Reflection v. Revision: Rethinking rather than rewriting an essay
by George Sebastian-Coleman

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In this practice, I replaced the use of multiple drafts of each paper in my Composition and Composition II classes with student reflections on what they would do to revise each paper. At the end of the semester, students use these reflections to revise all their papers for the final portfolio which is submitted for assessment. The goal and effect has been to shift students’ attention away from correction and quick fixes to my comments, to a more global revision of their work.

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Description:

The First Year Writing program at Tunxis Community College uses a portfolio approach across all sections, with the final portfolio weighted a minimum of 70% of final grade. In addition to their three papers, the portfolio includes a cover letter which takes the form of a reflective essay on how the papers demonstrate they have met course outcomes (Tunxis calls them “abilities”). While traditional “process” writing is reflective in nature, there is no prescribed reflective assignment prior to the final cover letter.
Like most composition teachers I've been using the process approach for many years: Students write drafts, which are reviewed by faculty and often peers, and then they submit another draft, through as many iterations as an instructor sees fit. When this approach was new, students seemed to take early drafts seriously. However, now that the approach is almost universal down to their earliest training, students—pragmatists that they are—have realized the early drafts really aren't worth the effort, and it may even be advantageous to do little, receive direction, then fulfill it.

Having grown tired of receiving crud for first drafts I decided to take a different approach. My goals were to emphasize the importance of the single iteration of the paper (improving initial quality), and when they did revise to get the students to rethink the whole of the paper, rather than correcting errors, or only those problematic areas that I or their peer reviewers had pointed out.

**Part I: Practice Step-by-Step:**

Beginning in Fall 2009, I dropped drafts and instead had students write their paper and place it in their ePortfolio. There, it receives peer and faculty feedback—assessing the work against the three (now four) course abilities. The student then uses that feedback to write a reflection describing how they would revise the paper, based on that feedback and their own hindsight, to improve it in each of the abilities. We use Digication as our ePortfolio platform and originally I had the submissions done to the course management side, where my assessments could be directly linked to the course abilities. However, the Peer Review component on the class management side is limited to a single reader responding. So, I've moved to using the ePortfolio as the site of peer-review feedback. I still have the paper put in to the course management side so I can provide confidential feedback, and have the link to course outcomes. After receiving my and student feedback, the student posts their reflection to the ePortfolio, where it is reviewed by the professor. The class then moves on to working on the next paper, which will go through the same process. The prompt for the reflection continues to evolve, although I've tried not to become prescriptive. The goal has always to have them describe how they would revise the paper to address comments made in the feedback. Some early reflections said little more than “I'd fix the things you pointed out,” so I have emphasized that they need to describe how they will go about “fixing” things. Reflections on the second and third papers should also be reflections on the previous papers insofar as I suggest they answer such questions as “did I improve in any area in which I'd struggled?” and “how did I make use of the feedback from my previous paper to improve this one?”

Similarly my response to the reflections has evolved. At first I did little more than make sure students had written a reflection, but it became clear that I needed to comment on the reflection fairly extensively, both to get the students to take it seriously, and to provide guidance in the process of reflection. However, I try to limit those comments to the substance of the reflection itself, and not to further direct their thinking on the paper, unless it is to correct a misinterpretation of my assessment.

**Part II: The Role of Reflection in Advancing Student Learning:**

At the end of term, students are given time to revise all three papers. The reflections remind the reader of weaknesses and strengths, but because students are now bringing end-of-course skills to the revision, they rarely drop into simple correction. Indeed they are likely to critique the limits of their original reflection as well as the limits of the paper and as a result engage in real revision. Thus, the final revisions are more clearly the work of the student and a reflection of the skills acquired, rather than being examples of collaborative writing between the student and teacher that multiple drafts are always in danger of becoming.
The other major element of the portfolio is the cover letter, which has always asked students to reflect on their experience of the semester, what they have learned, and, most importantly, how their papers demonstrate that they have met course abilities. With the reflections, the cover letter now has antecedents the student can draw on to describe their development and success in developing the course abilities. Besides simply providing practice at reflection, the students can see the difference between how they thought they would revise the paper, and how they actually revised it based on the additional experience they’ve gained over the semester.

**Part III: Evidence of Impact on the Student Learning Experience**

Since adopting this approach the final portfolios show at least as high a degree of performance as the previous method. In addition, the papers show greater revision (truly reworking a paper) than drafts had ever produced, particularly for the earlier papers, in which the students integrate end-of-course knowledge and skills. Moreover, I'm confident that what I'm reading more accurately reflects student skills rather than just my suggestions. Student comments indicate that they also leave with a greater “belief” in revision and in their own growth as writer, raising the odds that they will integrate these skills into future course work.

**Practice Identifiers**

**Location**

*Individual class*

I started using the practice in Composition 101 and have since expanded it to Composition II (which focuses on the research paper). Comp is required for all associates degrees and Comp II is also required for all Liberal Arts & Sciences, General Studies, Business, New Media, and Pathways to Teaching majors.

