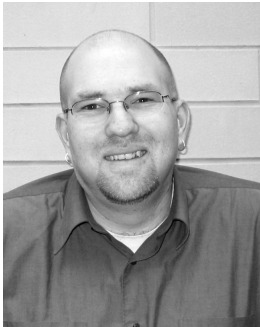


How can I use feedback through the writing process to improve my students' writing?

Jeff Senior

Biography



Jeff Senior has just completed his third year teaching. He currently teaches Grade 8 at Grandview Public School in Brantford, Ontario. Jeff has a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Philosophy and Religion & Culture from Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo. He completed a Master of Science Degree in Education at D'Youville College, Buffalo, New York. This is his first Action Research project.

Abstract

As education grows and develops, there is an increasing emphasis on providing authentic and meaningful feedback to students about their work. This project explores the successes, and frustrations, of a relatively new teacher as he attempts to motivate Grade 8 students in a core school to self-edit. Specific attention is drawn to the development of strategies used to guide students through the editing portion of the writing process. This report describes the feelings, growth, and set-backs that the teacher and class faced as they worked toward writing to their full potential.

Background

“The learning curve in your first years of teaching is a vertical line.” These words were spoken to me by Charles Irvine in my first teaching year at Seneca Unity Public School. I did not fully understand the significance of such a statement at the time, but now, being in my third year of teaching, I realise the truth of this observation. When I agreed to complete this research project I had very little knowledge of the action research process. I recall being asked in an early meeting about my question, that is, what exactly was I going to examine in my teaching practice? Good question. All I knew was that I needed to improve my English programme.

In my first year teaching I was responsible for the subjects of Math, Science, History, Geography and Art. I did not teach English. When I moved to Grandview in my second year, now a full-time teacher, I was responsible for all curriculum areas. English, was the area in which I was most overwhelmed. In planning for my first full year, I found myself without an English textbook. Although I believe that authentic education will not come from a textbook alone, it is terrific crutch for a beginning teacher. So, I examined the Grade 8 curriculum and found little help there. I found expectations such as, “read a variety of fiction and non-fiction materials . . . for different purposes,” and, “produce pieces of writing using a variety of specific forms . . .” to be vague and generally unhelpful. Using the curriculum, and my gut, as a guide, I did my best.

In the end, as I reflected upon that first year of full-time teaching, I realised that the best word to describe my English programme was variety. Of course, variety is not a bad thing; it even suggests success, but I didn't feel greatly successful. Upon more reflection, I began to realise that a better word to describe my programme was “hodge-podge.” As I cleaned up for the end of the year, I took note of the papers I was tossing into the recycling bin: a variety of projects, assignments, and lessons I had started with my class, but not finished. Ideas, works in progress, great plans, but often without follow through. This was when I realised that I needed to improve my overall English programme. Enter in Action Research.

Finding a Question

When I began this process, I was unsure of my focus. Should I examine reading or writing? Seeing a need for improvement in my overall English programme, I really had difficulty making a decision. I flip-flopped for a couple of weeks, and finally decided to focus on writing. But, what was it I wanted to examine about my teaching of writing? What exactly did I feel needed improvement? I was feeling more secure about the planning of my English programme. Using the Nelson Language and Grammar 8 book as a guide, I had an overall plan for the writing assignments we would complete for the year. I was spending a lot of time preparing for lessons, using, what I felt was, a valid process.

When we set out to write a myth to explain a chosen phenomena, we read a variety of myths, analysed these stories, and as a class created a list of the characteristics of a myth. We followed a step by step approach to create our own myths, beginning by telling our stories to each other orally, using only our point form notes. From this point we moved through the writing process to write the myth. I was sure that the results would be terrific. We had spent so much time looking at models of myths, I was confident that my students would write myths that followed the appropriate format. I was stunned when many of the submissions I read did not reflect an understanding of the characteristics that we, as a class, had developed. Something had happened between the reading of myths and the writing of our own stories. I was coming closer to a specific question to explore.

