
Class Writing Projects with Computers: Student Collaboration and Autonomy

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Teaching Students to Revise: Problems and Proposed Solutions

To many ESL writing students, the route from first draft to final copy is short and direct. There are simply two steps: ideas are put down on paper and the paper is turned in to the instructor. While reading it over, the instructor may "catch" a few surface errors of spelling, word choice, punctuation or syntax. These are brought to the student writer's attention, and the student "fixes" them. The paper is finished. Next!

Despite students' expectations, proofreading is not the writing instructor's principal function. Nevertheless, when we as writing instructors focus on content, style or organization in student writing, and ask for revisions that go beyond surface errors, our suggestions are often ignored. Students may resent what they consider overly harsh criticism of their efforts and the extra work such global revisions entail. They may actively resist the demand for revision by turning in second drafts that are virtually copies of their first ones.

Consequently, the questions arise: How can we make style and organization as important to student writers as it is to us, their readers? How can we open up the closed circuit of student-teacher communication in ESL composition classes?

Many solutions have been proposed, among them enlarging the potential audience

for student writing through small group and whole class readings of student writing. This "writing workshop" technique has the additional advantage of involving the students themselves in the editing of each other's work. Class activities like pair work and small group sessions of peer criticism serve both these purposes. But over the course of a fifteen-week semester, these too can become mechanical activities since there's no real reason for students to want to incorporate their peers' suggestions in their writing. Revision means rewriting, and rewriting is tedious.

A Solution Using Micro-Computers for a Group Writing Project

Having access to micro-computers has opened up a lot of possibilities for ESL writing classes. Storage on disk and reading text on the computer display screen helps to make rewriting physically easier and quicker. Using micro-computers too can allow ESL classes to work on class writing projects like anthologies, magazines and newspapers.

More than any other classroom activity, a group writing project makes peer criticism appropriate and provides students with a reason for multiple revisions. When seventy-five or one hundred copies of a class anthology are going to be printed and distributed, students become very concerned with what they have written, how it looks and how it will be received. Since students know that their class anthology will be judged as a whole, they become more

interested in each part of it and will more openly express criticism and praise of content (i.e. "This is boring," "This is funny," "This is too long") as well as offer suggestions and help to their classmates. Until my class started working on their anthology, I never saw students (unless they were already "best friends") take turns word processing each other's work.

Introducing a long-term goal in an ESL writing class radically changes classroom dynamics since students take on new roles as editors or illustrators and previously hidden talents and strengths are uncovered in the group. A group writing project using computers as word processors also challenges students' speaking, listening and reading skills since they must ask questions, read instruction sheets or manuals, and describe processes to their peers. In addition, a group writing project fosters both independence and collaboration among students. First of all, each student has a role as a writer or contributor. Secondly, each student has a responsibility to the group: to get his or her work done on time, to submit something that the writer's classmates think is interesting and worthwhile, to provide a finished product that meets the standards the project's "editorial staff" has proposed, and finally, to keep at it until the submission wins general approval and is printed out in final form. This is a far cry from the usual two-step "get it down on paper and turn it in" procedure.

Procedural Guidelines

To start on a project, use a magazine, book or newspaper as a model. Examine the contents and format of the publication with your class. Read the masthead or title page and determine what production jobs need to be done (cover art, illustrations, layout,

editorial work). Choose functions appropriate to your class project and give each job a specific title.

In general, a class project should have an editor-in-chief and two associate editors. All three make up the editorial board and are responsible for collecting and proofreading all written work. A layout person is needed to determine the page order of the finished product and to make a table of contents. Two illustrators should also be chosen and put in charge of generating computer graphics (if the software is available) or producing artwork to complement the written work. Ending a class anthology with an index of contributors (paragraph-length biographies) is a nice touch and an editor is needed for this too. List the jobs and titles and hold class elections.

Since the editorial staff is responsible for coordinating the work of other class members and keeping everyone to a deadline, they take over, in part, the instructor's usual "monitoring" function. Student illustrators must negotiate with other writers about the type of pictures they want, describe what is available, and learn how to use computer graphics programs. All students, whether they have just one role as a contributor or multiple roles on the production staff, participate in decision-making processes and have to accept the consequences of their actions or inaction (delayed publication, missing items, etc.). Peer pressure and each individual's desire for excellence become the motivators of good writing.

Even a simple group project takes many hours in the computer lab or classroom, so instructors should plan on spending a minimum of twelve hours on the actual word processing and layout of the work.

Begin with a session on computer use. Most word processing software in college computer labs has a self-teaching program or an introductory user's manual. After the students have gone through the introductory program, have them word process and print out something they've already written by hand. Seeing their own work printed out is usually a new and very gratifying experience.

Check with your institution's duplicating service before you begin your class project to find out their specifications for written material. Many copy services will not accept hand-written or hand-drawn work, and almost all require black and white originals. Be sure to inform your illustrators and layout person of these specifications. When you're preparing the final copy of your project in the computer lab, set all printers in letter or near-letter quality mode and install new ribbons if possible. I also ask students to highlight all computer graphics with black ink since most computer printers produce graphics in draft mode only, and the product doesn't always copy well.

To guard against accidental loss of students' work, have each student buy his or her own data disk and use it consistently. Store all disks in the computer lab in a

clearly marked storage box, so that the texts are accessible even if individual writers are absent. Keeping all the disks in one place also allows students ready access to their work if they decide (and many do) to put in extra time on the project outside of class.

Working on a class project, whether it's a brief collection of autobiographies or a weighty anthology of poetry and prose, is one of the most rewarding activities a writing class can undertake. For me, one of the best moments occurs when students, one after the other, approach me and say, "You know, I read this over last night and..." That's when I know that they have begun to care as much as I do about their writing.

About the Author

Nancy Erber Cadet received an M.A. in TESL in 1981 and is currently completing her doctoral dissertation, entitled Colette: the Making of a Writer, for the Department of Romance Studies at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. She teaches ESL at LaGuardia Community College in New York City.