**Scale**

Used in my sections of Composition and Composition II and for at least one paper assignment in at least two other professor’s classes. We routinely share classroom practices; however, there is no obligatory reporting of pedagogies employed, so scale of use is a matter of happenstance that someone has mentioned it.

**Helping Students Advance Their Learning.**

- **Reflection as a form of Connection (Integrative Learning)**
  As described in the Description above, the reflection on a “draft” rather than an immediate revision forces students to think about their paper in its entirety rather than on fixing individual errors or shortcomings. They must then describe their work in the vernacular of the course reinforcing course concepts. Finally, when they do return to a paper to revise for the final portfolio, the reflection reminds them not only of what needs to be done, but where their thinking was at that point in the course, and one hopes they will recognize the progress they have made, or recall early lessons learned.
Reflection as Systematic and Disciplined (Inquiry) – Students’ ePortfolio reflections embody the reflective process and connecting their learning to General Education or programmatic competencies

Reflection instead of revision is designed to directly support the development of the General Education requirements via the reflective cycle. Having produced the artifact (the paper) they are then asked to consider the peer review and my assessment of their success against the course abilities (Interpret and Evaluate Complex Texts, Demonstrate a Process of Critical Inquiry, Write Articulate Essays Supported by Authoritative Evidence, and Clearly Express Ideas Through the Effective Use of Standard English and Documentation), the student then responds to those comments and their own thinking about the essay to construct a plan for how the paper could be revised to meet standard or improve upon their current success. When the student then returns to the essay at the end of the course they re-engage their original paper, the reflection, and everything they’ve learned since then and now synthesizes those elements to produce a revised draft.

Reflection as Social Pedagogy

Papers are open to peer review on the ePortfolio upon submission. While peer review is not designed as a back-and-forth process, the knowledge that papers will be read by their peers has provoked far more care in initial proofreading, and the act of reviewing others works brings much greater awareness of the qualities of their own writing.

Reflection as a Process of Personal Change

N/A

Connections to Other Sectors of the Catalyst

Professional Development:

Faculty and staff using this practice engage in the following ePortfolio-related professional development:

I was part of the second cohort of faculty at Tunxis to participate in a semester long workshop on using ePortfolio and reflective pedagogy. I then joined the ePortfolio team as part of C2L and Making Connections, its predecessor grant with LaGuardia. I am also part of our Integrated Learning and Research Team as well as part of the ongoing mentoring process for ePortfolio. That initial workshop and specifically the work with Making Connections led directly to the idea of using reflection as an alternative approach to drafts as a means of getting students to think about their writing.

The department regularly holds roundtables for all faculty (full-time and adjunct) who teach composition and I have presented the practice at these sessions. As noted above, there is no feedback process to know who may have adopted the practice in whole or part except by chance conversation, but certainly the response to the presentations was very positive.

Are Peer Mentors involved with this practice?

Peer mentoring occurs only in the sense of the peer review of the essays themselves. I have not tried to formally carry the peer commentary (or assistance) in the reflection process itself or the final revisions. While I can see some advantages to doing so, it would certainly then muddle the issue of assessing an individual’s work.

Professional Guidance:

The Center for Teaching and Learning develops and guides professional development related to this practice:

- No
Judit the supporting materials listed below are all in our ePortfolio and I assume you can pull from there. The student work itself is pasted below; if that’s an issue e-mail me at gsebastiancoleman@comcast.net this evening.

**Supporting Materials:**

- COMPCOURSEABILITIESRUBRICEFFECTIVEFALL2011
- SyllabusCompFall2011
- CompReflectionAssignment

**Evidence:**

The following evidence associated with this and other similar practices has been collected:

- # of students
- Course completion
- Pass rates
- Retention rates
- Student engagement through surveys/interviews

We have been collecting this data, though all elements will not be on a course-by-course basis. I will try to pull it together and get it up here ASAP.

**Student work/ePortfolio examples:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3280 Comp 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian-Coleman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first thing that I could have done to have made my paper better was proofread my paper more thoroughly. I had a lot of stupid mistakes that make my paper lose flow and confuse the reader. Although I had a clear thesis there was the minor adjustment I could have made the thesis more specific, which was pointed out to me in my papers corrections. Although I had a clear thesis and had good support for it I also wandered away from some of the points I made. At the end of paragraphs some of my statements were not on line with the idea that I presented at the beginning of the paragraph. I need to stay focus on my main ideas because throughout the whole paper I had a tendency to stray away from my ideas. I had a lot of good support and quotes from the three sources but I did not exactly use them in the correct positions. I also could have incorporated more support from each passage not just quotes but also ideas expressed by the essays. Some of my support was somewhat inaccurate but some was not. Gangs on the west said that are mainly Puerto Rican, for example, do however have many members on the east side they are just a different division of the gang in a different area. Overall my paper was very raw. I had good ideas as well as good support but it was very scattered and all over the place. I need to focus more on my main ideas and not stray away from my main ideas to make my paper a better paper. Proofreading my work, as I can see after reading it once again, could have gone a long way to make my better much better.

