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REVISING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX: STUDENTS AS EDITORS IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This qualitative teacher action research study investigated the experiences of incorporating peer revision and writing workshops into a 9th grade academic level classroom. Twenty-four 9th grade students participated in a study conducted in a suburban high school consisting of approximately 2,800 students in eastern Pennsylvania. Methods of collecting data included participant and nonparticipant observations, student surveys, student interviews, and student work. The students were presented with various mini lessons for guiding the practice of writing descriptively, clearly and with an organized structure. They were also guided through the steps of peer revising and critiquing expository pieces through modeling and practice. Findings suggest that students were able to write clearer and more organized expository pieces after they were guided through very specific methods of peer revising. However, if given freedom or more abstract concepts to conduct the peer review, students were hesitant in providing guidance and feedback to their peers.
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Researcher Stance

As a teenager growing up with a less than avid love of school, I could never comprehend why the system of public education was putting twenty five or more teens in a classroom, and then appointing teachers to tell them that they couldn’t talk to one another. It seemed to me that this was not only a pointless and stressful battle for the teachers to fight, but also a punishment for the students.

As I grew older and slightly more mature, I realized that I had developed a love of English class which enabled me the opportunity to advance in course levels. Suddenly, it was my junior year and I had enrolled in an AP level course. Here, the world of education was entirely different. Rather than sitting in rows, students were working in pods. Rather than raising hands, students were contributing to discussions as if they were sitting around a table at a local coffee shop’s open mic night. The environment was one that fostered collaboration and encouraged discussion; it was an experience I had never been privy to before. It was vastly different from anything that I had experienced in any other classroom, even though I had taken this same teacher the previous year for my academic English 10 course. It was during this perspective changing year that I decided that when I became a teacher, a profession I had determined suited me years prior, I would structure all of my classes the way Mrs. K had set up this insightful, enriching AP 11 course.
Approximately six years after this eye-opening experience, I found myself standing in front of my very first classroom with both shaking hands and an idealistic certainty that I would be the next Ellen Gruelle. I had worked hard to fight my way into the classroom despite political battles that were downsizing educators and increasing class sizes, and I was absolutely positive that I would be a huge success in this new endeavor. However, the classroom that I stood in on this day was a far cry from the AP 11 course that had modeled my ideals on what works in education. Instead of a group of eager-to-learn bibliophiles, I stood before twenty-two alternative education students, most of whom were behavioral problems with a strong aversion to performing any academic tasks that caused any sense of discomfort. Needless to say, I made it through this first year as an educator with a much firmer grasp of discipline and classroom management strategies, but I felt I had disappointed myself in achieving my original goal of creating better writers. The environment that I created could not have been more different from the one that had enriched my own writing ability so much years prior. Students were placed in the same rows that I felt were punishing years prior, and as a result, I got minimalist writing samples that consisted of one to two choppy paragraphs at best. Sadly, when looking back, I don’t believe I fostered much of a love of language arts at all during that battle of a first year.

Now, six years later, I find that I have managed to work my way back towards that original goal I had set for myself when I still had the fresh
perspective of a high school student. I no longer allow rows in my classroom unless there is a test being taken. I have students work together in the beginning of the year to define the norms that they think are necessary to create a productive, enriching discussion based environment. And shockingly enough, it seems to be working. As I move forward in conducting my study, I intend to learn more through researching and analyzing in my classroom:

**What are the observable experiences when incorporating peer editing and writing workshops in the 9th grade, academic level high school classroom?**

At this point, I have not yet reached “Hollywood movie making” teacher status, but I think that reconnecting to my original roots as a young student myself has aided me in inspiring young writers in my own little part of the world. I also believe that using AP inspired strategies in an academic level classroom with struggling writers reinforces to my students that I think they have valuable ideas worth hearing, so why not write about them? If every person has a story to share, I want to create an environment where they feel capable of telling it. And even if my own story never makes it to the big screen, at least now I know that I can stretch myself and allow my students the freedom to become better writers in a student centered, safe environment; and that’s something to write home about.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is multi-faceted. It is to capture both the positive and negative experiences that are associated with asking teenagers to become both academically and socially reliant on one another. It is to stretch ninth grade students into new and, at times, uncomfortable dimensions as young writers. It is to investigate the happenings when the teacher is figuratively removed from the writing classroom and the students, instead, take on the role of facilitators- for not only the classroom environment, but also for themselves.

Essentially, it is to stop talking and to start listening; to capture the needs of students most effectively, and to allow students to determine what areas of their writing need focus. It is to stop stifling the opinions of young writers. It is to stop editing and allow for revisiting and revising. It is to eliminate the stigma that perfection must be present for success. It is to create a process beyond writing that far exceeds the writing process. Instead, the purpose of this study is to highlight the experiences when 9th grade students are asked to become peer reviews; both good and bad, and to evaluate what most effectively creates confident communicators in the ELA classroom.
**Introduction**

Through my first few years in education, I consistently grappled with simply trying to understand why students did not want to write. As an avid journal keeper and enthusiastic writer myself, I could not conceptualize why students were not jumping at the opportunity to express themselves via the written word. As time passed, semesters changed, and classes came and went, I worked diligently to change the methods in which I was presenting materials and creating lessons, but, alas, I did not feel the major shift from willingness to eagerness when covering the various written assignments addressed in a ninth grade academic semester. Eventually, a common theme occurred to me. It was not so accurate to say that the issue was that the majority of students did not want to write, as much as it became evident that students had not yet acquired the ability to write. Through this epiphany of findings, I have decided to conduct a study in which I will teach students each, singular aspect of the writing process in a positive, student-centered classroom that is centrally focused on writing workshops and peer editing conferences.

The goal of this study is to create lessons that are not only easily understood by a variety of learners with various needs, but also to incorporate peer editing, self editing, student-teacher conferences, and self-efficacy check points throughout the writing workshop and publishing process.
**Need for the Study**

This study needs to be conducted so that struggling high school students can approach writing with more confidence and proficiency. Currently, many students in 9th grade language arts and composition classrooms are not able to correctly organize a five paragraph expository writing piece. This study is essential to my accurately teaching writing to students through the observation of what does, and what does not work in terms of lesson plans and presentation of materials.

Students will learn the steps of the writing process as well as a variety of methods to complete both peer and self-evaluations. Through discovering what works and what does not, I will be better able to serve my students in their journey to become better writers, which is why this study is a necessary tool in my planning and executing the teaching of writing. Therefore, it is important to know how to reach a wide range of learners how to effectively plan and organize five paragraph essays.

**Research Question**

As a 9th grade English and composition teacher, I have seen the majority of my students struggle with understanding how to organize and write well developed five paragraph expository essays. Additionally, I have noted that many students are unaware of how to provide feedback to peers when conducting peer
evaluations of writing. Based on these experiences, I have decided to conduct a research study that asks the question:

**What are the observed and reported experiences when incorporating writing’s workshop and peer editing into the writing process?**

**Summary**

This study will be conducted with the intention of finding out ways that I can better teach my students how to proficiently and confidently write. The incorporation of peer review and writing workshops during class time are intended to provide feedback to students throughout the process of learning how to write in a well organized fashion. The study requires consistent data collection, in which I will actively monitor and discuss with students their levels of progress throughout the course. The overall goal of the study is to find ways to effectively teach students how to write and edit expository papers, and to further develop their understanding of writing well organized papers through the incorporation of the writing process as a guideline.
Research Design and Methodology

Research Goals:

Throughout the development and implementation of this study, my primary goal was to increase student levels of confidence and proficiency in expository writing. Additionally, a secondary goal began to emerge, which was to create a classroom environment where students became facilitators of their own learning in a collaborative state. As students newly entering high school, I recognized that participants becoming confident and proficient writers was not only something they would need for their ninth grade English class, but also for the remainder of their high school and post-secondary education careers. Very early on in the school year, I recognized that students in my classroom had a variety of writing abilities. However, I also immediately recognized that students could benefit greatly from discussing and analyzing their writing with their classmates.

Keeping this goal in mind, I decided that implementing peer revisions and writing workshops into the classroom environment would potentially open the doors for evaluating and discussing writing for students. I wanted to explore the possible outcomes of enabling students to take ownership over their writing and over the responsibility of giving sound feedback and criticisms to their peers. I developed the belief that if I took a proverbial back seat in the classroom, students...
would take the wheel and become active, engaged learners, which would lead to
them becoming proficient and eager writers.

After researching peer revision as well as the reported effectiveness of
peer collaboration in the secondary classroom, I launched a full scale study where
I implemented peer editing and revising into some of my lesson plans and
activities.

**Setting and Participants**

My study took place in a school district located in Eastern Pennsylvania.
The district has one high school, two middle schools, and seven elementary
schools. The total student population is approximately 8,000. I teach 9th and 10th
grade English at the high school, which has an approximate population of 2,800
students. The student body of the school is made up of 86% Caucasians, 5%
Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 4% Black students. The general tone of the school is
one of high academic expectations. Teachers are mostly traditional in their
approach to teaching students and most classrooms are set up in single file rows
rather than in pods or groups. Mostly, students are exposed to formulaic
schedules, meaning they are to perform the same tasks every day upon entering
the classroom. Group work is not generally encouraged and students are well
aware that if they do not complete the assigned tasks then they will not pass their
classes. There is little to no room for excuses.
Additionally, the faculty tends to give the impression that a silent classroom is a preferable classroom. The undertone suggests that if students are talking, even if they are on task, then they are not under the control of the teacher and are therefore not learning. Therefore, any approach where peer grouping is encountered is generally met by some discontentment from other faculty members.

The specific class I choose to focus my study on consists of 27 9th grade participants. Their ages are between fourteen and fifteen years old. There are 14 females and 10 males participating in the study. None of the participants have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 plan. There are no students with physical or intellectual disabilities that participated in my study.

Procedures

Prior to beginning my study, I submitted an action research proposal to the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) committee of Moravian College. Through the committee, I was given approval to conduct my study (See appendix K). Following my secured approval from the HSIRB committee, I also obtained permission from my building principal, the parents and legal guardians of participants, and from the students participating in the study (See appendixes B and C).

The study occupied the span of twelve weeks, during which time, students were asked to write, revise, and peer review introductory paragraphs, body
paragraphs, and conclusion paragraphs for expository writing prompts. Students were also asked to peer review and provide feedback and constructive criticism on creating thesis statements, incorporating supporting details when writing to inform, and using figurative language in writing. In terms of grammatical structure and syntax, students were asked to peer review and revise sentence structure, tense structure, and punctuation. Additionally, students were exposed to various mini lessons where they were given opportunities to experience descriptive writing concepts. The culminating assignment was a final, five paragraph essay on discrimination and the existence of it in America today.

Methods of Data Collection

Participant Observations

In an effort to remain in tune with students throughout the course of my study, I participated in many observations where I interacted and discussed concepts with students. I asked students questions about their confidence levels in writing and revising, I asked about areas in need of additional attention, and I provided opportunities for students to discuss what was and was not working in helping them to become more proficient writers. During each of these participant observations, I recorded the feedback and findings in a field log, and then reflected on what was recorded at the close of each class session. Once each day closed, I revisited my notes and immediate reflections and then elaborated on classroom occurrences and observations through creating a narrative of my
interpretation of findings, as well as through providing quotes and insights from student participants. I would often sit with individual student participants in an interview like setting and ask them questions as I recorded results in my field log. Almost everyday of the study, I would ask the whole group for some feedback as a closure activity. This feedback was either given in conversation format or written as a ticket out of class.

In addition to participant observations and my field log, I also used student check-ins to ensure that my interpretations of happenings were accurate. I discussed what I thought to be relevant and true with students, and then used their own feedback to lead my interpretations of findings to fact. Additionally, after each class when I would record my observed findings, I would write my own thoughts next to what actually happened. In order to keep a distinction between fact and interpretation, I placed brackets around any short hand notes I took to make sure I noted what was fact and what was an interpretation. Those things that were my own interpretations were bracketed so that I knew when referencing my notes what was actual data versus what was my own interpretation of data from spoken student insights.

**Student Surveys and Questionnaires**

In addition to participant observations, I also created student questionnaires to receive formative feedback as we progressed through the study. Students began with a questionnaire about their feelings in regards to writing at
the start of the semester. The intention was to collect baseline data about student feelings and experiences with writing. Then, students were given “silent surveys” to respond to at the close of each peer review activity (See Appendix A). Finally, students were given an exit survey at the close of the study when students were asked to hand in their final, peer reviewed essay (See Appendix A). I created all questionnaires as a response to what was being covered in each class period. Some asked for an insight to how students were feeling about each task and to evaluate their confidence level, while many also asked for students to reiterate something that they had learned throughout the lesson, as well as something they wanted to dedicate more time towards mastering.

