growth over time. That's the kind of revision I was hoping to trigger as I conferenced with Sandee, a second-language student. I saw that her story, "My Trip to LA," was little more than list of events which had taken place over two weeks, all described on one page. I shared all the parts of her story I had enjoyed: the way she showed her excitement by reporting her inability to sleep the night before the trip, the certain types of cars her family had counted in order to kill the boredom of travel. As we talked about her goals for her writing in the future, she told me that she needed to be more careful about her capitals, using them at the beginning of sentences and with names.

I, however, was interested in more than cosmetic changes. I told her I wanted her to have more focus in any story she wrote. She gave me her "worried-Sandee look." I could tell she was puzzled, so I made rough sketches representing events of her trip to LA, drawing chuckles from her — she never knew how poorly I drew. Making a small frame out of another piece of paper, I placed it down on one of the drawings, a sketch attempting to show Sandy as she visited her grandmother. Focus, I told her, means I want her to only tell me all the details about this memorable meeting with her grandmother and not all the other things she did on this trip. "Oh, I get it," she smiled, "like just one cartoon, not a whole bunch." There were several pieces in between before she finally wrote a masterpiece focused on a snake her family found in the backyard and the way they finally got rid of this dreadful creature, reporting in the process her Mien family's superstitions about snakes. She received an enthusiastic ovation as she shared this story in author's chair. I trace triumph on this occasion back to our discussion of how "My Trip to LA" could be revised.

Revision in the Context of Writers' Workshop

I have adapted the work of Donald Graves and Nancie Atwell to create my own version of Writers' Workshop. The mini-lesson is a featured part of this process. I give these lessons at the very beginning of the writing hour. They are lessons dealing with all aspects of writing. I might read aloud from a picture book to generate ideas for talk about "places in the room to go when you want to read your writing to someone," or present a lesson on how to use quotation marks when writing dialogue. I make certain that these lessons are no more than ten minutes long. I know its time to stop when I get clear clues that students are itching to write: they are toying with their pencils, rustling papers, wiggling in their chairs. Many students leap to their writing once the lesson is over.



Lessons on revision are an important part

of my mini-lesson plan. In these lessons I often effectively use transparencies or copies of first and second draft writing of former students. Students note the writer's strengths and needs for improvement in the first draft, and the next day, observe what the author did to revise in the second. They can see strategies used successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully. At times, they see that the writer's first draft is better than the second. Mareesha shares her thoughts on minilessons in an interview:

I personally like mini-lessons because it is interesting to know how someone else might have written. Then I think to myself, 'Wow, I could use that idea in my own writing!' It really gets my mind going and also my thinking and adds to my writing. I might even trash a sentence or two and replace it with something else.

At the beginning of the school year, one of the more successful mini-lessons was on leads with examples of different ways an author might start the same story. I asked the students to choose a recent piece of writing and to compose another beginning. Jake made this revision:

First draft: About two years ago we bought a house in Northstar at tahoe. We go up there every chance we get. It's a big house. It's got a loft on top

in case you don't know what a loft is its something I can't explain.

Second draft: Two years ago my mom brought up about getting another house. "But where?" we all said. Then my dad said, "I know a place. Where? we all exclaimed. At Lake Tahoe. It's a beautiful place. 0000HHH, yaaaah we said. And we jumped around, hugging each other. So we went and looked at lots of houses.

Interviewing Jake about the differences between these two leads, he said: "After your mini-lesson, I tried writing the second beginning. I like the second one because it's more interesting. It shows our excitement over getting a house at Tahoe. And we were really excited, you know. Hey yeah, it has more showing than the first one. The first one is just a boring, like booo-ring. I don't know if anyone would read my story if they read the first one."

Mini-lessons that involve my students are certainly my most successful. Often I ask students to take out a recent piece of work and make revisions right on their paper: between the lines, in the margins. I require my students to skip lines when they write during writers' workshop to facilitate these kinds of changes. I might even request two changes. Because their writing is freshly done, they have a vested interest in a mini-lesson as they practice the new skill, revising on the spot. I collected the following sentences after several lessons on sentence expansion, the italicized verb phrases added during the lessons:

"He jumps on my mom's lap, meowing for her to pet him."

