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The Effectiveness of Revision Activities on Improving Writing

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WRITING RESEARCH FELLOWS CO-INQUIRY WRITE-UP

Researchers' Names/Department:

Prof. Paul Chen – Political Science

Steve Walker – Political Science

Project Title:

The effectiveness of revision activities on improving writing

Research Question:

How effective are the activities, both individually and relative to each other, on improving students' writing skills and knowledge?

Method & Data Studied:

We conducted this research in a political science senior seminar in Fall 2008. The course was for 5 credits, worth 3 Writing Proficiency points, with 11 students.

We used two types of written assignments as material for revisions:

- Weekly synopses: One page, single-spaced summaries of class readings of varying lengths.
- Research paper: A formal research paper of 12-18 pages on a topic of the student's choosing.

The activities we wanted to evaluate were:

- In-class revision exercises: Students, together with the instructor, edited the wording of passages excerpted from synopses on the projector screen in class (this was done anonymously).
- Written instructor comments: Students received remarks on their synopses and drafts of their paper.
- Peer revisions: Students edited their classmates' synopses (this was done anonymously).
- In-class writing discussions: using lecture and Q&A, the instructor taught about ways to improve writing
- One-on-one consultations: done primarily for giving comments on the research papers.

We asked students to complete a survey telling us how effective they thought the above revision activities were in improving their writing ability. Giving the difficulty, and in some cases impossibility, of obtaining purely objective measurements to determine whether the quality of students' writing had increase, most of the survey questions focused on the students' perceptions of how effective the activities were on improving their writing. The 24-question survey was administered anonymously on Blackboard. Steve Walker conducted 2 one-on-one interviews with students who had taken the class.

Key Findings:

Among the activities that students found most effective or helpful in improving their writing were the following: (1) written comments from the instructor, (2) one-on-one meetings with the instructor, and (3) in-class discussions about ways to improve their writing. Among the activities that students found less helpful, but still of value, were the following: in-class revisions and peer editing.

Students generally felt that the synopses provided better opportunities to improve writing than the research paper, but that the research paper provided an excellent opportunity to "show off" how they had improved.

Some students responded positively to William Strunk and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*, an assigned book for the class whose effectiveness we had not intended to evaluate in this research.

The two interviewees expressed disappointment with the peer revision exercises. They felt that they gained very little from other students' comments on their writing, in part because they didn't think there was anything they

could learn from each other. But the instructors' purpose, which only came out while preparing for Steve's presentation and was basically unstated in class, was that peer-revisions would help students to identify problems in their classmates' writing, problems which they themselves also had, but found it difficult to identify when reading their own writing.

Implications for Further Study:

Educators could benefit from future research in the following areas:

- Find ways to get students more involved in revising their work. Students in this study favored exercises in which the instructor did most of the editing. But as this approach becomes more time-consuming for the instructor and therefore more impractical in bigger classes, it is important that students learn to assume more responsibility in revising their own work.
- Try different ways of implementing peer revision exercises. We believe students can benefit greatly from this activity, but, as shown in the interviewees' responses, students can misinterpret the intent of peer revisions if the instructor does not state its goals clearly.

Implications for Teaching and Learning:

Many students responded positively to written comments from the instructor and one-on-one paper consultations. Aside from the content of the comments and advice, students responded that they found these activities helpful because the activities showed that the instructor was committed to helping them improve their writing. Students said that the instructor's effort motivated them to devote more time to revising their writing. We realize that these activities require significant amounts of the instructor's time – particularly in larger classes – but students will likely still appreciate smaller amounts of feedback on their writing. This seems to show that the instructor's motivation and concern for improving the students' writing can be picked up by the students themselves, possibly even by students who initially had very little interest in improving their writing, but who took the course primarily to fulfill the writing proficiency requirement. But the effectiveness of this approach presumes that the instructor also has the required knowledge and skill to teach others how to improve their writing. For many college level writing instructors, achieving good writing is still something that requires much effort and concentration. Even many seasoned scholars who write professionally still struggle to improve their writing, using the same techniques that writing instructors use with their students: rereading, revising, and peer-editing. This lends support to the writing adage: there is no such thing as good writing, only good re-writing.