**Student Interviews**

To maintain focus and clarity throughout my collecting and interpreting data, I conducted student interviews throughout the course of my study. Interviews were done with all members participating in the study, with at least one interview per student, in order to accurately capture the effects of the implementation on all students rather than a minority. The point of the surveys was mainly to ensure that I was correctly interpreting findings and so that I could recollect and plan new mini-lessons when identifying, through interviews, that certain interventions and strategies were not proving effective.
**Student artifacts**

The last component of data collection that I utilized was student artifacts and writing samples from the course of the study. The first artifact used was an expository piece without any peer review element used in the writing process. This artifact is used as the baseline sample for the participant group. In addition to the baseline writing sample, I also accumulated sample paragraphs from descriptive writing lessons (See appendix D) and from the final product of the research project (See appendix J). In addition to student work, I also incorporated student reflections and self-assessments into the development of my action research plan so that I could receive and interpret what students felt were areas of success and weakness.
Trustworthiness

To ensure that the results of this study were both valid and trustworthy, I followed a series of guidelines and ethics throughout the process. First, before developing my study, I wrote to the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) at Moravian College requesting permission to conduct my study. Once I obtained permission from the HSIRB (Appendix A), I wrote a letter to my building principal requesting permission to conduct my study (Appendix B). After I received his written consent, I then sent home a letter asking parents for their consent in allowing their children to participate in the study (Appendix C). In this letter, I explained that I would only be using the data from those students who were granted parental consent, and I made it clear in both letters that a student could drop out at any point in time without penalty or disclosed rationale. I also reported that anonymity would be maintained and no student names would be written in the study. Additionally, after submitting my proposed study to the HSIRB at Moravian College, it was suggested that I also obtain consent from the students that would be participants in my study. After receiving this suggestion, I constructed a letter for student participants to indicate their willingness to participate in my data collection process (Appendix D). Just like in the letter to the parents, I made it clear to the students that participation was completely voluntary and that they could leave the study at any time. It was also written in both letters that all personal information would be protected by pseudonyms, and
all information, data and materials would be kept in a secure location until it would be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Once participants, parents, and building administration granted their consent and the study began, I maintained my trustworthiness by remaining open to unexpected findings both in the research I found and through observing my student group. In order to stay open minded throughout the course of my study, I utilized peer-debriefing strategies when discussing the happenings of my study with colleagues both in my department and in a peer cohort group through Moravian College (Hendricks, 2012). Having conversations with other members of my department provided me with feedback that enabled me to see some of the occurrences in my classroom through an objective lens, which helped to eliminate subjectivity in analyzing my data collection results (Hendricks, 2012). Additionally, sharing findings and discussing events from my study with the members of my peer cohort group enabled me to gather feedback on the overall validity and reliability of my research study. Finally, throughout the course of the study, I participated, both actively and passively, in persistent and prolonged observations of consenting research participants. During these lengthy periods of observation, I recorded, in a double entry journal, accurate and detailed data to ensure an accurate recounting of the effects of my study (Hendricks, 2012). Using a lengthy observation time of twelve weeks ensured that my findings and results were as accurate as possible. Throughout all of the observations during my study,
I kept a detailed field log to accurately capture the occurrences during periods of observation. During data collection, to avoid skewing results, I used triangulation to validate my findings (Hendricks, 2012). My results were based on common occurrences through the use of data collection, inquiry, and observations throughout the course of the study.

Lastly, throughout the course of my study, I used member checks as I began to interpret my data (Holly, et al., 2002). Discussing my interpretations of findings with the actual students participating in the study enabled me to maintain a system of checks and balances. Consistently throughout the study, I asked students to journal about insights they had gained, to identify areas where they were struggling with tasks and information, and to offer suggestions for ways that I could alter my study to ensure that students were finding success in each task. This system ensured that I was not misinterpreting data during the observation process. The student participants were able to support or refute my ideas when presented to them in member checks. This process helped to ensure the validity of my findings as being accurate or “real”, rather than interpreted findings. A final precaution taken to ensure ethical interpreting of findings was to analyze negative occurrences during the course of my study. To ignore any artifacts or outliers would have been unethical, so it was necessary that I study and analyze all results to better understand the effectiveness of my study. Additionally, I consistently planned and reflected throughout the course of my study. To maintain an ethical
study from start to finish, it was important that I deviated from my original plans to change the study so that it would best suit the needs of the students in my classroom. Finally, when presenting my findings to other audiences, I was sure to provide visual descriptions of the study and the setting in which it occurred while still maintaining anonymity to protect the identity of those participating (Hendricks 2012). This was done as a precautionary ethical measure to allow other teachers to accurately evaluate if the results from my study could be applicable in their own classrooms.
Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review is configured to highlight both the needs for students to become better writers through peer editing, as well as the need for students to take a more active role in being advocates for their own education. The proposed solution is that through peer editing and working with others in an intensive writing environment, both needs for academic improvement will be met. This document summarizes the findings of other action researchers and compiles the claims for both sides of this debate, indicating that there is a need for more emphasis on proficient expository writing, and that writing workshops, combined with peer reviewing, will offer the solution necessary for positive results.

An Introduction to the Current Crisis in Academic Writing

Currently in the United States, more and more students are struggling to gain proficiency in writing. Yet every year in the United States, large numbers of adolescents graduate from high school unable to write at the basic levels required by colleges or employers. (Graham, S., & Perin, D. 2007). In addition, every school day, 7,000 young people drop out of high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009), many of them because they lack the basic literacy skills to meet the growing demands of the high school curriculum (Kamil, 2003; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). In the United States, as of 2011, approximately 25% of the student population scored proficient in writing (NAEPS, 2011). An astounding
54% of the student population scored below basic, and a minimal 3% scored advanced (NAEPS, 2011). This score profile was consistent in grades eight through twelve in secondary level writing ability. In part, this concerning score is based on a lack of writing practice in the classroom, “What is clear is that even with some increases over time, many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length” (Applebee and Langer, 2006). The effects of a decrease in writing will lead to a decrease in academic writing ability. Additionally, students that are scoring proficient in writing are only able to compile basic writing structure, but are not able to maintain precision or add engaging details to their assignments (Apple and Langer, 2006). Not only does more writing need to occur in the classroom, but it needs to be practiced with an active audience, “Writing is communication, and without an audience, communication cannot occur” (Berridge, 2009, p.17). A common thread that has been linked to poor writing scores is the current methods of writing instruction. The National Commission on Writing claims that students are not engaged in writing often enough, nor are students actively engaged when facing the task of writing (2003).

**The Current Concern: Lack of Engagement**

With a diverse classroom filled with a variety of learners, not all self motivated lovers of writing, there need to be methods of engagement woven into each writing lesson. As McMaster claims, “The use of drama as a teaching tool is
based on the simple premise that an involved child is an interested child, and that an interested child will learn” (McMaster, 1998, p. 574). While most writing teachers cannot understand why any person would not want an entire class period of time to write, the fact remains that students may need action to create engagement or a desire to write. One method of creating a desire to write is to offer students a variety or topics to choose from, or free choice in their assignments with minimal teacher limitations. Additionally, it is essential that teachers implement the best practice methods into their classrooms, even in writing, to ensure that participants are interested and attentive (Pella, 2011). Therefore, drama and performance based activities are just as necessary for engagement in the writing classroom as they are in any other content area.

“Drama encompasses all four of the language arts modalities and is an effective medium for building decoding, vocabulary, syntactic, and discourse and metacognitive knowledge” (McMaster, 2010, p. 574). The four modalities, which are vocabulary, syntactic, discourse, and metacognitive language are necessary building blocks for the improvement of proficient writing. Children need a variety of methods to learn and make connections in all areas of their lives (Brown, 2011). Therefore, the writing classroom may be centered on writing, but it cannot be dedicated solely to the independent act of simply writing all the time. Instead, students must have an opportunity to explore, evaluate, and discover through activities, questions, and discussions with both peer and teacher support.
available. It is no longer deemed effective for students to submit papers and then receive corrections from teachers (Steineke, Daniels, & Zemelman, 2010). Rather than receive notice of mistakes after the fact, students should be evaluating and editing throughout the entire process, as well as relying on peers and student-centered discussions to solidify writing proficiency (Hokins, 2002). Students must be active participants in the entirety of the writing and collaborative process. A major struggle in high school composition courses today is that students receive feedback to steer their writing rather than creating criticisms to engage in their own exploration of the process (Hopkins 2002).

“When you give him an assignment you tell him what to say and how to say it, and thereby cheat your student of the opportunity to learn the process of discovery we call writing” (Murray, 2010, p. 5). While teachers may not be in a position to allow students free reign over topics of which to write, and while many students may desire a bit more structure to get them started, it is indisputable that for a student to truly learn, he or she must be engaged in what he or she is doing. Therefore, creating a study where students follow the same pattern of brainstorm, draft, peer review, and write for a variety of paper types and topics, will not likely foster exploration or sudden insights into how to become a more effective writer. This method will foster a more intrinsic want to write within students because they will be motivated by the choice they have to create their own work. Students will also find that the interaction with peers, as
well as with written words, will provide a sense of ownership that will encourage them to become more motivated, and therefore more proficient writers.

**A Proposed Solution: The Writing Workshop**

Students learn best when they are able to interact with peers in a collaborative setting (Berridge, 2009). In teaching writing, it is imperative that students learn to conference and edit with one another, as well as with the teacher or facilitator in the classroom (Tobin, 1993). Therefore, in order to actively teach writing, the entire process must be taught, not simply the act of writing, but also revising, editing, and conferencing. (Burke, 2008). Allowing students time to brainstorm and draft in class can often become “free time” in the eyes of a student. While a writing teacher may believe that students are embracing all aspects of the writing process, students may need redirection from the classroom teacher to ensure that they remain on task (Berridge, 2009). Even through there is a risk in students not working during time that is provided in class, it remains evident that students must work with peers as a method of learning to take ownership and pride in what they are working on (McClanahan, 2001). Therefore, teacher conferences and formative student self-assessments should be eagerly and consistently incorporated into the writing classroom. For students to begin to understand *how* to revise and give feedback, they must practice and witness good feedback and constructive criticism in action. Therefore, the writing workshop is an essential component to a successful writing classroom (Tobin,
1991). “How do you motivate your student to pass through this process, perhaps even pass through it again and again on the same piece of writing? First by shutting up” (Murray, 2010, p.5). It is necessary that teachers allow students the freedom to write and revise without overbearing interventions (Murray 2010). “When you are talking he isn’t writing. And you don’t learn by a process by talking about it, but by doing it” (Murray, 2010, p. 5). The workshop is a place for a teacher to model for students. Teachers should show how to go about the process, and then leave the students to master the process through living it. “The purpose of the writing conference is to help children teach you what they know so that you can help them more effectively with their writing” (Graves, 1994, p. 59). This is most often achieved in the writer’s workshop, where a teacher is there to provide guidance, and a learner is there to explore. To become a better writer, one must write. Regardless of the format, writing must be mastered through practice. “The most effective way I know to improve writing is do freewriting exercises regularly” (Elbow 1998 p. 3).

The draft is never finished after the first submission, but is rather perfected through the process of enacting the steps of the writing process. Likewise, the only way that a person becomes a better writer is through the act of writing and discussing (Elbow, 1998) Without practice, the skill of crafting essays cannot be improved. When students begin the process of writing, they begin an artistic journey toward the creation of something new. Noden (1999) says “The writer is
an artist, painting images of life with specific and identifiable brush strokes, images as realistic as Wyeth and as abstract as Picasso” (p. 1). The blank pages that predecease a well polished essay are best written, reviewed, and then again revisited by not only the author, but by the author’s peers as well.

**Editing and Revising**

For students to become better writers, students need to learn grammatical usage (Topping and Hoffman). Although grammar is an important aspect of becoming a more proficient writer, “Knowledge of grammar, in itself, does not improve writing” (Topping and Hoffman). Although teaching grammar is noted as an important aspect of the writing process, “studies over the years have consistently shown that the teaching of grammar does not automatically improve writing. Conversely, teaching writing does not automatically improve one’s writing of grammar. Writing is writing. Grammar is grammar. They are related and symbiotic in nature, but neither necessarily causal of the other” (Topping and Hoffman). To most effectively teach writing, students must have writing shared with them, and they must share their own writing. (Topping and Hoffman).

Unlike the creative process of writing, grammar and editing must be concrete and cutthroat (Elbow). While writing allows for creativity, the voice of a passage can be stifled or unintentionally changed by grammatical and syntactical errors.

“Common sense tells us we have to do more than mention mechanics and grammar: we have to teach them” (Anderson, 2005, p. 23). However, rather than
the traditional approach of drill and assess, Noden (1999) offers five “brush strokes” that he feels will most help students to become better writers. “For student writers, learning how to show is central in their journey toward powerful prose” (p. 3). This concept of brush strokes can aid students who have an aversion to the drilling method of teaching traditional grammar by displaying the concepts through sharing examples. This method does not suggest that students must be able to deconstruct sentence patterns, but rather emphasizes student writing through exposure and modeling for understanding.

**Collaborative Learning**

Students learn best from one another (Murray, 1972). While the teacher in the classroom may be the most knowledgeable about the content area, there is a level of attentiveness that occurs when students are working with their peers that is not as easily achieved, or ever achieved, by a classroom teacher (Daniels, 2004). Constructive and valid meaning making and learning can only occur when a student is actively engaged (Berridge, 2009). Constructivist learning allows students to participate in his or her learning and their environment to become active thinkers. (Frank, 1995). Student participation helps students to retain more information about a subject rather than simply listening passively to information being presented in lecture format from a classroom teacher. “This interplay among students and the environment they occupy is what can be called a cooperative learning environment, and environment where ‘students work
together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (Berridge, 2009, p. 6).