Jesus

"Then he left, debating if he would like the job." Eugenia

"We screamed and screamed and screamed, trying to get away." Lucy

The two cats lay in front of the fireplace, *licking their paws.*" Jake

Mini-lessons Revised

With results such as these, I thought everything was going great until two months into school when I asked my students to rank which writer's workshop activities they found most helpful. Mini-lessons received the lowest score. I was shocked — no, devastated. How could that be? I spent so much time and thought preparing for these lessons! I have a couple of students who are especially reflective about writing, so as I had lunch with them, I showed them the survey and asked them why they thought mini-lessons rated so poorly. Here are portions of that conversation:

J: Not to hurt your feelings, Mrs. M., but we do like your mini-lessons, but when I'm writing a story, I want to get to my story. I am only thinking about what I am going to write. Umm. Sorry, but sometimes I don't hear you. (Everyone laughs).

Me: Really, that's okay; don't apologize.

C: Yeah, no offense, but I kinda get ideas to make my story more exciting outside of school. Like I might see a TV program and think what a great ending and kinda of go from there.

J: Umm. He's right. You don't stop thinking of writing when school stops because you're always thinking of how you can make it better so that the kids in class would love it.

Me: So are you both saying that once you become a writer, you are even thinking about writing outside of school. You become observant about what you see, hear, ah, read?

C: Like me, like I really am serious about my writing. If I write I want something really great. I don't think everyone in our class is serious, if you know what I mean. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to put the other kids down. Ah, most of us like writing a lot.

Me: No, no, I don't see your comment as putdowns. You're just being honest. That's why I am interviewing you two.

J: Yeah, I want to be a writer someday. But when I was writing about my younger brother being a brat, umm, I kinda looked at him at home to see how I could improve how I wrote about him being stupid about looking at Power Rangers and karate stuff on TV and stuff. Mrs. M., you can't give a mini-lesson on that. (Laughs.)

I learned a great deal from this fascinating conversation. Becoming a real writer, a child looks not only to the classroom, but to the richness of the world. After that mini-lessons became less frequent. I spent more time conferencing with individual students and instructing small groups. But of course, I did not give up altogether. Before one mini-lesson focusing on a different kinds of genre, I blurted out something about how tired I was of giving these lessons. Wouldn't it be wonderful, I said, if one of the students gave a lesson instead! Spontaneously, Ludvig, a student from Sweden whose second language is English, raised his hand and said, "I'll give one now, Mrs. M." He raced to the front of the class and said:

Today I am going to talk about the word 'said.' When your father is mad at you, you don't use the word 'said' when you write about what he said. You use words like,' yelled' or 'screamed.' They go better with him being mad. And when you tell someone, 'Ilove you', you don'tsay, 'Isaid.' (Class giggles). Umm, you use 'whispered' or 'moaned.' (Class howls.) Are there any questions? Now I want you to look at your writing that you did and change one 'said' to a more exciting word.

Ludvig bowed as he received a standing ovation.

What a precious moment Ludvig gave us. The children combed their papers and struck out the many "saids," replacing them with powerful verbs. We had a wonderful time as students shared their changes. True, I had given this lesson on "said" before, but this was a voice other than mine, it was a fresh challenge from a peer.

Right after this lesson, Kaneesha ran up to me and whispered, showing me her paper and pointing to a sentence, "Mrs. M., I use the word 'said,' but I use it like this: "I am so tired," he said with his head hanging down.' Sometimes, isn't it okay to use it like this?"

"Of course! You're absolutely right!" Excited, I asked, "Do you want to give the next mini-lesson? Let's meet and talk about your lesson!" And so the idea of student mini-lessons caught on. Students signed up for times to be coached and to present to the class, some of the students even in pairs. The list of student topics looked like the following:

Jamal: "How to Write a Longer Story"

Dana: "Getting Ideas Right from the Classroom for Stories"

Matt: "Handwriting"

Katelyn: "Draw First, Then Write"

Jason and Evan: "Writing a Story with Some

one"

Emma: "How I Check on My Spelling"

I realized that the format of my mini-lessons became a model around which the students framed theirs, even down to those revisions on the spot. But most importantly, I noticed how attentive the students in the audience were to the mini-lessons given by their peers, the variety of voices enabling them to look at their work anew. Once reluctant to revise at my direction, students were now being pushed by their peers to make changes.

The Teacher-Student Conference

One spur to revision that has proven successful year after year is the conference my student teacher and I have with individual students, each of us averaging three conferences per day. We focus on student work in process or on final drafts. I don't know who to credit for this form below because it wasn't one that I created, but nonetheless, I have found it invaluable in keeping a record of our conferences.

