

A Dramatic reVISION

Reviving Revision through Storytelling and Poetry

CARON LEVIS

“IF YOU COULD CUT some of the groaning out of revision, that would be great.”

The sixth-grade teacher who says this rolls her eyes and the rest of the teachers nod in agreement.

“Oh, yes, I can’t get them to work on things more than once.”

“They always think they’re just done!”

“It’s like pulling teeth...”

Lessons that teach and invigorate student interest in revision have become one of the most common requests I’ve gotten from teachers during our creative writing residencies. Whether its fourth graders in Greenwich, Connecticut or sixth grade teachers in Brownsville, Brooklyn, when it comes time to revise, the groans sound the same: loud. And with the emphasis on revision in the new Common Core standards, teachers will need to get students picking up pencils to revise a lot more in the coming school year.

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At first, I found the idea of teaching revision daunting. Then one day, as I went through multitudinous drafts of a short-story I was working on, I realized, that revision was probably the only thing I was truly qualified to teach. For me, and most writers I know, writing IS revision—or rather, reVISION, and it’s become one of my favorite subjects to explore. The first thing I did to prepare for teaching revision was to sit down and consider my definition of the word.

Revising Our Words: Rethinking the Way We Talk about Revision

Often times, teachers tend to equate revision with correction, and the latter I believe is one of the major groan-inducing culprits. The word “correction” implies firstly, that you’ve messed up, made mistakes, did something wrong. This can subtly and immediately induce sensations of disappointment or shame in the student, deflating their confidence and provoking their defense mechanisms. Even the commonly used directive, “Go back over your work,” I suspect can hinder enthusiasm as the idea of going-*back* suggests a regression rather than a movement forward; the word “over” is associated with “do-over,” and “again”, suggesting we are asking students to repeat a task they’ve already done and perhaps struggled through. After observing many teachers in varied settings for over a decade, I’m

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convinced that paying attention to the way we frame and phrase tasks for students is incredibly important, and that one small word change can sometimes lead to large shifts in attitude. I suggest that instead of “go back over your work,” each teacher revise the phrase to his/her own way of signaling a forward movement and a fresh start. Sometimes I say things like, “Read your piece with fresh eyes; continue creating by making new choices.” Instead of “correcting” I offer “polishing” and I differentiate that from revision which is about making creative choices, expressing yourself, and having control over how you present yourself to the world. I don’t, however, preach much of that to the students, at least not at first. First, I just tell them to push back their chairs, stand up, find a partner, and tell me their life story in sixty-seconds.

Warming Up for reVISION: An Interactive Introduction

Warning: This activity will get noisy. It will, however, be over in about four minutes...

Step 1: Have the students pair up and choose A & B. Assure them they will BOTH be doing the SAME thing; pairing should be as comfortable as possible, this isn’t an exercise where you want to force enemies together or a super shy student to try someone new. Cut out any moaning and groaning, by assuring them they will be paired for a grand total of about four whole minutes.

Step 2: Ask them to stand. This is to create a sense of play, generate excitement, and coax energy— even if they groan, most students actually enjoy the chance to move and the signal that something ‘different’ is coming.

Step 3: Announce that Student A has sixty sec-

onds to tell B their life story. The only rule is that he/she MUST speak for the entire 60 seconds. To set this up, ask the class to generate a list of topics

on the board for speakers to turn to if they get stuck such as information about my family, places I’ve been, dreams I’ve had, meals I’ve eaten, feelings I’ve had, languages I speak, mistakes I’ve made, subjects I’ve studied, scary memories, exciting memories, things I’m proud of, etc.

Announce that student B must be The Greatest Listener Ever. Ask for ideas about what makes a Great Listener. Instruct the listener to *notice* when they want to interrupt with a “YEAH me too!” or a “Huh?” or “No way!” but NOT to act on it. Give the listener a simple and specific task, such as telling them that *after* A is done speaking they will need to tell A one thing such as something they’d like to know more about, or one thing they found funny, interesting, striking, or confusing.

Using a stopwatch, or the second hand on the clock, give a dramatic countdown to “Go!” Give them a thirty-second, and ten-second warning. (Don’t worry that most won’t hear you.) Use a flick of the light to signal stop. Instruct everybody to take a breath in, and exhale out. Give the Listeners ten seconds to make their observation, instructing A not to respond but to simply take it in.

Step 4: Repeat step 3, with B now telling their life story to A in sixty seconds.

Step 5: Now, repeat steps 3 and 4, changing the time to thirty seconds. Side-coach lightly with questions such as, “Will you start the same or differently this time? Did you partner’s question give you any new ideas?”

Options: You may do another round at fifteen seconds or one at ninety seconds; or alter the time frame as you feel is appropriate for your students.

Step 6: Discuss!

Ask students to reflect on the experience by asking them which time frame was hardest? Easiest? Why? Validate the varied answers by pointing out that every writer is unique, and might even experience things differently on different days. One day it might be hard to get started, another day it might be impossible to stop! Ask them to relate the different time lengths to different forms of writing, what are short forms? Long? (Novels, poems, flash fiction, novellas, articles, commercials, greeting cards, etc.)