To not allow students to work and interact with one another is to limit their resources in making meaning and long-term knowledge, and this remains true in the teaching of writing as it does any other discipline. While writing may begin as an individual task, for it to become perfected there must be time for both feedback and revisions (Tobin, 1991). “Authentic, applicable learning is not something that is done to us, but rather something we must do. Learning to write using the writing process is such a way, it allows for engagement of the student in the act of writing to improve their skills. This act is supported by interaction with others” (Berridge, 2009, p. 8). A student cannot improve without enacting the process of writing his or her self. “Unless children speak about what they know, we lose out on what they know and how they know it” (Graves, 1994, p. 16). As the masters of many trades have mentors and teachers, student writers must have the same, and it is often best presented through the interaction with peers in the classroom. “Powerful writing seems to contain a magical essence; one we hope might somehow rub off on us. (Fletcher (2011), p. 3) Without engaging with the text, there is no real chance for growth (Berridge, 2009).

**Reflective Thinkers**

Creating a classroom that is based on student exploration creates an environment where grappling with new ideas is no longer something to fear, but is rather something to strive for (Tobin, 1991). In an environment where students are
steering their own paths of thinking and creating, there cannot be room for
discouragement, but rather constructive criticisms. “Kids expect the red pen to
come down hard […] Students don’t learn from it; it sends a negative signal that
you’re fault finding, not helping them learn” (Steineke, et al., 2010, p. 125). Not
only does a teacher directed environment challenge the esteem of struggling
student writers, but it can also influence teachers to give less assignments for fear
of incorrect markings and feedback for students (Steineke et al. 2010). The red
pen method of correcting and moving on from an assignment after a “final
submission” is a practice that is no longer deemed effective in creating a writing
environment for reflective thinkers. It is important to note that the student must
gain the most from the process of writing and thinking; not the teacher. Therefore,
the process must not only aim to create a better writer, but more importantly, a
better thinker.

Self-efficacy

While peer editing aids students in collaborative thought and reflection
throughout the writing process, it is through the more lonesome steps of the
formulation of expository writing that students become more mature and
responsible writers and thinkers (Calhoun& Haley, 2003). Peer interacting and
tutoring incorporate relationship building and metacognitive thinking into the
classroom (Berridge, 2009). To ensure that students become more fluent creators
of expository assignments, they must include the writing process as a checkpoint
within a system of checks and balances. A student who embraces the process of writing and uses it when composing essays will assuredly become a better writer. “When the class takes responsibility for their own writing and managing of the classroom, it encourages individuals to do the same” (Graves, 1999, p. 123). Rather than writing a paper and submitting it for a grade, the writing process allows for revising and revisiting work so that a student learns writing through the act of practicing it. For students to become aware of their own thinking and learning, they must be active participants in their thinking and learning (Burke, 2008). Students will reap the benefits of consistent feedback and growth throughout the process of writing using: brainstorming, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing, but using the writing process in class will also instill a system of checks and balances for students to maintain an active pace with their writing throughout the stages and deadlines that are set forth by the classroom facilitator or teacher. However, despite the solidarity, or independent assignments that writing brings forth, there must also be a sharing of ideas and an exchange of feedback as directed in the revision and editing steps of the process (Murray, 2009). Additionally, incorporating the writing process into the classroom through teacher modeling will enable students to become better writers through trial and error. “We have to respect the student, not for his product, not for the paper we will call literature by giving it a grade, but for the search for truth in which he is engaged” (Murray 2009, p. 5). As Murray claims in the aforementioned quote,
self-efficacy is an important component of the writing course as well as the writing process. The student finds an opportunity to create, and likewise, the teacher finds an opportunity to facilitate rather than directly lead. “Through practice and modeling, the novice writer will learn to become not only a responsible writer, but also a reflective one through the assistance of the classroom expert” (Soiferman, Boyd, & Straw 2010 p. 8). Essentially, the writer can only improve through the act of practicing, revising, and revisiting his or her work, not through the surface level suggestions of another teacher or peer, but through his or her own exploration and revising of writing.

**Summary**

For students to gain the most from a high school writing class, they must have ample opportunities to share their writing with others (Tobin, 1991). Without consistent feedback, students cannot learn how to improve their writing (Burke, 2008). Therefore, to create an environment where students are able to grow as writers and editors, the classroom cannot be based on silently writing, but rather on sharing, collaborating, and providing feedback for growing ideas.
Methods of Analysis

Introduction

The entire purpose of data collection is to analyze our findings to discover what works best for our students. To improve my professional practice and my approach to teaching students in innovative and successful ways, I followed Bogdan and Biklen’s (2003) advice and did initial coding to help focus my study towards the needs of my students, but I saved the “more formal analysis and interpretation until most of the data [were] collected” (148).

Field Log Analysis

My field log became my best friend throughout the course of this study. While I kept it locked away in my desk at times when I was out of my classroom in the beginning of the study, as the process went forth, I began taking my log with me wherever I went. In my field log, I kept a double entry journal which held factual participant and non-participant observations, but also my feelings and interpretations about happenings throughout the course of my study. It also contained student work, interviews, formative assessments, questionnaires, surveys, and journal responses. To maintain a distinction between what was fact versus what was my own opinion, I keep the factual information and quotations on the left side of my double entry journal, and wrote my feelings and interpretations on the right. If I was scribbling findings somewhere other than my field log for some reason, then I placed brackets around any writing that was my
own interpretation so that I could maintain a trustworthy distinction between what actually happened and what I was interpreting as happening.

**Participant Observation Analysis**

While I conducted the study, my clipboard became an extension of myself. I carried it with me when I circulated the room during student work time, or kept it nearby anytime I was providing direct instruction or piloting a mini-lesson. If a student or student group said or did something that I would want to remember or address later, I would write it on my clipboard so that I would not forget that I deemed it as something worth addressing during the class period. By the end of the study, I had collected 134 pages of notes from my observations and reflections.

Once I had time at the close of class, I would sit at my desk and type out the quote that I had captured, and then I would journal about my perceived thoughts, actions, and reflections to it. Additionally, I would look over any student work that I had collected, interpret what I found to be significant and determine any questions that arose from it, and then I would journal about it as well. At the end of each week, I would re-read my field notes and write down any questions, comments, concerns or insights that I gleaned to help guide my planning for the following week.
**Student Work Analysis**

Although I collected a vast amount of student work samples, I did not collect everything that my students created because I wanted them to have access to each of their drafts so that I could try and influence them through the experience of conducting constant revisions to their work. However, I did collect every final expository sample paragraph and essay that students participating in my study created. All of their final products, as well as their peer review responses, went into my field log so that at the end of each week, as I reviewed and reread my findings, I could also look over student samples to see what initial themes and codes were arising to help guide the course of my study. It was through this process, in hindsight, that I see where my students were finding success even though in the midst of this timeframe, I was sometimes unable to see it.

**Collection of Baseline Data**

To begin the study with an idea of current levels of student proficiency in writing, I had students write a five paragraph, expository essay on the district assigned summer reading. This essay was informative in nature and students were not given guidelines on peer reviewing prior to submitting their final products. It was through the reading of this baseline essay assignment that I was able to note some areas of weakness, as well as some areas of strength, in student work.
To begin the study, I gave out a survey on writing and asked that my students give me some insights on their own views of writing and the process of writing. Through this, I learned that most of my students did not enjoy writing unless it was in the narrative form, that they were lacking confidence in grammar which they felt affected their writing ability, and that they mostly approached writing as a “once and done” task; not as something to be revisited and revised in the form of a process. This feedback was coded constantly as part of my process in seeing how to direct the course of my study so that I could make necessary changes to ensure that students were learning as the study progressed.

At the close of my study, I gave out the exact same writing survey that I began the study with. The point of using the same survey I started with was because I wanted to see how my students’ perspectives had changed throughout the course of the 16 week study. I coded this survey the same way I did the first, but this time I also made notations about what had stayed the same and what had changed in terms of student responses and insights in regards to writing and revising.

**Timeline**

First survey on experiences with writing and editing: (9/11/12).

-A non-peer reviewed literary analysis paper based on the district required summer reading novels (9/24/12).
-An informational paragraph, which was subjected to two peer reviews and a final self check prior to submission (10/22/12).

- A smattering of cohesive paragraph prompts based on the various short stories covered in our first unit (9/16/12, 9/23/12, and 10/18/12).

-were placed in three member, cohort groups for the creation of the first, full length expository paper (11/11/12).

-Create an outline for a formal paper based on a teacher provided sample for a student driven writing prompt (11/16/12).

-Students shared and peer reviewed outlines in class (11/19/12).

-Students worked in small groups to create and edit clear and concise thesis statements to organize their formal drafts (11/27/12).

-Students wrote rough drafts based on their peer review (12/6/12).

-Students had typed, rough drafts reviewed by two different peers on two different days (12/7/12).

-Students used a teacher created peer review page for one review, and were responsible for creating their own for the second review (12/12/12).

-Students peer review an introductory paragraph in class with teacher modeling (12/13/12).

-Students reviewed their own introductory paragraphs with peers (12/17/12).

-Students used a step-by-step, student created peer review page to evaluate the writing of body paragraphs (12/18/12).
- Students work shopped in class to make revisions based on peer reviews (12/19/13 and 12/20/12).

- Students handed in final, peer reviewed expository papers based on discrimination (1/4/13).

Coding Analysis

Although I began collecting and coding data from the beginning of my study, it was not until my study was almost complete that I was able to reread my field log and scrutinize the data and codes that had emerged. As Bogdan and Biklen (2003) advise, I took a slight break of about ten days from my study before I revisited my codes for analysis. I believe that it was through this break that I was able to emotionally detach myself a bit from my study, and look though my findings with an objective, professional researcher’s perspective. Through rereading and analyzing my developed codes six times, I was able to see new insights, roadblocks, and perspectives that I had during the course of my study and the initial coding process. Before developing my theme statements, I coded my findings and read my field log to interpret how my guidance was being perceived by students in their journey toward becoming better writers.

My Story

The Art and Struggle of Teaching Writing

When I first discovered that I had an interest in teaching struggling writers, I myself was a struggling teacher. For some reason, I could not find a
method in which I felt that I was actually reaching my students and making sense of what the typically well organized expository essay looked like from the writer’s perspective. I kept standing in front of the blackboard, writing down the following: Topic sentence, transition word, supporting detail, transition word, explanation, second supporting detail, explanation, transition word, final supporting detail, transition word, clincher statement.

I did all that I could to make this pattern clear through direct instruction. I used different colored chalk. I made guided notes handouts. I made PowerPoint presentations. I created outlines with roman numerals and instructions in the margins. Nothing worked.

Finally, one afternoon in conference with a colleague and friend on the telephone, I explained how exasperating the process was becoming for me. I simply could not understand why what I was teaching about writing was not translating into understanding for students. The woman on the other end of the phone simply asked, “Well, have you asked them to write yet?” The moment she said it, I had an epiphany. Had I asked them to write yet? The answer, sadly, was no. I had not. At least not in a manner that would enable them to begin and finish a product without it constantly being under the scrutinizing eyes of the teacher. Not only had I not provided this seemingly simple opportunity, but I had also not allowed for many others. Students had not been asked to brainstorm topics that they were interested in writing about, they had not been asked or interviewed.
about their previous experiences with writing, they had not been challenged to freewrite, to journal, to blog, or to speak with their peers about writing, the act of writing, or to review one another’s work. Essentially, in this early phase, I had done all I could with teaching writing, without actually allowing for the writing to happen.

It was after this newfound understanding that I began to research new ways to teach writing that would essentially eliminate the classroom teacher and make the students of the room into the facilitators of their own learning. This inevitably failed. My students hadn’t even been asked to write more than one expository paragraph on their own. How possibly could they move from such extreme support to practically no support? The answer is simple— they could not.

As any reflective practitioner ill do, after this seemingly huge failure, I did two things: I cried and then I called my best friend. She reminded me of the many great teachers that I had learned throughout the years. She asked me to think about the way that they had influenced me to write. I tried and tried to think of the answer to this seemingly simple question, but could not find a solution. I distinctly remember saying, “but I always just knew how to write.” It was never something that I had to practice because it had been a part of my life for as long as reading had been; essentially, forever. To this, my best friend responded with the only thing a fellow educator can convey in a time of need, “if
reading made you a better writer, why in the world aren’t you having them read more?”

In hindsight, it was this comment that changed my teaching style and opened my eyes to my objectives and the means in which they could be achieved.

Instead of holding reading and writing separately in my approach, I began creating assignments that asked that students encompass both. Rather than asking students to read a book and write an essay about something completely different, I began asking students to do things at home such as reading an article about a local issue or occurrence and then write a journal response to it. Suddenly, even though I had not stood in front of my classroom with green and orange chalk, my students were writing journal entries that had clear topic sentences, supporting details, and flowing transitions. Not only was this an impressive change, but more importantly, they were not upset about being asked to write. It was as if they might even enjoy the assignments as long as they had some choice in what they were writing about and the format that they used.

At about the point in time when my students began to enjoy writing, I found that they also enjoyed sharing what they wrote with their peers. This, I believe, was when I discovered that peer reviewing and sharing made my students better writers when they were writing narratively and also in expository form. I wondered, though, would this approach work if students were asked to write full
length, expository pieces instead of the short, 1-page responses that they were handing in for homework assignments?

As these things tend to go, I had this sudden realization and posing question at the close of the school year. Though I felt my students could be pushed much further, and that I had finally found a way to begin pushing them, I still conceded that I had made some significant strides throughout this academic year. I left the school year in 2011 with a renewed desire to teach writing and with new plans for how to teach it.