I had not yet nailed down my question in early November when I met with Lori Barkans (Junior Consultant, GEDSB), Diane Clark and Deana Gates (Grade 6 teachers, Lynndale Heights P.S.). Diane, Deana, and I met for the afternoon to discuss our projects. We found a variety of similar frustrations in our classes. Three areas of difficulty for us were detail, editing, and time. We each struggled to encourage students to add adequate detail to their writing, and consistently seemed to be met with resistance. We also shared our experiences in the students' objection to peer (and self) editing. But the most interesting commonality in our three classes had to do with time. We each agreed that if the teacher was able to spend a great amount of time, guiding the student through the process one on one, that the student seemed to complete all of the required expectations well. There did not, however, seem to be this carryover from lesson to lesson in a whole group setting:

In my class, I am having difficulty getting the students to use the information taught in previous lessons to inform their writing assignments. Diane and Deana expressed frustration with their classes too – in their classes, they said, they can teach a great lesson, and students will seem “to get it”. But a day later – or on another assignment – these students will not apply the things they have learned. There seems to be no follow through. (Personal Journal, Nov. 10, 2003)

It was a welcomed discussion, to see that I was struggling with the same type of problems as other teachers.

I finally found my question in a one-on-one conversation with Lori Barkans at the close of that meeting. In discussing frustrations I was having with my class, Lori gave me a number of things to think about. One suggestion kept bouncing around my head: using feedback to improve student writing. In our conversation I realised I was relying on marks and a sentence or two, and sometimes the rubric, to provide the students with feedback. Something had to be done to ensure that I was giving better feedback throughout the writing process, not simply once it was complete. Hence my question: How can I use feedback through the writing process to improve my students' writing?

The Process

Now that I had my question, all I needed to do was implement my hypothesis. But what was my hypothesis? If I provide my students with more consistent feedback through the writing process, they will produce better writing assignments. It should have been easy.

Verbal Feedback

My first attempt at this was to increase verbal feedback as the students worked. Before this time, I would often circulate through the room to ensure students were on task, and behaving appropriately, but rarely would I use the same opportunity for conferencing. Sure, I would give a pointer or two as I walked by, but I did not sit down and actually converse with the student about his or her work. This was my plan. As my students worked, I figured I would circulate and guide each student through the assignment, providing constructive criticism as I went.

Perhaps this would work in a different class; unfortunately it was a failure in my classroom. I was frustrated because I was usually unable to connect with more than two or three students. This is fine if students are working on a lengthy project, but is not terribly useful for shorter assignments. Furthermore, I found that the time I was circulating was already in use, and I was not really able to conduct a sincere conference with my students. Rather, I was using the proximity approach to, “put out fires and get students back on track. The idea of course is to help students with verbal feedback. In essence, I [didn’t] ever get to really do that without being interrupted.” (Personal Journal, November 17, 2003).

No, verbal feedback was not going to work, at least not in this class at this time. I needed to come up with another idea.

The Nahrgang Approach

One of my most memorable teachers from highschool was a man named Jack Nahrgang. Mr. Nahrgang was a teacher who truly inspired me, and he always seemed impeccably fair. One of the options in our OAC English class was the option to resubmit work if we were not satisfied with our mark. Mr. Nahrgang told us, “I am most concerned with your learning. If you wish to resubmit your essay you may do so. Just make sure that you have taken into account each of the comments I have made on your paper.” If you reworked your paper, and resubmitted it, he would mark it again, without penalty. This saved many of us that year in English class, and many of us learned a lot from the process.

I began to think that this was the type of approach I would take with my students. But, more needed to be done. My journal entry from late November demonstrates my train of thought.

There is a difference between late grade highschool students and Grade 8’s. The fire that fuels most Grade 8 students is a social fire. Late grade highschool students tend to be a little more academically inclined (or at least interested). So, I think I need to refine Mr. Nahrgang’s way of doing things.