Teacher's Conference Record for			
Title/Date	Skills Used Correctly	Skills Taught	

I have this form stapled to the right side of a writing folder with current work as a reminder of the goals a student has set for his or her writing. During these conferences, especially by the end of the first semester, we want to see the writer articulate the strengths and weaknesses of each piece. By becoming more reflective about the craft, a writer begins to internalize those skills that will allow revision throughout the writing process.

On the next page I show the form I used with Michael. We see that after Michael's first publication, "The Bloody Eve," he began to use dialogue with success and became quite adept at writing with Show Not Tell (descriptive writing). In the second conference, Michael could point out the strengths of his writing although I had to help him with areas that needed attention. Although Michael is a good writer, he is easily distracted, becoming more social with time. And thus, I needed to have more than one conference with him on The Kidnapper to keep him on track toward a final draft. When we directed him to use the computer, he was able to finally revise and publish this piece. It should be noted, however, that the form does not show the many times parent volunteers and I checked in with him, keeping him accountable for his time and work— what we call "putting on the pressure."

Author's Chair

Author's chair gives students a chance to read completed first and second drafts to the class. The writer receives positive comments and may solicit questions. Some students are eager to read in author's chair; others must be strongly encouraged if not exactly bribed. By circulating around listening to writing read aloud and also by investigating writing folders after school, I find many examples of superb writing that need to be shared with the whole class. I want these presented as models, but I also, of course, want to hear from students who are struggling. The purpose of author's chair is both to show off accomplishment and to get help with revision. When students are not getting useful and appropriate comments from their response groups, author's chair provides a chance for a second opinion.

This use of author's chair evolved from a conversation I had when Rene one day approached me, livid that he wasn't receiving helpful response on his writing from his peers. "How could I revise when I get dumb responses like these here?" he scowled, tossing the response sheets my way. The suggestions for improving his piece were: "Rene, you need to spell better." "You need to have more Show Not Tell." "Tell what was your mother's boyfriend's name." I told him that I agreed one hundred percent that these comments were not helpful; they were either unspecific and unconnected to the content of the piece or too specific. To appease and support Rene, I decided, right then, to put him in author's chair. Rene then shared this writing:

First Draft:

one weekend I was learning how the bikeride. My mom's boyfriend was tecting me how to ride my Bike But I know how to ride my bike safter a wihl and I feel of my Bike and I hert my knie. It is fun to ride. I like ride my Bike at jaquin milar park and at my gradma's house and at Mrarit Collige and to Skyline Make and one more place is roberts park I like to ride my Bike at Yosenite to. I can go Blasing than a speeding boolit on my Bike at Yoseite.

His classmates proceeded to tell what they liked about the story, what he did well. Lastly, they asked questions and suggested improvements he could make, all of which I copied down:

Tell what her boyfriend's name is. When did you fall? You need Show Not Tell. How badly did it hurt when you fell? What did they say when they're teaching you to ride the bike? How old were you? What does your bike look like? How did you feel when you're riding your bike? How many days did it take to learn?

I had Rene think overnight about what he wanted to do with all this feedback. With the permission of Rene and his responders, I then showed an overhead transparency of this list of responses with Rene again on author's chair. I reminded everyone that as the author, it was totally Rene's decision as to which questions and suggestions he wanted to address in his second draft. Realizing he had such power, he now seemed to sit taller, basking in the attention. He then responded to the responders: "I don't think it is important what my bike looks like although it was blue. Umm, I don't remember exactly what my mom and her boyfriend said or when this all happened. I will try to do the show-not-tell; that isn't hard. I have to think about the rest." Equipped with the contributions of his peers, Rene then wrote:

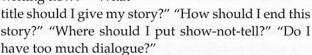
I'm Learning How to Ride My Bike
One weekend I was learning how to ride my bike. My
mom's boyfriend steve was teaching me how to ride
my bike. But I know how to ride my bike a wihl. But I
fell off of my bike and hret my knie reely bad. My niey
hite so bad I felt like crying. My bike is blue. It is fun
to ride. I like riding my bike at Joaquin Miller Park and
at my gradmas house and at marit college and at
rabers park and yseite. I can go faster than a speeding