**Even the best laid plans…**

The following school year did not begin the way that I had envisioned it. In fact, it almost did not begin at all. During the summer between school years, I was told that I had been furloughed because of the impending budget cuts that the governor had made in the state that effected educational spending. Devastated that my tenure at the high school had been terminated after five years of service, I frantically began searching for a new job placement. Luckily, I was offered a one semester long term substitute position for a woman that was going out on a maternity leave in a neighboring district. I eagerly accepted this position hoping that when the semester came to a close in January, I would have secured a contract in my previous placement again.

The cliché “all things happen for a reason” is often used when negative situations arise. However, I suppose that even the most overused of overused
expressions can resonate true in some situations. This was one of them. Although I dreading having to leave my comfort zone and classroom, I embarked upon this new journey in my teaching career with an optimistic attitude and was thrilled to learn that I would be in charge of teaching three sections of intensive writing classes. One was a newly designed course to teach freshmen expository writing, and the other two were expository writing courses that had been placed in the district curriculum as a requirement for eleventh grade students. Both required that students write a minimum of six expository pieces and the ninth grade class called also for one narrative piece. The prospect of diving into so much writing and teaching of writing inspired me, and so I went back to my proverbial drawing board and debated how I would approach this new and exciting career shift.

This time, instead of not allowing my students to write so that I could tell them about writing, I hit the ground running. On the very first day of class, I took students outside into the courtyard and had students create descriptive paragraphs about their surroundings using imagery and the five senses. And as they wrote, rather than sit idly by and watch, I modeled for them. I wrote as they wrote, and then I took the center stage and shared my own writing. I asked students for feedback. I asked what they thought should be added, eliminated, and changed in my writing. I began to note that this was not only a new experience for me, but a new experience for my students as well. I later found out that not only had they
been prone to direct instruction and little to no classroom movement, but they had also been encouraged to remain silent during school hours. I found that in my classroom, these students whole-heartedly embraced an opportunity to be heard, and so they used their writing as a starting point for their stories to be told.

Granted, this dreamlike reality in education was sadly short lived. At the close of the semester, the woman who I was in for returned to her classroom, and I returned to my original district, but this time was placed in the opposite high school from the one I had been hired in. I left my long term sub position mourning the end of this teaching assignment. At this point in my career, my experience in this school was unparalleled. It was a time that I felt incredibly effective, and I was fearful that returning to my original district would again mean that I would be faced with obstacles that would make me, once again, question my effectiveness and my purpose.

During my stint at this high school, I took an approach that encompassed all things that had worked for me in the previous placements where I had been employed. I was not quick to forget how the open environment and freedom of writing, and wandering, had inspired students in my previous district. Yet I was also mindful of the need to incorporate more strict guidelines for students in my new, very large and very urban high school setting. I feared that freedom to write at will would inevitably lead to students not taking me or my expectations
seriously. I also feared that going back to the direct instruction model would turn students off to writing and I would once again stare failure in the face.

At an educational crossroads, I stood. It was here, at this place, that I decided I needed to find a “happy medium” – a place where students were able to write, to share, and to find their voices, but also a place where accountability was a priority; not only from the teacher, but from the students as well. It is at this place that I decided I would focus my instructions on peer editing and the effects of it on a 9th grade classroom.

A couple of speed bumps

After this point in my decision making process about my approach to teaching writing, I learned that even though the two high schools I had worked at were in the same district, the curriculum was surprisingly different. Or perhaps it is best to say that the approach to teaching the curriculum is surprisingly different. I was once again professionally forced to rework my bag of tools and create methods to teach writing that would allow for students to interact with one another and find a way to enjoy the journey through expository writing.

It was during this time in my career that I believe my desire to explore peer reviewing and editing emerged. I could not expect that I would have longevity in any certain school, or district for that matter, with the state of the economy. I could not conceive of where my next placement would be, so I decided that I would focus my efforts on peer editing. Not only because I found a
passion for it as an educational tool, but also because I was determined to focus my efforts on a topic that could benefit students of any grade, at any level, and in any place. Peer reviewing seemed to be a perfect fit.

The following summer, as I began my proposal to the HSIRB to conduct my action study research project, I applied for a job in a new school district with the hopes of achieving some job security. After an extensive interview process, I was offered a permanent contract in a new, and far more affluent school district. I eagerly accepted the position and anticipated great and immediate success in regards to implementing my study in this new building.

While incorporating peer workshops and reviewing had shown me more than mediocre success in my previous urban school district, I had found exceptional results and received positive student feedback when I had incorporated the basic concepts of peer revision in the district where I had taken the long term substitute position the previous year. The conclusion I drew from this was that in my new school district, which is more closely akin to the place of my long term substitute position, the students would love this peer revision concept. I was positive that I was making a wise choice for not only my career, but for my study as well. I could not have been more wrong.

Here, we play school

While the focus and intention in my previous classrooms had been finding new and innovative ways to captivate the attention of students, in my new
classroom, the focus was quite different. Here, students do not need a teacher who is willing to put on a “show”. In this new place, students do what is expected of them when it is asked, because that is what has always been enforced. While my previous experiences had always signified a need for students to be convinced that they should buy into what I was selling, in my new placement, students are used to functioning under a much more traditional system. Students in this school prefer their desks in rows, not groups. Students in this school prefer traditional tests. They prefer that a teacher give them explicit guidelines on exactly what will be needed to achieve a grade of A in the course, and then they want to do those things, exactly. In this new school, students did not embrace peer editing and revision workshops. They did not buy in to working with peers and becoming facilitators of their own learning. Instead, they resisted. They asked me, the teacher, for clarity instead of relying on their peers or on themselves. They met me with resistance in my desire to go against the norm almost every step of the way. Until suddenly, they didn’t. Until one day, magically, it seemed to click for this very special group of students. Many of the experiences and observations that occurred were not positive. Many of the mini lessons that were planned were met with resistance. However, through the journey of this story, something far more valuable was learned than anything I believe can be gleaned from a textbook. For both the students and the teacher alike, new doors were opened and new insights were created. Perhaps at this new school, students play school as per their
traditional teachings. Through the course of this study, I believe the game changed. And that has made the journey worth all the while.

**Introducing My Study**

“Before we begin our class today, or therefore, our year together, I wanted to tell you that I am conducting an action research study. I am a student as well as a teacher, and I am looking for ways to most effectively teach you how to write”.

“So you mean to tell us that you have to write a paper based on what we do?” asked Clay

“Yes, that’s exactly right.” I answered.

“So, if we do a really good job, you’ll get a better grade?” He inquired

“Well, as long as you do your best, I should get a good grade. It’s not really about you doing well, as much as it’s about me recording what does and doesn’t work for you so that I can plan to better teach you and students I have in the future.” I responded

“So basically you’re saying you don’t know how to teach and we are puppets.”

Chimed in Kim from the back of the room.

The course of my study, much like the above quote, was full of surprising findings. This statement, in a way, captures the general attitude of my students that participated in the study. Or, at least it does for the beginning of the study.
As we grew to write more and to understand each other better, there was a shift in the general attitude of students to that of more appreciation and less entitlement.

Overall, the initial response to my study was not that of appreciation for my desire to learn and explore the best methods to most effectively teach my students, instead it was one of disbelief that I didn’t already have all the answers. The only basic interest students had in my presenting my study was that they were excited about potentially having their names, not knowing at this early stage that they would each be assigned a pseudonym, appear in a publishable document. They were intrigued by the idea of fame far more than they were by me becoming a more effective educator.

At this point in time, I let students know that while I certainly wanted to glean new insights from this experience, and that I wanted for each student to consent to participation, I ensured them that their grades would not be affected in any way by their willingness, or lack thereof, to participate in the study. I also reiterated to students that if they wanted to withdraw from the study at any point in time, they could do so without any penalty. This revelation originally gave students the idea that they could not do any writing or classwork if they were not study participants. A myth I quickly dispelled by explaining that participating in the study only enables me to record and reflect upon the findings of those consenting, but that all students, regardless of study participation, would be responsible and accountable for the work presented.
After all was said in terms of participating and what it would entail, every single student in my class where the study would be conducted agreed to participate.

**Jumping In Head First**

The day after the study was presented, I brought in student and guardian consent forms and got to work. I began with the following:

*Mrs. Ott:* “What makes a paper a good paper?”

*Clara:* “It’s long”

*Mrs. Ott:* “Okay. How long is long?”

*Clara:* “At least three paragraphs, but it should probably be more like five.”

*Mrs. Ott:* “Excellent! I am glad to see that you already know two of the organizational models that are effective for writing! What else do you think makes a paper good?”

*James:* “Supporting details. You need, like, three or something.”

*Mrs. Ott:* “That’s a great point! Do you need three total in the paper?”

*James:* “Yeah.”

*Carisle:* “No. You need three for each point you make.”

*Mrs. Ott:* “Yes! That’s an excellent guideline. What else?”

*Clara:* “You should have all the punctuation and spelling checked by someone so you know it’s right”

This conversation about what makes for a good writer or for a good paper went on for about 10 minutes. I noticed that mostly students were reporting
formulaic concepts for good writing. None said anything about originality, tone, voice, style, or focus. Instead, they listed things like: grammar, spelling, punctuation, topic sentences, supporting details, and examples. To capture what students generally believed was “good writing” we generated a list as a class. I wrote responses on my white board, and asked a student to record traits on a piece of paper as well.

Next, we brainstormed what would make for “bad” writing. Students came up with the following: Bad punctuation, bad spelling, no details or lacking details, boring topics, veering off topic, not doing MLA the right way.

Again, to capture student responses, I wrote these findings on my board and had a recorder make note of what was written.

I felt it was necessary to develop an understanding of what my students valued as “good” writing and what they believed constituted “bad” writing. It was at this point that I began to notice that students were most comfortable evaluating a sort of check list of items that were easily checkable in writing. They concentrated on the minute details of punctuation and style formatting more than they did on tone, development of ideas, and organization.

A New Beginning

After discussing writing with students and noting their perceptions and preconceived notions of good vs. bad writing, I decided to jump right into the first descriptive writing activity. The goal was to have students move to a new place in
the classroom or the vicinity of the classroom, meaning the hallway or stairwell nearby, and write for 4-6 minutes about the environment. Before setting them free to embark upon this journey, I asked students to list the five senses. They responded with: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching. I asked them to try their best to use each sense in describing the surrounding area. The first response was one I was expecting:

Sam asked, “so you want us to taste the stairwell? I don’t think that’s very sanitary.”

“I most certainly do not want that, but Sam brings us a good point. Class, what do you think you can do for the taste component of sensory writing?” I implored.

David responded, “Maybe we could just imagine what it would taste like because of the smell.”

“Great idea!” I encouraged.

Tyra chimes in, “Or we could try and use similes to say what it seems it would taste like.”

“Excellent!” I respond. “Does that seem to clear to everyone?”

This question is met with hesitant nods as response from the student population of the classroom. After another prompt for any questions, students scatter to their in school field trip destinations. I circulate and choose a place in the vicinity of some of my more talkative students, and model the descriptive
writing I am looking for. Once students see that I find the task important enough to do myself, any residual talking comes to a halt and students begin writing.

After 7 minutes comes to pass, I collect students and lead them back to the classroom. I ask them what they thought about the assignment. Students gave the following examples:

“I thought it was cool to go to a different place. Plus it helped to have a thing to concentrate on instead of having to just think of something to write about from nowhere” offers Steph.

“Mostly it was okay once I got started. Getting started is the hardest part” claimed Chris.

“It was easy because I know the five senses and I knew what you wanted us to do with using them. It was basically the easiest thing because I knew exactly what you wanted.” offered Robin.

Something about Robin’s poignant statement resonated with me. Perhaps the struggles that students faced with writing were directly linked to their interpretation, or misinterpretation of the requirements and expectations. I decided it was best to elaborate on this hunch, so I asked students what they believed I would look for when grading their writing. The response was the five main domains of the PSSA writing rubric: Focus, Content, Style, Organization, and Conventions. I asked students who could tell me what is meant by “conventions”. Not one student was able to answer. I asked what was meant by
“focus”. This time, one student said, “I’m pretty sure that’s how well you stay on your topic... but I always lose points for that and I never know why”. This was a turning point for me in the course of my study. I began to deduce that possibly students were not struggling with writing because of ability, but perhaps it was the obscure rubric guidelines that were presenting road blocks in their road to writing success.

I was inspired to add a new element to my research study. I was going to create a rubric that was not the PSSA writing rubric. Instead, I wanted something focused and explicit. I made a new rubric to be used for a paragraph writing prompt guideline. When I passed out my new rubric, I asked students if it helped to clarify the expectations I had for what they should be submitting. The response was overwhelming in the affirmative. Students responded saying that the general consensus was a question of why they had never been given such clear and explicit directions in the past. At this point, I assumed that I had unlocked the secret to success and that my students would all go home, read the rubric guidelines, and come back with perfectly executed, well organized paragraphs.

Finally, when meeting with my class again, I got paragraphs, and they were certainly more descriptive than they had been in the past, but while I had gained some success in getting students to add sensory details to their writing, I lost something in getting structured and well organized writing. This time, papers were descriptive, but there were many personal pronouns, fragments, and
questions leaden throughout the paragraphs. It seemed as though in achieving the primary goal, to develop more descriptive and imagery filled writing, my students had forgotten about grammar and organizational structure. It was back to the drawing board.