It is my guess that if I allow students to hand it in after, that many will not do so. They are not motivated by marks. I fear that many of them won’t care unless they received a failing grade. (Personal Journal, November 17, 2003) I came to the conclusion that it would be best to build Mr. Nahrgang’s approach into my writing process. I would still attempt to provide verbal feedback as often as possible, and I would still use a process in which we explore similar texts before writing our own. The difference is in the final stages of the writing process. My plan was to have students submit their work to me. I would read it, comment on it, and hand it back, without a mark. Hopefully the students would read my comments and be able to improve their work. Although this solution would not be as immediate (and perhaps, therefore, a little less authentic) I would be able to, through writing, conference with each student.

I took my idea to the class, and their reaction was less than positive.

“You’re going to make us write it twice?” “Why would we have to do something over again if we didn’t fail it?” “This sucks,” are all examples of responses from my class when I explained my great idea to them. (Personal Journal, November 24, 2003). But, then there was Trevor. Trevor is a strong, quiet student in my class who watched and

listened to this outrage and then simply stated, “Guys, this might be a good thing. You’re just going to end up getting better marks.” (Personal Journal, November 24, 2003). Excellent! At least I had one on my side!

Implementing the Nahrgang Approach

I really believed this was going to be easy. It seemed like a foolproof plan, but I am starting to discover that you cannot have a foolproof plan when you have more than 20 variables (also called students) in the classroom. For the purpose of this essay, I am going to speak about one of our writing assignments, because I think it is indicative of how this process worked.

We began writing travelogues before Christmas. A travelogue is a description of a journey or a trip, and it often is written with the purpose of convincing the reader to take the trip themselves. Our process was specific and straightforward. First, we read and compared a variety of travel brochures, looking for the descriptive language that might convince a reader to travel to a certain destination. Next, the students chose a place (real or fictional) that we have travelled, or would like to travel. I encouraged the students to use destinations they themselves had gone, but did not make it a requirement. Once the student had a destination, I gave them a chart in which they filled in all of the sights, sounds, smells, sensations, and tastes details they could brainstorm. This is quite close to the procedure laid out in the Nelson Language & Writing 8 book.

The first stage went well. I was able to provide verbal encouragement and acknowledgement of students’ progress. We discussed how to use a thesaurus (both print and electronic), and students completed the planning stage. In the second part of this assignment, students wrote about their destination in detail, again focussing on the five senses. We peer-edited (a subject for another action research project) and wrote our rough draft in the form of a travel brochure.

I had the students hand in their rough draft. I did not so much as edit as pose guiding questions. For example, Jessica wrote, “. . . and wake up each morning to an amazing sun-rise.” I asked, “What does the sunrise look like? What colours and shades?” In the end, Jessica wrote, “. . . and wake up each morning to an amazing sun-rise.” This was true of most of my students. It seemed my comments were pretty much ignored. I was disappointed to say the least. Now, this is not to say the students did not put a lot of effort into their travelogues; most improved greatly on their rough drafts. The problem was that they mainly improved the design, colours, and neatness of their drafts. Very few students actually changed the wording in their assignment. This was a source of great distress for me. Why wouldn’t they have changed their wording? After all, I had spent a couple of hours trying to create specific guiding questions to help them edit their work. I really struggled with this question; I had seen myself as a facilitator, not an editor, but maybe I hadn’t been clear enough with my comments. The following is from my personal journal.

[Should this be] teacher as editor? When I edit friends’ papers for their university classes I make specific changes. Do I do that for these students? I can see some value in it – but won’t they just eventually wait for my changes? And if I do EDIT it, how can I justify a mark under the provincial standard – seeing that I was the one that made some specific changes. Am I willing to mark myself below grade level? . . . I think I need to act as a combination of editor and facilitator. I do not believe it is appropriate to edit their work the way I would a friend or colleagues. But I do believe that elements of regular editing need to be present. So I need to have some of that. But there needs to be elements of facilitation involved too. If the student simply makes the changes suggested, he may learn some, but if some of the suggestions are made as questions, I think he will learn more. (Personal Journal, December 8, 2003).