Now ask, what stayed the same and what changed between versions? Why did you keep or change certain things? Did you change the order? The content? How? Let the conversation evolve and keep a list of the observations on the board, distilling their comments to things that are useful language for revision. I usually put up a combination of their direct speech, as well as reinterpret some of them to introduce some revision vocabulary. Your list might include: Kept what was true. Kept what was honest. Put things I cared about first. Cut out boring stuff. Added something I forgot to say. Begin with a different part. Got to the end. Clarified, emphasized, re-ordered...

After you have a list, write on top of it “reVISION” Ask why the VISION is capitalized. Discuss how reVISION is about thinking big and being creative. Besides writing, when else is it important to be able to reVISION something?

Writing Activity: Six-Word Memoirs to reVISION Your Life Story!

Step 1: Announce that now the students will one last time write their life story... using ONLY six words. Model your own, find some at *Smith Magazinr* (www.smithmag.net), or use the student examples here. Ask students what each author wanted you to know about them. For example when I read the student example “Running red lights, stopping at green,” other stu-

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dents have observed, “He wants us to know that he’s a rule breaker.” “He takes risks.” “He’s unpredictable.” “He’s dangerous!”

Step 2: Go! Invite and encourage them to try as many as they can with the ultimate challenge being to create a poem using six 6-Word Memoirs. They’ll ask if they can use five or seven words; I let them decide for themselves if articles count and encourage them to use punctuation to help shorten. (It’s a great way to teach about commas and semicolons.)

Here are some examples from students I’ve taught (you can call them Six-Word Mottos or Six-Word Bios, and use them for student publications):

- “Animals and drawing are my life.”
- “I’m kind, and smart at baking.”
- “Curious, unique, artistic, talkative, beautiful, Russian.”
- “I wasn’t made for your happiness.”
- “Took the pain and used it.”
- “Always being myself, no matter what.”
- “Born to dance and live life”
- “A path without an accurate map.”
- “I am a believer, I believe.”
- “I tell the truth and lies.”
- “Young parents’ sacrifice turned out alright.”
- “I am snow and sun bunched into one.”

Writing Activity: reVISION the World Poems

You can use this activity in addition to or instead of the above, or on a separate day. If on a separate day, a great introduction is to show revision examples of your own work or that of another writer. Using a familiar professional writer if possible allows them to

see the real world application. One great resource can be found in Ellen Raskin's *Westing Game* manuscript, drafts of which can be found at www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/authors/raskin/intro.html.

Step 1: If not already on the board from the previous activity, ask student to recall, brainstorm, and/or identify from model texts as many revision tactics and vocabulary as possible. Have them record these in their own notes.

Step 2: Choosing a subject, lead the group in creating a “_____ reVISION model poem. Use the reVISION language to express what they’d like to change about the topic. For example:

School reVISION

IF I could revise school
I would cut out all the bullying
expand recess and art
clarify my homework
substitute the cafeteria with a five-star restaurant
give it a ten o'clock beginning
Find an ending that you'll never forget...

Step 3: Have students brainstorm “juicy” poem subjects. (Just as when making orange juice you want to choose an orange that has enough juice to fill a whole glass, when writing, you want to choose a subject with enough juice to fill an entire poem or story.) Now tell them to write their own “_____reVISION” poems.

Step 4: Share.

Here are some of the revision poems my students wrote:

World reVISION

AYANNA L., 6TH GRADE, BROOKLYN
Cut out all the haters
Rearrange some personalities
Bold the love
Underline the importance
Punctuate the fights!

Lengthen the good timesssss
Backspace the school
Add parties
Strengthen the power.

Relationship reVISION

CHYNA M. 6TH GRADE, BROOKLYN

If I could revise my relationships with people...
I would CLARIFY who my real friends are,
I would CUT OUT the people who bring me down,
I would ADD more free spirited people in my life,
I would REARRANGE the choices I make,
I would BOLD FACE the problems I'm gonna have
to go through,
and lastly, I would EMPHASIZE that I'm just me!

Re-Writing Activity: reVISION Your Own Work

Once you have your students immersed in the language and power of reVISION send them to look at their own work (whether it's poetry, fiction, or essay) with fresh eyes and sharp tools.

Step 1: If possible, type up first drafts. This is not always an easy task, but I've found it greatly enables students to really see their work: unfinished or thin work is more obvious, awkward sentences and misspellings stand out, and it's easier to see revision marks against the type. It also takes away the groan-inducing idea of rewriting.

Step 2: Using a graphic organizer, notebook, or loose-leaf, have students identify:

- a) Something powerful about this piece is _____.
- b) When people read my piece I want them to
(*feel what?, think about what?, want to do what?*)
_____.

Then have them list 3-5 reVISION tactics they will focus on, for example: “re-ordering,” “find a strong beginning,” “add details,” etc.

Step 3: Put on some calm music and let them work. When they have truly finished their reVISIONS,

polishing (checking spelling, punctuation, and grammar) should make them feel like they're simply brushing their hair and checking there's nothing caught in their teeth before standing up to show themselves off to the world.

Note: Add, cut, rearrange, and reVISION this lesson plan as needed, because the work is always in progress. 🐼