The following lesson, after reflecting on the paragraphs that I had graded, I noted that based on my rubric guidelines, students had in fact earned full point values for their work. The things I specifically requested that students do, they did. It was at this point in time that I realized students were writing exactly what I had asked them to, and that they were following the rubric to a “T”. In essence, they were playing school. They did exactly what I wanted, and eliminated anything they had been asked to do prior in terms of writing. It occurred to me that they were not making a natural connection between what they had been taught previously about writing and what we were visiting as a class at this point. I noted that I needed to make a more elaborate rubric, so that I could encompass all things that I expected in writing.

The next day, I did a mini-lesson where I modeled descriptive writing while tasting a Hershey Kiss. Every student was given a prompt explaining that they were traveling to the United States from another planet, and that they wanted to write home to their fellow alien citizens about the delectable sweets that Earth had to offer. They were given a list of 5 words that they could not use in their description, and then they were asked to do the following: Look at
the wrapping of the treat, describe it. Feel the wrapper, describe it. Unwrap the wrapper and listen to the sound it makes, describe it, taste the treat and describe it. The five words that students were not allowed to use were: sweet, chocolate, smooth, creamy, or good.

During the lesson, students were chatting excitedly with one another, but the focus was on the lesson materials and writing about the Hershey Kiss. They were eager to eat their treats and to write about them, but they were also very eager to share their writing with their peers and to hear what their friends had written. This is where, in my field log, I identified the beginning of a shift in the classroom environment. Students were eager and excited to hear and share what they had read. They enjoyed listening to one another. Here is where I determined it was time to not only make better rubrics, but that I should also not wait until the final stage of drafting for students to peer review, instead, I should allow them to share and revise together through each part of the process. Although I concede that student Hershey Kiss paragraphs were not much better than the in house field trip paragraphs, it did seem as though the overall attitude towards writing and sharing was improving slightly, despite having taken about four weeks.

One October morning, in the midst of my study, I asked students to complete a mid point survey about their feelings in regards to peer editing prior to the first formal review. One student was vehemently opposed.
“I don’t understand why we have to do this” Sheena protested.

“Why you have to do what?” Mrs. Ott responded.

“If you are the teacher, I should not have to have other kids read what I am writing. You are paid to do it. Not me.” Sheena continued on.

“Everyday when you teach, you are able to learn something new. That is why I want for you to engage in peer editing and revising. When you are asked to teach someone something, you are more likely to know it more for yourself.” Mrs. Ott replied.

Sheena continued on “My parents said that you should be the only person to read my writing. If you are the person who knows what you want it to be, then you should be the one who grades it. Not anyone else.”

At this point, to halt the conversation, which was occurring in front of the class, I asked Sheena to please see me privately so that we could continue this discussion without involving the rest of the group. She was willing to abide by my request, but already I could sense the tension and the shift in willingness to participate from the group. To eliminate dissension, I asked students why they thought that I was asking them to engage in peer editing. Crickets could be heard in the room. No one was willing to raise their hands or offer any insights after Sheena’s outburst. Here is where I offered to share a story. I delved into a time in college when I was struggling so much in attempting to understand a concept in my calculus course. No matter how often I met with the professor, I just could
not grasp what I was supposed to do to find the value needed. I worked on essentially one problem for days, nervous that if I could not perfect it, I would not be able to keep up with the class as they advanced to higher-level calculus. My professor said to me, “Jamie. We have gone over this ad-nauseam and I cannot think of another way to explain this to you so that you understand the concept. I think you should go to the math lab and have a tutor try and talk you through it.”

Since I was at a point of collegiate despair, I took the advice of the professor and got help from one of the more proficient math tutors. In moments, she clearly explained the process necessary to me in a manner that I understood. By no means does that mean that my professor was wrong in his approach, but hearing it a different way, in a different setting, from a peer made a connection happen for me that provided clarity. I explained to my students that I believe that incorporating peer revising into our classroom could do the same thing for them with writing. There were some nodding heads and some glances exchanged between students. Sheena huffed a bit more, but I felt like I had established a clear message of why I was doing this with my students, and that I had illuminated that my intention was to make sure they were able to become the best writers possible. That this was for their benefit far more than it was for mine.

After I collected the initial survey for the first major peer review, I was surprised to see how positively students responded. It had seemed to me that they were struggling to see the value in what I was requiring of them, but the responses
they wrote were quite contradictory to the opinions I had assumed they had. Students claimed that, “peer editing and revising was helpful because it forced them to see things that they had missed before.” Some said that, “knowing we were peer reviewing made me hand things in on time because I knew someone else would have to read my work in order to get full credit.” One student, who seemed hesitant said, “it’s cool to have another kid look at my paper because they can tell me stuff sounds dumb without worrying about my feelings the way you would.” Granted, not all of the feedback I received during this initial survey was positive. Kala claimed, “I hate peer editing because I don’t know what I am supposed to be looking for.” And Sheena said, “I don’t see a point in this. It doesn’t matter if my classmate thinks my writing is good, it matters if my teacher thinks my writing is good. My classmate is not grading me.” And Marcus said, “I think that there are good and bad parts to this, but mostly it’s bad cause I talk instead of work.”

I began to think at this point, that I should allow students a chance to create a list of what they believed should make up the peer editing requirements. Students said they wanted a chance to revise with more than one partner, but that they also wanted an opportunity for a teacher conference before they submitted any work. Students said that they wanted to have the peer editing page for feedback, but that they also wanted me to create a checklist of things that a peer could easily look over to make sure that students were “on track” and adding all
of the correct and necessary elements to fulfill the requirements for the essay. This included: MLA format, topic sentence check points, transitions throughout the essay, and a section that allowed for a count of supporting details. I thought that this specifically was an exceptional request, but I suggested that students work together with me to make the checklist of what should be required. Sheena said, “that actually makes sense.” I took no offense to this remark, as it was becoming more and more clear to me that my student population was struggling with this nontraditional approach to grading and writing, but her remark showed that there was some willingness to adhere to this progressive idea. Yes, it was finally starting to make sense.

**Beginning yet again**

The next morning, I created a checklist on my Smartboard that was a compilation of items students deemed necessary for our checklist (see appendix). Students started out very slow to give responses, but eventually they got invested in the idea of offering advice on how they should be graded and seeing that I, as a traditional figure of authority, was listening to their suggestions and writing all of them down. I took this moment as an opportunity to model for students the concept of brainstorm, “*see how all of the ideas that we present are put on the list?*” inquired Mrs. Ott.

“Yes” Carla offered.
“Well, this is what the first part of brainstorming looks like. The idea is not to limit your thoughts and ideas, but instead to get everything on paper so that you can weed through it later and see what works. You should also keep your prewriting and brainstorm pages because they can be essential later on in the writing process when ideas don’t seem to be working the same way any longer,” Mrs. Ott finished.

In the midst of my speech about the importance of brainstorming as a part of the writing process, I note that Kyle and Levon are whispering to one another and are not listening to a word that I am saying about brainstorming, or about anything for that matter. I prompt the class to tell me the stages of the writing process. Brielle says: “Brainstorming, prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing”. I respond in the affirmative and then have one of those moments that you wish you could erase as a classroom teacher. I turn to Kyle and say, “Now Kyle, can you please repeat the steps of the writing process?” He looks like a deer in headlights.

This classroom environment is one that I have been working so hard to mold into a productive and respective collaborative environment. Part of the reason why it seems such an arduous task to get my students collaborating and working together is because, in my opinion, they are afraid of being wrong or becoming embarrassed in front of their peers. Yet, here, despite my knowledge of this issue, I asked that Kyle provide an answer that only he and Levon, in the
entire class of 24, did not know the answer to. As soon as the words were out of
my mouth, I instantly regretted my choice in calling on Kyle. Not only had I just
put him in a position to be embarrassed in front of his peers, but I had also
suddenly become similar to the majority of other teachers in my building. I took
an “I know more than you so I will embarrass you” approach. I was devastated in
my choice and disappointed in myself.

I remember little from the rest of this particular class session because I
was so preoccupied with Kyle and my impulsive decision to put him in the
classroom dunce cap. As the minutes were ticking by and the bell was ready to
sound, I asked Kyle to please take a moment and chat with me after class. He
came up to me and my desk and I stood. I apologized to him for embarrassing
him in front of his peers. He looked at me with what I can only assume was
bewilderment in his eyes. I asked him, “Were you not upset that I asked you a
question knowing that you didn’t have the answer?” Kyle looked at me, mouth
slightly agape for another moment and then said, “Well, yeah. I mean… it
bothered me, but you don’t have to apologize for it. You’re the teacher. You
don’t have to tell me that you’re sorry. Besides, I am sort of used to having
teachers do that to me, so it’s really not a big deal.” Inside, I was screaming at
myself. I had told Kyle that he was the same to me that he was to every other
teacher in the building, and it hadn’t even been intentional. This was the biggest
goal of my year, to change the approach to the classroom relationships through
collaboration and peer revision opportunities. I hadn’t known that until this very moment, but suddenly, the epiphany hit. This study was about more than what happens to the writing of kids when they work together and peer review papers.

Now it was, what happens to kids when they peer review and work in a collaborative environment. Or at least some aspect of it had become so. I determined here, before Kyle left to race to his 4th period class, that I was going to have to do two things: first, I needed to address my approach with Kyle to the rest of the class and use my own mistake as a model for what not to do when trying to encourage others. Second, I was going to have to change the way I dealt with students who were not on task or engaged in my mini-lessons.

Surly, embarrassment would work in this school to get things turned in and on time, but that was not what I wanted. I wanted real work. I wanted relationships to develop in my writing classroom, and so I had to be the first one to change so that it could occur.

A Brand New Day

As I reflected on the behavior of my students, as well as the way I myself behaved, I decided that it would be beneficial for me to incorporate a team building activity into our writing lessons. Upon entering the classroom, I asked that students sit with their cohort groups. These were specifically designed, with students involved, so that the peer writing groups would be built with a level of comfort through and a variety of abilities. When creating the cohort groups, I
used the baseline data from the summer essay that I had compiled, and I also asked that students write down the names of two peers they would like to work with, and two peers they felt they should not be paired with. Students were asked to provide two supporting reasons for each category. Then, I went through the responses and made groups. Each class member was given one peer from their choice list in each grouping of those they preferred to work with, and no students were paired with those they claimed they should not be asked to work with. This particular day, I decided that I should encourage students to try and work with their group members on a task. It was becoming evident to me that students were not only weak in revising, they were also weak in collaborating with one another.

The activity I provided for this day is called the four squares activity. The goal in this is that students must work together to place folds so that four perfect squares are created, but this must be done with nonverbal communication only. One person is assigned the role of recorder, where he or she must keep a written account of all that happens in the group. This person may note what is said and the body language that occurs throughout the activity. My intention in assigning this task for students was to provide them with an opportunity to tackle a challenge together, and to pick a challenge where they would be able to delve in without concern about feeling embarrassed over their own writing. This was implemented into my process to enable students in communicating while eliminating any threatening factors. At first, as I circulated the room, I sensed
what I recorded to be tension radiating throughout the classroom. Students were abiding by the rule of not speaking, but they were visibly annoyed with one another. There was finger snapping, shaking, and pointing occurring at most groups. Many recorders were furiously scribbling how much was happening even without any verbal communication. I allowed this to continue on for four minutes. Finally, I said, “Okay class. You have 30 seconds to communicate verbally one major facet that you believe needs attention in order to complete the task”. Suddenly the room was chaotic. Students were stumbling over one another to tell their peers what they thought was most important. Communication was finally happening, but it was not happening in the most productive of ways. Instead, it was a chaotic mess of “my idea is more important, so listen to me!” I allowed this chaos to continue for the full 30 seconds without intervening. Next, I stopped students from talking to one another, and told them they had three minutes to complete their assigned task. Mostly, as I walked about the room, I saw that students were stumped. No group had managed to create the four possible squares. Not one.

At the end of the 4 final minutes, I asked students what happened. That was all I said, “Okay class, what happened?” I was berated with an onslaught of opinions that students wanted to offer:

“When you gave us time to talk finally, I had the answer but my group didn’t listen to me” Ventured Jay.
“Well then why didn’t you tell us?! “ Sheena chimed in with an agitated tone.

“Because I was thinking that I would have time to say it after everyone got out what they wanted to say since everyone was all huffy about having the answer.” Jay retorted. At this time, I decided I should intervene before any additional relationship damage could potentially be done.

I asked, “What about having the 30 seconds was helpful?”

“It allowed us to talk, Mrs. Ott, but I think we would have been better off without the chance cause it just made me more annoyed ” Sheena responded.

“Alright. How, then, do you think this could apply to writing and reading our writing?” I asked.

This question, like many that I have asked about peer editing and reviewing was met with silence. I was getting frustrated. Really frustrated. At this point, I had asked relevant questions, given students opportunities to share their thoughts about their experiences with peer editing and revising with me through conferences, I had built time into almost every class period to discuss what changes could be made to the format that students were given so that the task of peer editing could be made more clear. Overall, despite all of that, students were still not biting. I was trying very hard to remain patient. Finally, I said, “Okay. If this is not working for us, perhaps we should try something different.”
I am not sure what happened at that moment. If it was the tone of my voice, or the resigned look on my face, or something in my body language that indicated I was ready to quit this endeavor that I had so enthusiastically spoken of prior, but suddenly the willingness of my students to participate changed. Kyle, of all students, was the first to speak up. He said,

“You know what was cool about that activity? I saw how hard it is to work with people when you can’t talk. That’s how I feel when I write stuff sometimes... or when I read other people’s stuff. I just feel like I don’t know what to say. I sort of end up feeling like I can’t talk about stuff or whatever because I don’t know what I am supposed to say.”