I decided to hold on to the travelogues for a little longer, and try another, similar, technique.

Improving on the Process

Before I returned the student's work to them, I talked about having looked at my university essays a year or two after I had written them. I was always surprised at how great I thought them to be when written, and how lousy they seemed when I read them. That distancing from an assignment really allows a person to view their work with a more critical eye. I explained that I was going to hang on to the travelogues for a while, and then let them view their work with new eyes in a month or so. I explained that I thought it would be an interesting exercise, and they seemed to agree that it might just be interesting (though I also have a feeling that many were just happy not to be working on their travelogues for a while).

Over this time, I continued to use written feedback in other subject areas as well. Sometimes I listed resubmitting work as a requirement, but often I left it as a choice. Very few of my students chose to resubmit work, many being contented with a level 2 grade. Those students who did choose to resubmit usually had received a level 3 or 4 on the first attempt.

At the end of February I decided to revisit the travelogue, much to the dismay of my students. "I told the class we would be looking at our travelogues again, and was met with a series of groans, rolls of the eyes, and 'Do we have to's?'" (Personal Journal, February 27, 2004). But, despite the groans, most completed this part of the assignment with at least some enthusiasm. I handed back the travelogues, and asked students to read them over, just to look at how well (or not so well) they had performed. While they read, and shared their travelogues with classmates, I circulated, keeping an ear open for their reactions to their own work, now two months removed from the initial assignment. There seemed to be mixed reviews. Cameron (February, 2004) made one of my favourite comments, "Hey, it's not too crappy for doing it in fifteen minutes." I had to smile.

Once we had taken a little bit of time to reread our work, I reviewed the purpose and expectations of the initial assignment. Then, I handed each student a sheet entitled Travelogue – Revisited. My plan was to force the students to look critically at their work, with a series of guiding questions. Then, once they had completed the handout, have them rewrite their work, and see what kind of improvements were made this time. (See Appendix). The first question states simply Read your travelogue. Do you think it is good? 15 out of 21 circled YES. I found the next answers interesting; Is it your best work? 18 out of 21 circled NO. I thought this was quite telling. We spent the remainder of the week completing the handout and rewriting our travelogues. Since we had worked so hard, had consulted the thesaurus, and answered critical questions about our work, I was sure we were bound for success.

Again, on the final draft, very little was changed from the original, and what was changed tended to be visual rather than wording. Amy is one of my strongest students. The major change she made in her travelogue about Nova Scotia was taking her sentence . . . the fresh smell of fish and water is purely priceless and rewriting it as . . . the fresh smell of fish and water is absolutely priceless. Tom changed very little in his travelogue about Bikini Bottom, but this time, at least, he added headings, which was something I had suggested on each of his drafts. Alycia made some of the most dramatic changes to her Algonquin Park travelogue. "There is (sic) also some cottages you can rent so you and your family can be safe and comfortable," became, "If you don't feel safe camping in a tent or trailer you can stay in a cabin or motel and still enjoy the wilderness that surrounds you. It would be wise to reserve ahead of time as cabins and motels are usually full in the prime time of the year which is summer. (March, 2004).

So, I found myself slightly disappointed in the results of this stage. The process worked, the students really thought critically about their work as they completed the Travelogue – Revisited handout (all students did complete the handout), but they failed to put those ideas into practice on the final draft of their work. Was it a failure? I don't think so, but I would have liked to have seen a more dramatic change.

The Results

There was a change in the attitude toward editing in my classroom. Students seemed to become more used to the idea that they may be asked to improve on work, not as a punishment, but as a learning opportunity. (Personal Journal, March 26, 2004). That being said, in the final travelogue assignment, I had five students (of 21) who completed the handout, but did not hand in a new travelogue, and I had four students who resubmitted the same travelogue with no revision.