Student 2
3280 Comp 101
Sebastian Coleman
Oct 9, 2011

Improvements to Project One Submission

The first actions to improve the paper will be to correct all the spelling and punctuation errors.

A common error for me when writing is that I tend to assume the reader has the same point of view as I do. This leads to some areas that I think are perfectly clear, being vague or poorly explained to the reader. In this paper the main example is the lack of clarity in the thesis statement. I will address this type of thing more carefully in the future. As for corrections in this paper, the following is what I plan on doing:

More information will be added to the first paragraph in order to have a clearly stated thesis. As it stands now, the thesis is more implied than stated.

The following comments will be addressed:

Comment 8: will add more detail in order to relate how disagreements were handled both within the community and with non-members.

Comment 9: will correct citation error and rewrite parts of paragraph, possibly incorporating parts of this paragraph with previous one.

Comment 13: will add more information on South Korean replacements in order to provide segue to South Korean alliance with U.S.

Outline for revision of
Types of Communities Formed in Vietnam
Introduction

Communities are formed quickly in many different ways in combat.

Describe environment upon arriving in Saigon and how it led to formations of community based on ego-centered network.

Give example of how network worked

Describe how quickly ego-centered network fell apart.

Describe lack of community upon arrival on barge.

Describe environment while on patrol and how we interacted during our off-duty after forming cosmopolitan community.

In his book “Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of strangers”, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes “...we can agree about what to do in most cases, without agreeing about why it is right (62)”. This phrase describes how many of our decisions were made. The boat captain was responsible for choosing where to set up our ambush sites. This was a very important decision and often the difference in whether we made it through the night in relative peace or not. Once we got to know the area we were patrolling, we would spend the time reaching the ambush site debating exactly where to set up. Our crew was so in tune with each other, it seemed as though we were all coming to the same conclusions but for a wide variety of reasons. The same can be said of off-duty time spent together. After about two months together, we were thinking as one, all the while maintaining our very different views of how and why things were the way they were. Then the biker and the cowboy were transferred to another river division down in the delta, and my little cosmopolitan community was dismantled. They were replaced by a couple of newbies from the Saigon replacement barracks, and the process of forming another community began.

One of the United States’ allies in Vietnam was South Korea. The United States was supplying both military and financial aid to them. This was a long time before South Korea became the self-sufficient economic country they are today and they relied heavily on the U.S. for keeping their country safe from North Korean intrusion as well as building their country into a modern society. In “The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century”, Thomas Friedman explains what he refers to as the Dell Theory as “no two countries that are part of the same supply chain … shall ever fight a war against each other (125)”. One can take this theory and expand it to include fighting with each other against a perceived common enemy in order to keep the supply chain intact. In essence, the U.S. convinced South Korea that it was in their best interest to get involved in a war that should have impact on them, other than the suspension of U.S. aid.

Even though all of these types of community building happened under different circumstances, they seem to have all stood the test of time. The U.S. and South Korea are stronger allies now than they ever were, even though South Korea is no longer as dependent on the U.S. and I still have the friendships formed on the river boats. Some of us email regularly, others send Christmas cards, but we all remember the sense of community we felt.

My Comment:

Don’t correct errors first, because if you do then you won’t want to change those sentences. Rethink, rewrite, and then proof for errors.
My Reflection

After reading the Professor’s comments and my own self-evaluation, I have found several things that I would change in my paper to make it better.

One thing that I found that was repeated a lot in my comments was not going deeper with certain ideas. For example, I state that “if one person from a stunt group doesn’t show up to a practice, the rest of the group will suffer because they can’t fully prepare for a game or for competition”. After I finish saying this statement, I don’t go further on and connect it to one of the authors. I should have connected it to Friedman in that this is like a supply chain that is broken down. By saying this, it reinforces my idea that cheerleading is a group of girls that need each other to reach one final goal.

Another thing that I need to fix are the little grammatical mistakes that make the piece weaker. For instance, I wrote, Friedman, “proposes with ‘the Dell Theory of Conflict Prevention” when I should have wrote a single quote before the ending quotation marks…”…”Prevention”.

In addition, my thesis is not a strong one. It is, “Just like any other sport in these sports communities, cheerleading involves the group becoming closer and, if not taken seriously, this sport can cause injuries”. I should probably remove a bunch of words from it to make it less confusing. Maybe a better thesis would be “cheerleading can build a stronger community as long as it’s taken seriously as a sport, otherwise injuries can occur”.

Hopefully, by making these corrections, my paper will become at least a high 2 to fully reach the standard

Outline

1. Community
   * Cheerleading is my community.

1. Greatest Risk
   * Stunting
     - no joking around
     - complete concentration

III. Choice
   * Choose to join a community
     - obligation to group
     - total commitment in stunt group

IV. Rebekah Nathan
* Diversity in friends

* Change of character

V. Kwame Appiah

* Cosmopolitanism

- responsibilities to group

- working together to reach a common goal

- accepting each other and moving on