I am stunned by this moment. I am so surprised, that I don’t know where to go for a moment. I look about the room, and I see students nodding in agreement. I back towards the dry erase board, not daring to take my eyes off my students for fear that this moment might be a figment of my imagination. I grab a black Expo marker and ask students what else they felt about the activity. Suddenly, the gates have been opened and the answers come flooding out:

“I think we need to be able to talk to tell what things we need to work on”

Asserted Ben.

“I don’t think it’s fair to only give a set amount of time, because then I felt like we were fighting each other instead of working together because we wanted to be the one to be heard or something.” Quipped Kaylee.
“I think it’s really cool that we tried this” Offered Sheena.

“it’s not a bad idea to force us to work together if you want us to be able to trust each other.” Replied Levon.

This was the point where I saw the break through. Where I realized that I could develop more concrete rubrics and that I could create more sound peer review sheets, but that if I didn’t concentrate on the more abstract relationship elements, I would never have a successful peer review environment in my classroom.

**Yet Another New Approach**

The day after my perceived breakthrough in class, I decided it was time to allow my students to write with some freedom. I developed and made the first major expository essay assignment prompt. The focus of the assignment was to write a paper about why discrimination exists in the United States. This was a follow up to the reading and discussing of texts that are based on discrimination in American history.

Instead of creating a packet with bubble charts and outlines, I asked students what they believed would be the best approach to begin the process of writing this piece.

“Okay class, now that we have spent some time discussing discrimination in America and writing, how do you think we should go about collecting ideas on what we are going to write about?” Prompted Mrs. Ott.
“I guess we should start with writing down all of the ideas that we have about discrimination. Like maybe the many different types.” Kaylee offered.

“That’s a great idea.” Mrs. Ott responded.

“Afterwards, we should freewrite about it for some minutes.” Suggested Ben.

“Okay, perfect. So the plan is that first we will each generate a list, then we will share our findings to make a master list, and then we will choose one or two topics from all of the items that we brainstorm so that we can do a silent freewrite to see what ideas we have, is that correct?” Ventured Mrs. Ott.

“Yeah, that sounds ‘bout right.” Replied Levon.

The class begins by generating a list of ideas that come to mind when they think of the word discrimination. The class works for about 5 minutes independently and then they are asked to share their brainstormed lists with the rest of the class. As they share ideas, I write them on the board and ask that another student please copy them on a sheet of paper.

Students generate the following ideas: racism, ageism, sexism, gender orientation discrimination, and mental/physical disability discrimination. I ask each student to select one or two topics that they believe they would be interested in freewriting about, and tell them that they may move about the room to get into a comfortable “freewriting” position and placement. The class moves about and
after about 2 minutes, they are settled and poised with their chosen writing
utensils and notebooks.

The students are silent and I am, for a moment, moved by the sound of
pencil tips scratching notebook paper. As the teacher in the classroom who has
worked so hard and gotten so frustrated lately, I have not stopped to evaluate what
is happening in my classroom, or what that would look like to the outside world.
My students are engaged in the task of prewriting. They are brainstorming and
collecting ideas. They offered this as being the best approach to creating their
ideas and beginning their papers. I think for a moment that possibly success has
been reached in a small, yet victorious way. Students are taking an approach that
they offered, that they are not receiving a grade for, and that they are not forced to
do, and yet they are choosing to embrace the skill.

The class writes silently for about 7 minutes. I hear them start to rustle
about and assume it’s time that we put our pencils down and come back to whole
class discussion before focus is lost. I queue the class to finish their final thoughts
and sentences and then before I can even prompt the class, there is a small
eruption of talking.

Stephanie starts by saying, “I totally found that helpful this time. Way
more than usual.”

I respond by asking, “what about the frewrite this time made it easier for
you? Or more beneficial for you?”
Stephanie adds, “I don’t know. Maybe it was because I liked the topic we were freewriting about. Or maybe it’s because we talked about it for a while before hand.”

I look about the rest of the room and see that many students are nodding their heads to show agreement with Stephanie’s statement. I ask the rest of the group, “Does anyone else have anything to add?”

I am met mostly with silence at this point, except for Dominique, who says nothing but is looking at me like she’s angry. I have no intention of disrupting the flow of the class at this point to check in with her, plus her look suggests that she prefer I leave her be for a while longer. I make a mental note that I should speak with her at the close of the class period.

The rest of the class begins working independently toward turning their freewrites into bubble charts, which will later become outlines as part of both the prewriting and drafting process.

As the class continued working ahead, I circulated the room offering insights to students who were interested in getting feedback from me. I made my way to Stephanie’s desk and stopped to praise her on how much she had written during the freewriting segment of the class. I hoped that my approaching her would bolster her spirits and improve her mood about class on this day. I eagerly said to her, “Wow Stephanie, you’re really getting a lot of ideas down on paper. Can I read over what you’ve developed so far?”
She grudgingly said that I could look over her work. I saw that she had written some very poignant ideas about discrimination, and had even written some insights from her own experiences not only with discriminating, but also with being discriminated against. At this moment, I was very impressed with her work, and so I said I was proud of her. I expected her to reciprocate with appreciation, but instead she shrugged and put her head down.

For some reason, despite my best efforts, I could not seem to inspire Stephanie to see value in what we were doing. I also felt that I could not get her to see the value in establishing relationships in the classroom. I needed to find a way to further develop her confidence in writing and in participating. I am presenting Stephanie’s story to highlight teacher perceptions in contrast to student perceptions. Throughout this study, I found that many of the measures I took to try and inspire students had a reverse effect, and instead made them feel smothered by my desire to see them do well. I believe that it was my level of expectation, compounded with the expectations of their parents and of the other teachers in the building that forced them to feel as though the adults in their lives wanted more from them. My students began to believe that nothing they were doing was enough. Rather than wanting to achieve higher goals, I believe they wanted to be appreciated for what they could already do. Not to be reminded of what they could not.
Stephanie’s Story

Stephanie
Why does she have to lurk around me all the time and comment on everything that I do? Is it not cool just to leave me alone?

Mrs. Ott
Why is it that nothing I say to Stephanie makes a difference? I am trying so hard to make her feel valued in this classroom, but nothing seems to have an impact.

Stephanie
Will she ever just stop? If I wanted her help, I would ask her. Maybe if I don’t make eye contact, she’ll get the hint and leave me alone.

Mrs. Ott
Okay. Perhaps I am being too pushy to be effective. I suppose it’s best for now that I leave Stephanie be. I’ll just keep reminding the whole class that they can approach me with any questions or needs they might have.

Figure 1: Stephanie’s layered story

The creation of Stephanie’s layered story is to highlight that throughout the course of this study, there were some students who I simply could not reach in the ways that I aspired to. However, through this process, I found that I was better able to see things that students were feeling. I became capable, through my collection of feedback and through discussions with students, to see who was inspired by these efforts to create a collaborative environment, and who was hesitant about these newly implemented expectations.
After much thought and process, I took the insights I had gleaned from discussions, peer review, and formative assessments with students, and I decided it was time to create a peer review worksheet for the initial process of the final expository peer review. This time, rather than creating each category on my own, I began a rough sketch and then asked that students fill in the blanks with items they deemed necessary. Essentially, rather than compiling a list of tasks I thought essential that students complete when peer reviewing, I created an outline of what a peer review entails and allowed students to fill in the blanks with the more minute details they felt were valuable.

During this process, I was primarily thrilled to see that students had grown less inhibited in sharing details with me in front of the class. Rather than feeling I had to lure students to share concepts, during this particular lesson plan, students eagerly offered results.

“Okay class...” began Mrs. Ott, “when approaching another student’s writing, what is the first thing that we should do as revisers?

Sheena calls out, “We should read it aloud without a pen or a pencil in our hand so that our friends can hear what they wrote rather than look at what they wrote.”
Tyke chimes in and claims, “and then we should make sure there’s one of those hook things. Like any part of the four possible choices we learned in class.”

I prompt the class to please share these four “hooks” for writing an effective attention getter. I point to raised hands about the room and write their suggestions:

“ummm.. can ask a question that does not have a yes or a no answer.”

Kylee adds, “That’s a rhetorical question. You can also use a startling statistic.”

Janese, who is generally quiet and dislikes participating in front of the class says, “you can also tell a little story in the beginning. That anecdote thing.”

I nod encouragingly and scribble the responses on the board, asking the class for the final attention grabbing method of writing an introductory hook.

Crystal says, “You can use a quote as a lead in.”

I commend the class on this and write on the outline for peer review, “includes a hook.”

Dan stops me from writing and says, “Wait... can you please write down has one of the four hooks and then list what they are? I forget sometimes and then I keep just using those questions as starters because I know it will get me the points. If I could read and circle the one the person used, I would know what to
look for more... Especially if I’m not interested in the topic because then
sometimes I think to myself ‘that’s not a hook because I am not interested in it.’”

I am appreciative of this great insight. Perhaps I am not forcing my
students to think on the evaluation or analysis levels because I am simply asking
them to do more rhetorical skills such as recalling and listing. Dan’s comment is
quite valuable because it shows that students are noting areas where they feel they
can improve, and they are willing to provide the feedback to me as the instructor
to ensure that it happens. In the beginning of the year, and at the beginning of the
implementation of the study, students found that asking questions for clarity was a
sign of weakness or of assumed stupidity. Now, however, students are willing to
share their concerns and to offer more insights into what will help to create better
learning.

The class completes the task of creating a peer review sheet and suggests
that we also incorporate a color coding aspect so that students can highlight the
various requirements of each paragraph including: topic sentences, transitions,
supporting details, examples, and a closure sentence for each paragraph in the
body of the essay. One student says that she likes a visual when going over her
work, so she thinks having the color charts will help greatly in knowing exactly
what is missing. I am impressed with this identification of learning styles.
At the close of the mini-lesson and peer review creation sheet, I left my classroom eager and hopeful. I believed that true strides had been made in regards to students willingly collaborating and identifying areas of need.

**Fantasy vs. Reality**

I walk into room 518 armed and ready with my student created, peer created rubrics (see appendix G). I am so confident that my students will have a successful peer review, and that it will be so insightful, that the papers will essentially already be graded for me, with a score of A scrawled across the top.

Reality is at times not as sweet as fantasy. As much as students were coming along showing more willingness to participate in the peer review process, their attitudes during the implementation of the final peer review were not as receptive as I had begun to hope they would be. Below is a figure of my perception of the thoughts of my student participants:

| “She has a teaching degree. Why should I have to grade people?” |
| “I’m not a good writer and I never will be” |
| “Hey! This actually helped me!” “I still think this is useless” |
| “Ugh! I guess I have to do my paper now since Joey needs to review it for a grade.” |

*Figure 2: Thoughts of participants.*
As I circulated the room during the time that students were working with their peers and delving into the peer revising process, I noted that many were talking about things other than peer reviewing. I overheard conversations about upcoming winter dances, about a recent threat that had resulted in school being closed, I heard gossip about who the responsible party might be. I did not hear much being discussed about writing or drafts.

So, I went to the front of the room and I asked students what was causing the issue in progress. I was met with blank stares. I called on two students, Jay and Sheena, and said:

“What seems to be the problem? I have heard the two of you discuss everything other than peer reviewing.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted saying them. Here I was, working to foster an environment of support and instead, I had called out two students and belittled them in front of the group. I could taste metallic in my mouth. I was so upset, not only with myself but also with my perceived failure of this project implementation that I had so wholeheartedly thrown myself into. Both students looked at me with weary eyes. I decided it was best to address the class. I turned and said:

“I do not mean to call anyone out. I just want to understand what is happening that is not enabling you guys as a class to peer review your work the way I know you can.”
Sheena ventured, “It’s just different when you aren’t leading it. That’s all. It’s like… I understand what you’re saying when we review things together, but when I have to do this on my own, I never know what to say about another person’s paper.”

I looked about my classroom and saw that students were nodding in agreement with Sheena’s claim. I decided that it was time to go back to my roots and create a step-by-step guide for how to approach looking at the paper of a peer.

I created the following on the overhead projector for students to follow:

1.) Is there an attention grabber? If so, please underline it in green. If not, please write, “attention grabber needed” in the margin.

2.) After the attention grabber, is there a transition phrase to clarify the direction of the essay? Please underline this transition phrase in yellow. If not, please write “transition needed” in the margin of the introduction.

3.) Is the last line of the introductory paragraph a thesis statement that tells the reader what your essay will be about? Make sure it is 3 prongs, parallel, and one sentence. Underline each point of the thesis is purple. If there is no thesis, please take a moment to develop one with the writer of the paper. Write the new thesis in as the last sentence of the introductory paragraph.

Figure 3 - Introduction peer review

Once I created a simple step-by-step peer review, I saw the emergence of a change in the level of comfort within my students. Having a concrete rather than
an abstract task seemed to give them a renewed sense of confidence in their ability to accurately evaluate one another. Rather than discussing the year’s trends in prom attire, students were focused on the task at hand. They were all reading one another’s introductory paragraphs. The sounds of colored pencils scratching on paper resonated throughout the classroom. I overheard things like, “clear explanation”, “this sounds redundant,” and “I am not sure that this is parallel”.