Figure 1: Conference Record for Michael

Title and Date	Skills Used Correctly	Skills Taught (1-2)
The Bloody Eye 10/1/96	 Character's thoughts "How could he miss dinner?" Tight story — good beginning, middle, and end 	1. How did you feel? Show-not-tell Dialogue
Adven. of Mohawk Man & Super Cat 11/6/96	1. Good dialogue 2. SNT — "so strong that" "stung so hard that"	 Capitalize names Other words besides "then"
The Kidnapper 1/15/97	 Strong verbs — "threw," "plunged" Other words besides "then" SNT — "So scared" "screamed so loud" 	 Capitalize names New lead besides "Hi! My name is"
The Kidnapper 1/23/97	Verbs Sense of humor shows through Some names capitalized New lead	 Periods at end of sentences More details in one scene

boolit on my bike. When I ride my bike I feel like I can ride my I bike all my life.

From that day on, the author's chair took on a new complexion as more and more students, like Rene, requested input from the whole class. Before they took the chair for this purpose, however, I required that they receive at least two peer responses. Seated there, they would ask specific questions about a work in progress: "What should I do with my writing now?" "What



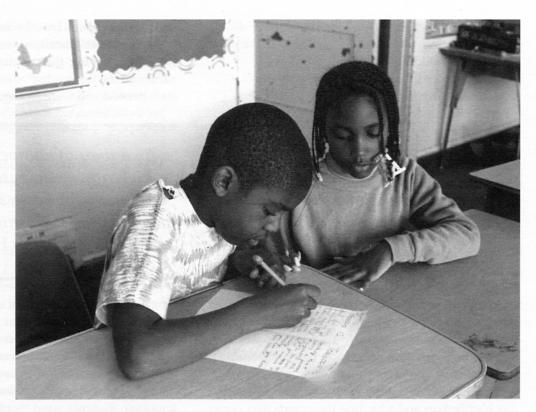
In a reflective piece, Narami, a fourth grader, expressed well the value of bringing an unfinished work to the author's chair:

It helped to be on author's chair because other people have more ideas than one person. The class had better ideas.

Thus, author's chair eventually became a richer pool from which students could draw ideas for change in their writing.

But my encounter with Rene lay bare another revision-related writers' workshop problem. Rene was getting "dumb responses" from some other students. This should not come as a surprise to most experienced teachers. We have noticed that the quality of response varies greatly from one student to another. How then are we to prevent the student who depends on response from others from feeling short changed?

I came on a partial answer to this question when I read an article by Donald Graves in *Instructor Magazine* entitled "Experts in Writing." Graves suggests that



there are students who have expertise in different aspects of writing in any classroom community. I was interested in this notion, as I thought it might help with the problem of inexpert response that plagued many students working on a revision. If each student had an expertise, then others could go to that person for assistance in a specific skill.

We began by generating a list of such proficiencies, using only about half:

show-not-tell using complete sentences words besides "said" similes metaphors using quotes in dialogue other words besides 'then' using quotation marks feelings of a character letter writing form vivid verbs possessives setting a scene dialogue spelling transition words sensory details

poetry
capitalization
character building
leads
paragraphing
great endings
catchy titles
humor

One day I announced that I would be interviewing students to see if they qualified to be experts. I focused on only two proficiencies that morning. They were to sign up for conferences throughout the week and bring writing samples that proved they knew a particular skill. A buzz spread around the classroom, even a "Yes!" here and there, giving me clues that they were excited about this opportunity to prove their worth; quickly students began pouring over their work, making corrections and additions. Revision was happening before my very eyes!

Sections like "show-not-tell" and "words besides 'said'" quickly filled up, and with time, the experts then began interviewing their peers, freeing me to work with students in other areas. The experts were much more stringent about qualifying their peers than I would ever have been. When one interviewee was reduced to tears, we had to have an emergency meeting of experts to talk about being supportive while still testing. They learned a new word that day: "tact!"

What then were the results of such a venture? The more competitive and competent students tried to qualify for as many areas as possible so they also became risk-takers in their writing, plunging into areas like "thoughts and feelings of the character," "setting," and "character building," around which they previously tiptoed. Ironically, proofreading and revision became natural byproducts as students read and reread and rewrote portions of their papers to perform well.

Becoming an expert was also a booster for those quieter students like Leona and Jesse who were superb spellers. They were very much in demand when students needed to edit their papers for publishing. They helped each student generate a list of words that students misspelled often.

We depended less on parent volunteers for editing purposes as the students went to each other for help. Talk about building a classroom community! To keep the experts from backsliding and falling into bad habits, I periodically asked for evidence that they were maintaining their skills. I put stars by their names on the "expert list" when they passed — more stars proved you were "too-good-to-be-true."