I did notice a change in marks from first to second term. The report card average for Writing in my class increased from 65% in term one to 68% in term two. Of twenty-one students, 14 students' marks increased, 6 decreased and 1 experienced no change. Of those 14 students whose marks increased, 10 enjoyed increases of more than 5%.

I also discovered that I was able to more accurately assign a mark to those students who consistently experienced difficulty in fully completing assignments. There seems to be a roadblock for these students to see a project through to the end, but in each of these cases at least something, at some point of the process, was submitted for evaluation (and feedback).

Conclusions and Next Steps

This action research is still in progress. Over the year I have been able to reformulate my thoughts on how Grade 8 students write, and the supports they need to be successful. I do believe that providing written, detailed feedback, and forcing (or offering) students the chance to resubmit work, will increase their learning, and make them feel more successful and therefore better about their own performance. For the class I taught this year, simple verbal feedback, or simple marks was not sufficient. My students needed a step-by-step process in which they learned how to self-edit, and how to view their own work with a critical eye. I was able to observe the success of a step-by-step approach as I read students' responses to the Travelogue-Revisited handout. Where I went wrong, I believe, is in bringing back the travelogue too many times. In essence, we were "flogging a dead horse" and I think my students had lost motivation for the assignment. I did use this type of an approach in other subject areas with a little more success.

I have learned a lot from this experience. I am more aware of the needs of the students', that is, they need to be guided by questions, verbal feedback, and written comments. They need to have chances to improve on what they have done, so that they can begin to understand that everything is a learning process and a work in progress. No matter how well we have done something, we can always find some room for improvement. They need to be motivated to perform their very best on each assignment, and in everything that they do (as do I, as their teacher).

Next year, I will start earlier with the "Nahrgang Approach". I will encourage students to think critically about their work, and I will seek out new and exciting ways to do so. It wasn't as successful this year as I would have hoped, but, as I will tell my students, there is always a chance to make it better – and that's just what I will do.

References

- (2003). *Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grades 7-12*. Queen's Printer for Ontario.
- Aker, D et. al. (1998). *Nelson Language & Writing 8*. International Thomson Publishing.
- Barkans, L. (2003). Personal Interview Regarding Authentic Feedback. November 11, 2003
- Clark, D. & Gates, D. (2003). Personal Interview Regarding Student Peer Editing. November 11, 2003.
- Senior, J. (2004). Personal Journal. October 2003 to March 2004.
- Sutton, R. (1997). *The Learning School*. RS Publications, Salford, England.

APPENDIX

Travelogue – Revisited

List the place you are describing in your travelogue: _____.

Read your travelogue. Do you think it is good? (Circle one) YES NO
 Is it your best work? (Circle one) YES NO

In the boxes below, write the descriptive words or phrases you used to describe each of the following senses. Use a thesaurus to find at least 3 different ways to word your description. Use the box on the right for this purpose.

My “SIGHT” words	Thesaurus “SIGHT” Words

My “SMELL” words	Thesaurus “SMELL” Words

My “HEARING” words	Thesaurus “HEARING” Words

My “TASTE” words	Thesaurus “TASTE” Words

My “TOUCH” words	Thesaurus “TOUCH” Words

Good. Now we have a variety of descriptive words we can use to improve our travelogue. Now let’s look at the layout.

Does your introduction make someone want to learn more about your destination? YES NO
Rewrite your introduction 2 different ways. (Use a thesaurus to help you).

REWRITE ONE: _____

_____.

REWRITE TWO: _____

_____.

Did you use heading to organize your work (so it’s easier for the reader to navigate)? YES NO
If no, write some ideas you could use for headings:

What do you feel are the “eye pleasing” aspects of your travelogue? _____
_____.

List the ways in which you could improve the look of your travelogue.

Is there anything else about your travelogue you feel should give you a good mark? (In other words, what makes your travelogue better than everyone else’s?) List the qualities here.