Finally I saw the breakdown in communication. I had made tasks for my students that were unobtainable because the scale of which I was asking that they preform was outside of their zone of proximal development. The practice of peer revising was something I had been expecting they would simply do with the entire essay. However, in order to make that possible, I needed to break down the steps to the simplest forms, much like when I teach grammar.

Since this lesson seemed to be so effective, I decided to emulate it again for reviewing and revising the body paragraphs. Students were given the following directive:
1.) Underline the topic sentence of the first body paragraph. Does it relate to the first prong of the thesis statement? If not, rewrite your thesis statement so that it corresponds to each body paragraph.

2.) Underline the topic sentence of the second body paragraph. Does it relate to the second prong of the thesis statement? If not, rewrite your thesis statement so that it corresponds to each body paragraph.

3.) Underline the topic sentence of the third body paragraph. Does it relate to the third prong of the thesis statement? If not, rewrite your thesis statement so that it corresponds to each body paragraph.

Figure 4: Written instructions for peer revising body paragraphs for topic alignment to thesis statements.

Again, with chunking and breaking this segment of the peer review process into more simply assigned tasks, students rose to the occasion and were engaged, as a group, in the task of identifying if topic sentences directly corresponded with thesis prongs. I began to note that the process became much more manageable for students when they were given more directives and less freedom than I had previously been implementing into the revision segments of class. This discovery was well aligned with what I had previously gleaned; students in this particular environment thrive under concrete directions and clear cut expectations. They do not embrace freedom in the classroom in the same manner that students in previous settings of which I had previously worked in did.
This time, however, the knowledge gleaned was more comforting than frustrating, as it had been before. I recognized that my students were quite capable of reviewing and revising papers. I noted that they were even proficient at identifying areas in need of improvement and had gained the tools to effectively communicate how to make revisions to writing so that peers were creating well organized, coherent expository pieces. The only true difference from what I had wanted to see and what I actually saw in terms of improvement was my own expectation. While I had assumed that the class would, once again, take on a Hollywood movie like status, I had been wrong. However, that did not mean that my students could not learn as much as the classrooms aired on the big screen. The difference was in the freedom.

My population craves structure. The group that I work with does not want to be told to write. Instead, they want to be given a specific directive and then told what is needed to achieve a score that is deemed acceptable. That is why, rather than continuing to fight a battle that was not necessarily a losing one as much as it was a displaced one, I evaluated what my actual goal was. I wanted to create an environment where students felt comfortable working with one another and sharing ideas and criticisms alike in a supportive, collaborative environment.

That goal had been achieved. I also wanted to teach students how to revise and edit their own writing as well as the writing of their peers. That, too,
had been achieved. Granted, the road was not paved with an easy passage for the
journey, but regardless, I saw during this lesson that students had finally gained
the skills that the study was constructed to encourage. Overall, when I collected
the final drafts with the official peer reviews attached to them from my students, I
noted not so much the writing as I did the feedback that was given on peer review
forms. Students had written valuable feedback to one another. They praised one
another. They asked poignant questions such as, “I see that this is an important
supporting detail for your argument, but do you think it would be better used as an
example rather than a topic sentence?” and made valid suggestions without taking
ownership of the papers they were reading is saying, “I wonder if adding an
anecdote to your introduction would make this ending more clear for your
readers.” These suggestions showed me that students had learned enough about
the structure of writing through peer review, that they were able to offer guidance
and to teach their peers. Seeing as though those who teach also learn, I
considered this day a great success. I saw that my students had gained
knowledge, had gained confidence, had built positive relationships in the
classroom, and had fought their desire to “play school” and avoid taking
ownership of their learning. On this day, I saw that the transfer had happened.
My students were suddenly not only typical Language Arts students; they were
writers and editors as well.
At the beginning and the implementation stages of my research study, I anticipated Hollywood movie status results. I assumed that my students would soon be published, and I would soon be contacted by Steven Spielberg to sell my success story. I soon found out that sometimes the best laid plans are not meant to come to fruition.

First and foremost, I discovered that my students would not eagerly buy into anything that I was “selling”. While all that I had read prior to conducting my study indicated that students would benefit greatly from taking over the classroom, I was surprised to see that the reality included far more resistance than I ever anticipated. My students were not eager and excited to take on leadership roles. They were not immediately thankful for my eagerness to implement new writing and teaching techniques. They were the atheists of willingness when it came to change. As a group, my students were more hesitant than I would have expected from high school students growing up in a progressive era. The first thing that I found in this study, said plainly, is that students who are growing up in a time of change, are not necessarily as progressive as the trends in education currently are. With this, I also gleaned the insight that students are not necessarily as excited about things as I am. Despite my hopes and my best efforts, I learned that simply wanting for something to happen does not mean that it will. Instead, I found that the success in my study could not be found in the surface
implementation of practice, but instead needed to be fostered through a growing emphasis on relationship and team building in the classroom environment.

Additionally, through the phases of this study, I learned that regardless of my efforts, not every student could be inspired through my practice of peer revisions in the secondary language arts classroom. I found that no matter how much I tried, some students were not going to buy into my study or my ideas. I also found that some were disinterested in developing a positive relationship with me. In hindsight, I do not believe this was an intentional choice on the part of my students. Rather, I have found that in the district in which I am employed, the community emphasis is not on relationship development or on student focus, but is instead on the traditional adult/child, mentor/mentee belief system of schooling. I found that regardless of my intentions, some students would not be capable at this point of their lives in changing their approach to learning, nor could I impact the methods they valued as “good” teaching.

Finally, through this process, I discovered that peer editing and revising does in fact inspire students to become self-advocates. Students did claim that working on their papers while knowing their friends and peers would be reviewing them made them feel more accountable than if they had simply been writing their papers for the teacher to grade. Some students provided feedback saying that the awareness of another person being graded on the completion of the peer edit made them feel more obligated to submit their assignments on time. I
also discovered that students care about how they are viewed by their peers in terms of academic capabilities. Many were untrusting of peers in providing sound feedback, while others were nervous to potentially appear less than adequate in their ability to write expository pieces.

In total, these research findings highlighted that students are more invested in the classroom environment when they are held responsible for the collaborative working group. This research study showed that not all students are comfortable with sharing and collaborating, and that many are opposed to a change in the traditional approach to teaching writing, where the teacher explains and the students then write to be evaluated by the teacher. I also found that not every student can be reached through the methods we place emphasis on in our classrooms, but that changes can always be made to find avenues in which all students can be reached, and that is the most important revelation; that through flexibility and various grouping tactics, student engagement can increase.

**Where Shall We Go From Here**

Overall, the implementation of my study taught me that academic level writers need consistent feedback, not only from their peers, but from their writing teacher as well. While the feedback that peers reported was valuable, students wanted reassurance from me, as a classroom teacher, before they made the suggested revisions from their classmates. I also found that students from many backgrounds and from a variety of school and home environments need clear cut
directives in order to have the confidence to complete assigned writing tasks. In the beginning of my study, I believed that students would eagerly embrace the concept of peer editing and that they would lead their peers to becoming more sound and proficient writers. In hindsight, I now see that there is a need for the teacher to front-load this type of writing classroom with lots of modeling and with very clearly stated directions for any peer editing process. While I had originally assumed that students would essentially become the facilitators of their classroom and the advocates of their own learning, I quickly discovered that they do not have the know-how or the knowledge base to do so. Rather, they need to be exposed to clear cut directions, explicitly developed rubrics, and have mini-lessons that highlight the process of peer editing for them to have a clear understanding of the process.

As I carry forth with teaching writing to 9th grade students, I will continue to implement member checks and student interviews into my teaching practice. Many of my students confided in me that they appreciated my willingness to seek their opinions on concepts that we covered as well as my desire to know what was working for them as opposed to what was hindering their progress. At first, I struggled with hearing that certain approaches and ideas were not providing clarity to students. My original response was one of hurt feelings. However, I noted that throughout the implantation of my study, I became much more aware of what actually worked for my students rather than what I thought would work
for my students, and that made me a more effective educator. Instead of taking feedback personally, this venture has highlighted for me the importance of consistently changing and modeling my practice to best suit the needs of my students; an approach most suited to reach learners of all levels as they tackle the challenging task of formal writing.

Additionally, throughout this study I discovered the importance behind creating clearly stated and easily interpreted rubrics. Originally, my district insisted that students be evaluated using the PSSA rubric for writing. However, upon discussing the rubric with students, I noted that many could not deconstruct the language to glean a sound understanding of what exactly the professional scorers would be looking for when evaluating their writing. Although students needed to be scored in class on the items that would be included in the PSSA assessment, I found that breaking down the language and making more simplistic checklists for students provided them with the knowledge of what they were being assessed on. Once they knew that, the rest of the battle to create better writers became far more achievable.

Finally, in years to come I will change the pace at which I incorporate peer editing into the writing classroom. In the beginning of my action research study, I asked that students immediately begin peer editing. In hindsight, I see that I was requesting that students work beyond their zone of proximal development, which was making the task not only un-pleasurable, but also impossible. In the future,
the first phase of my practice will still be to ask students about their prior experiences, but it will be followed by a session of teacher modeling of writing. Additionally, I have found that there is a need for students to review the format of the five paragraph essay, as well as to explore other formats so that they can have the freedom to determine a writing style that will work best for them.

Findings

Introduction:

The purpose of my study was to observe the effects of incorporating peer revising into my English and writing classroom to see what effects these practices would have on student writing. With a focus on creating a classroom of proficient and eager writers, I set out to create a collaborative and effective academic environment. My ideal goal was to have students become self-reliant writers and to essentially create a “teacher-less” classroom. While my ideal goals were not quite reached, I did see that my students became more independent than they had been in the beginning of the study. I also observed that, although it was not immediate, a sense of community emerged in the classroom.

Although changes did not happen quickly, I have discovered that my students have become more proficient and confident writers throughout the course and implementation of my study. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, I found that students, when given choices and a voice in the classroom, become much more invested in not only their own learning, but also in preserving the
communal environment once it emerges. Originally, I did not set out with the primary goal of encouraging students to like one another, or even to learn to appreciate one another, but as this study took place, that very thread become the one that held this group together in their journey to become better expository writers. It was the sense of community and the obligation that they had to one another that led to students holding themselves accountable and also influenced them to consistently make the choice to forge ahead and to continue writing. It was through their consistent practice and exposure to expository pieces, as well as to peer review and feedback requirements, that students mostly became more proficient writers. Below are the themes that emerged throughout my data analysis along with an explanation of said themes.

**Implementing peer editing into the Language Arts classroom frustrated students when they were not being given directives from the teacher.**

Working in a district that is associated with student achievement puts a lot of pressure on not only the teacher to perform well, but the students as well. Therefore, many of my students grappled with the idea of not being told explicitly what to do in order to achieve an A in class and on their essays. Many students would ask me to look over their papers after their peers reviewed them; many even offered to come in after or before school to ensure that they were writing what I, as the teacher, was looking for. Although I am sure that many teachers worked along the way to encourage the students that made up this group to
become self-reliant, they were still dependent on teachers for feedback and for affirmation of success. Therefore, they were very resistant to the implementation of my study at first, and had a negative opinion about not only writing, but of working with peers as well.

**Student’s perceptions of their own ability to write and edit well effects their willingness to share their writing with peers.**

Consistently throughout this study, students were lacking confidence about their own writing, which made them self-conscious about sharing their work with others. Additionally, the absence of confidence in regards to writing proficiently themselves made many students cautious rather than confident about their ability to provide feedback and guidance about writing for their peers. In order to avoid this feeling of self-consciousness, many students at first refused to complete the paragraph writing assignments in an effort to avoid having to share their work and potentially feel inadequate academically. In the future, to combat this occurrence, I will make an effort to have students writing from the very first day of school. Additionally, I will require conferences with me as well as with peers so that students become accustomed to sharing their writing at an early stage in the school year.

**Mini-lessons on the writing process are necessary to keep students engaged.**

In the beginning stages of my study, I expected that students would easily be capable of sitting down and writing. However, this was not the case. Students
needed step-by-step instructions and exposure to the process of writing, so mini-lessons were necessary in obtaining positive results. Once students were sent on “in class field trips” and given food to describe, they became much more motivated learners and writers. In addition to becoming more motivated learners, students also gained a sense of confidence through their exposure to writing and editing from mini-lessons. Essentially, prior to the implementation of the mini-lessons, students did not yet have the skills to edit expository paragraphs for organization or support. Therefore, they were essential in enabling students to gain writing proficiency.

**Enabling student choice made for more frequent writing and revising**

Students shared with me in their introductory surveys that many enjoyed writing only if they were given a choice about what to write. Therefore, many lessons that were centered on writing paragraphs allowed for student choice. Rather than me creating the prompts and details, I allowed students to generate lists of possible topics to write about persuasively and informatively. When collecting feedback from students after these assignments, many stated that they appreciated an opportunity to write about things they were interested in because it made the task of writing seem like less of a chore. It is from these conversations that I realized how important it is for students to be given a choice, and that through having a choice; they will invest more into their work.
The Next Steps
A New Beginning

Fortunately for me, I am in a school district where students work with the same teacher for the entire school year. Therefore, my students were able to work with me even after the close of my study and I was able to implement even more opportunities for peer editing and revising. Additionally, I took what I gleaned from my experiences with my study group, and altered my approach to teaching writing in my other classes. Each week, we do a freewrite in our warm up journals and then students pick one paragraph from the week to have a peer review and provide feedback for. While I have noted the importance of composing clear and easily understood peer review worksheets, I do not provide one for the journaling activity. The reason being that I want for students to see the importance of peer review in all types of writing that they do, and to take some ownership over the outcomes. Essentially, I believe that it is important to provide clear expectations for major writing assignments that highlight all that I am looking for when assessing students, but I also believe that too much teacher directive will cripple students in their ability to find what is, and what is not, good writing themselves.