As a way of showcasing writing which other students might admire and use as models in revision, we put together a flashy bulletin board titled "The Writing Hall of Fame"...

I met with the more reluctant students, offering them another pair of eyes with which to comb their papers to see areas where they were strong. Sean, almost afraid of his own shadow, was thrilled to see that he always got possessives correct, a skill mastered by very few students. Sandee, like several of my second-language students, used "said" and other mundane verbs too often. With instruction from her best friend Katy, she began using the thesaurus and experimenting with word choices. Two weeks before the end of school, she became an expert in the category of "words besides said."

Because students were motivated to qualify as experts, they were more attentive when I gave my minilessons. They now had ears to hear and the courage to try new strategies in writing. I had to chuckle when I saw Melissa even taking notes as I spoke.

There was, however, a down side to this generally successful technique. By definition the term "expert" is exclusive. Benjamin tried again and again to qualify for "catchy titles" but he just did not seem to have the catchy title gene, producing titles like "My Cute Dog" and "My Trip to San Diego." We looked at book titles and tables of contents to see if he could understand the gist of interesting titles. We brainstormed words he could add to "My Dog" to make it more exciting. Sadly, he didn't seem to understand. I tried to find other areas of expertise without much success. I still feel badly whenever I greet him in halls this year.

Writing Hall of Fame

As a way of showcasing writing which other students might admire and use as models for revision, we put together a flashy bulletin board titled "The Writing Hall of Fame" which was made up of snippets from such writing:

From Angela's "Home Alone": He ran down the stairs and hopped on the couch and curled into a ball because he was so scared."

Dennis from "The Abduction": It was really weird. There were different lights from green to red to purple. It looked like Christmas. All they needed was a tree.

Erica from "The Haunted House": The porch steps creaked when I stepped on them. The door screeched when I pushed it. I felt something brushing the side of my head.

Jesus from "Meow, Meow": What's weird about them (my cats) is Tippy meows like a lion and purrs like the pitter patter of a mouse's run. Mittens meows like a mouse and purrs like a volcano ready to erupt."

Somehow, like some teacher-generated plans, the idea was easier to conceive than to carry out. Soon the board looked pathetically sparse. Before killing this project, I decided to ask three students, choosing those who were competent writers and already in the Hall of Fame, to form a committee responsible for finding treasured morsels of student writing for our Hall of Fame, whether they heard them during author's chair, while responding to writing or merely through the grapevine. Ashley, one of the committee members, announced that they would be interviewing interested applicants for the Hall of Fame. Within weeks, we started to see students taking care to write with specificity in their pieces, even rewriting, to qualify as a Hall-of-Famer.

Committee members like Jake would occasionally ask my advice:

J: Mrs. M., do you think that Eric's paragraph should qualify for the Hall of Fame?

M: What did he write?

J: He wrote, 'The boy ran as fast as a cheetah across the school yard.' The rest of us on the committee feel that it is a sentence a lot of people write. It is kinda not a new idea.

M: Well, I will go along with the committee's opinion, Jake.

J: Yeah, we got a lot of those kinds of sentences lately: We just tell them go back and change that sentence. 'Try again,' we tell them.

M: Wow. You people are tough!

Soon after this conversation, I noticed Eric revising his cheetah sentence to give it originality or, as the kids say, "make it fresh."

After turning it over to the children, the Writing Hall of Fame generated renewed interest. Some children even gave up their recess to meet with the committee. Before each writing period, one committee member announced the new Hall-of-Famer, who then read his/her qualifying sentence or paragraph. A certificate designed by a child in our class was then awarded to the new member, followed by enthusiastic applause.

Conclusion

I have presented here some specific revision-related strategies that have evolved as I have done my research. It is my hope that teachers will be able to adapt some of these to serve their own classrooms and students. But I believe I learned more from my research than some specific classroom techniques. Reviewing what I have done over the past two years, I am struck by the fact that every time I got in a jam, it was the students who helped me out of it. I learned from them and with their help found better ways to do mini-lessons, author's chair, the Hall of Fame board and more.

As I increasingly involved my students in the teaching of writing, asking them to help me find answers to sticky pedagogical problems, they responded with enthusiasm, generosity, and wisdom. In essence, they taught me as much as I did them — teaching turned full circle.

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