For future classes, in addition to providing students with peer editing worksheets, I will require that all students work with partners to identify what areas they themselves believe should be revised by a peer. Additionally, as well as providing a peer review feedback form, will also provide a self-review form so
that I can gain insights into how students feel they are performing on their own. This will enable me to get a written account of what areas students are excelling in as well as which areas they are struggling with mastering. This will help me to better monitor student gains and it will also provide an opportunity for me to create lessons that will help students when they are struggling.

Additionally, in the future, I will show students good writing from the beginning of the implementation of expository writing in the curriculum. The more models that students saw, the more proficiently they began writing. Therefore, I have noted that if I want students to become better writers, they must see better writing. It is nearly impossible to explain a piece of artwork without showing it visually. The same is true for academic writing. Students who are not exposed to good writing have no model after which to base their approach. This year, I collected many writing samples, both good and bad, that I will present to students in future writing classes. Through that practice, students will learn what works for writing as well as what does not. Additionally, through allowing students to peer edit and revise practice pages, they will likely gain more confidence about their ability to do so before they are asked to complete the task for a peer in the classroom.

Finally, I learned about the importance of creating a sense of community in the learning environment in order for any real learning to occur. Previously, I discovered that I was operating under the assumption that students felt
comfortable around one another because they were peers. In hindsight, I see how ridiculous that belief is. I, for example, am not comfortable working and sharing my ideas with all of my colleagues even though they are my peers, so I should certainly not expect that from students. Therefore, in future writing classes, I will spend the beginning of the year working on establishing a sense of comfort and community through the incorporation of team building activities. It is my thought that if students become comfortable with one another at the beginning phase of the year, before peer editing is implemented, then it is likely that when it is time to peer review, there will be less social resistance.

**Personal Reflection and Conclusion**

For me, one of the most difficult aspects of this study was the need to rearrange my original plan to fit my study into the new environment in which it would be conducted. Having worked in an urban environment for most of my teaching career, I was not prepared to face a new and vastly different group of students or colleagues when my study began. However, in hindsight, I believe that the change in placement led to a much more enriching experience than I would have encountered in my original high school. I was pushed to change my lesson to accommodate a 45 minute period rather than a 90 minute block, which changed not only the timeframe but also the approach to teaching each skill needed to create proficient peer reviews.
Also, I never anticipated having to face such hesitancy when it came time for students to rely on one another. Not only did this experience force me to revisit my planning and add team building strategies into my curriculum, but it also put a new role on my own shoulders that I hadn’t expected; the role of community encourager. There were times in my study when I believed that positive results would never come to fruition. There were moments when I lost sight of why I was choosing to venture onward and research this topic. At times, I struggled with forcing so much power into the hands of my students and allowing them to become advocates and facilitators of their own learning. However, in hindsight, I see that my students improved, not only as writers, but also as citizens of our classroom. The social construct changed. The desire to help one another and to become more able to help grew exponentially. And so, at the close of this action research study, I have found that, yes, my students are better expository writers because of their exposure to peer reviewing. But more importantly, I have found that my students have learned to take on responsibility, that they have learned accountability and have earned the respect of their peers and of their teacher. And that, in my opinion, is where the true success lies.
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## Appendix A

Directions: Please circle the response that is most closely aligned to your own beliefs, feelings, or experiences about writing. Be honest! There is no wrong answer.

1. I enjoy writing for my own pleasure in doing things such as: blogging, Facebooking, and journal keeping.
   - a.) never
   - b.) rarely
   - c.) sometimes
   - d.) often
   - e.) always

2. I don’t mind writing as long as I get to pick the topic.
   - a.) never
   - b.) rarely
   - c.) sometimes
   - d.) often
   - e.) always

3. I understand the basic format of writing a 5 paragraph essay.
   - a.) never
   - b.) rarely
   - c.) sometimes
   - d.) often
   - e.) always

4. Writing a thesis statement is easy.
   - a.) never
   - b.) rarely
   - c.) sometimes
   - d.) often
   - e.) always

5. I like arguing points and persuading people.
   - a.) never
   - b.) rarely
   - c.) sometimes
   - d.) often
   - e.) always

6. I am familiar with the writing process steps.
   - a.) never
   - b.) rarely
   - c.) sometimes
   - d.) often
   - e.) always

7. I have another person read and edit my papers before I hand them in for a grade.
   - a.) never
   - b.) rarely
   - c.) sometimes
   - d.) often
   - e.) always

8. I am confident when giving feedback to others about their writing.
   - a.) never
   - b.) rarely
   - c.) sometimes
   - d.) often
   - e.) always

9. I read all of the comments that a teacher writes on my paper and remember them for the next time I write another one.
   - a.) never
   - b.) rarely
   - c.) sometimes
   - d.) often
   - e.) always
Appendix B

Dear Parents and Guardians,

Currently, I am in the process of obtaining my master’s degree in curriculum and instruction at Moravian College. As a program requirement, I am conducting an action research study, where I will collect data on student levels of engagement and achievement in my English class and levels of proficiency when incorporating peer editing and classroom writing workshop opportunities into our lessons.

A major component of my data collection plan is recording student actions and responses when children engage in peer review activities when working towards improving essay writing. All research participants will be given a pseudonym, and your son or daughter’s name will not be included in my research data.

All students will be exposed to the same curriculum, lesson plans and class activities. I will include only data from participants in my research study. You may withdraw your child from participation in the study at any time without penalty.

The goal of this study is to explore methods in which to best teach students literature in a manner that engages them actively and helps them to meet high academic standards. If you have any questions about this process or my project, please do not hesitate to contact me at jott@eastpennsd.org. You may also contact my Moravian advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh at jshosh@moravian.edu.

Please note that signing and returning this form indicates the granting of permission to your son or daughter to participate in this study.

Respectfully,

Jamie M. Ott
Dear Students,

Currently, I am in the process of obtaining my master’s degree in curriculum and instruction at Moravian College. As a program requirement, I am conducting an action research study, where I will collect data on student levels of engagement and achievement in my English class and levels of proficiency when incorporating peer editing and classroom writing workshop opportunities into our lessons.

A major component of my data collection plan is recording student actions and responses when teenagers engage in peer review activities when working towards improving essay writing. All research participants will be given a pseudonym, and if you choose to participate in my study, your real name will not be included in my research data.

All students will be exposed to the same curriculum, lesson plans and class activities regardless of willingness to participate in the study. However, I will include only data from participants in my research study. As a student in class, You may withdraw from participation in the study at any time without penalty.

The goal of this study is to explore methods in which to best teach teenage writing in a manner that engages them actively and helps them to meet high academic standards. If you have any questions about this process or my project, please do not hesitate to contact me at jott@eastpennsd.org. You may also contact my Moravian advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh at jshosh@moravian.edu.

Please note that signing and returning this form indicates the granting of your permission to participate in this action research study.

Respectfully,
What is a good part time job for someone your age? Why would this be a good job for a teenager to have?

Appendix D

Informational writing paragraph #1:

Please respond to the following prompt in one paragraph. You will want to incorporate the following:

a.) Topic Sentence
b.) Transitions
c.) Three supporting details
d.) A wrap up/concluding sentence.

What is a good part time job for someone your age? Why would this be a good job for a teenager to have?
Appendix E - Teacher created peer editing form

Peer Edit Sheet:

Writer's Name:___________________ Your name:____________

1. Summarize the main idea. If there is a thesis statement, write it here. Does it meet the requirements of the assignment?

2. What works best with the essay? Give the writer a good compliment.

3. What examples does the author use to prove his/her thesis? Give a suggestion for one more example here.

4. Discuss the effectiveness of the introduction and ways to make it better.

   *Does it capture attention?

   *What would make it better?

7. Did the writing stop you because you were puzzled by grammar, punctuation or meaning? If so, where? Underline any sentences you think might need editing.

8. Point out any places where information was not clearly presented or was inadequate with: HUH?

9. Point out any terms that should be defined with: WHAT?
10. Are transitions used to help the ideas flow? Where do more transitions need to be used -- if any? Write TRANS where you think the writer needs a transition.

11. Discuss the effectiveness of the ending and ways to make it better.

*Does it leave you hanging? Is it too abrupt??

*Does is restate the thesis statement?

12. If this were your essay, what would you change?

13. Any other comments or suggestions for the author? If this were your essay, what would you change?
Appendix F

Reflect and Review through Interview!

What did you like about reading and editing the paper of a friend in class?

What was challenging about being asked to provide feedback?

What is a concern that you have about editing papers that your peers have written?

On a scale of 1-10 please circle the number that mostly closely represents your feelings on the statements below. Feel free to add comments!

a.) **Having to look over someone's paper makes me nervous!**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Lowest</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
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Reason:

b.) **Knowing we will review drafts in class makes me more likely to do my paper on time.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Reason:

c.) **This exercise helped me today.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Reason:

d.) **Conferencing with Mrs. Ott helped me more than conferencing with a peer.**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Reason:
Appendix G - Student Created Rubric 1

Name: __________________________

Example Essay Writing Rubric

_____ Focus:
says that something simply exists
on topic

_____ Content:
Provides 4-5 examples
Provides a brief explanation of each example

_____ Use of Imagery:
sight
touch
smell
taste
hear
mood/atmosphere/intuition

_____ Language:
vivid verbs
colorful adjectives

_____ Conventions:
spelling
grammar
punctuation: COMMAS!!!!

______/15 x 4 = ______/60
Appendix H- Student and teacher created final checklist
Name: ______________________

Final Essay Checklist

_____ /4 - Focus
☑ The essay is written with the audience in mind (the teacher)
☑ The essay contains a strong three-point thesis at the end of the introduction
☑ The writer stays on topic throughout the essay
☑ The writer is writing within the informative mode and stays in that mode throughout the essay

_____ /6 - Content
☑ The essay explains the information thoroughly; the reader does not have ANY questions
☑ The essay explains the cause/effect relationship through each paragraph
☑ At least 3 quotes are included from research and support the main ideas
☑ All quotes are written with a lead in sentence or phrase
☑ All quotes and support have clarifying sentences to explain the information (remember: quotes do not do the talking for you)
☑ Examples are present to illustrate the ideas

_____ /5 - Organization
☑ The essay has an inviting introduction that begins with a hook and leads into the thesis
☑ Each body paragraph begins with a powerful topic sentence which expands on the thesis
☑ Transitions are used to connect paragraphs as well as ideas within the paragraphs; they are included throughout the essay
☑ The essay concludes the topic and restates all main points as well as refers to examples/support
☑ The conclusion contains a clincher statement at the end of the paragraph which is reflective in nature; reflect on the cause/effect relationship and explain its significance

_____ /6 - Style
☑ The point of view remains consistent throughout the paper; watch your verbs! (go, went, gone)
☑ NO first or second person pronouns are used in the essay (I, you, me, etc.)
☑ The writer uses VIVID verbs and adjectives—please use the thesaurus
The writer includes at “The Chosen Three” vocabulary words; these words should be **highlighted and numbered**

The writer’s voice comes through

The writer utilizes figurative language (choose **three** out of the five we’ve learned: simile, metaphor, pun, hyperbole, personification); these should be **HIGHLIGHTED and identified** in parenthesis

7 / 7 - **Conventions**

- All quotes are cited properly
- All quotes are punctuated correctly
- A **revised** works cited page is included as the last page of the document
- NO spelling errors
- Punctuation is correct including capital letters, **comma placement**, and end punctuation
- It is obvious that attention has been given to proofreading
- The paper is written according to MLA format

\[
\frac{6}{28} = \frac{21}{84} = 25 \%
\]
Appendix I
Does Discrimination Still Exist?

Your task: Write a formal, 5 paragraph essay that proves your point about the existence of discrimination, or lack thereof, in America today.

Requirements:
- you must use 3 sources of evidence to support your claim.
- One of your three sources must be from a book.
- You must create a thesis statement that outlines your stance on the prompt. It must be a 3-prong statement.
- YOU MAY NOT USE PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN THIS PAPER. (I, YOU, ME, WE).
- You must follow the process of creating AND submitting all of the following:
  - Thesis statement for approval
  - Outline
  - Rough Draft
  - Peer Review
  - Self Review
  - Final Copy
  - Works Cited

Here are some cases/suggestions to get you started:

Brown Vs. Board of Education
Lum Vs. Rice
Plessey Vs. Ferguson
Affirmative Action
Japanese Interment Camps
War on Terror

Reminder: There are MANY types of discrimination. To best execute this paper, narrow your focus to one or two.
## Appendix J – Final Rubric

### Descriptive Essay Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing Process-</strong></td>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
<td><strong>Style</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student devotes a lot of time and effort to the writing process</td>
<td>Student devotes sufficient time and effort to the writing process</td>
<td>Student devotes some time and effort to the writing process but</td>
<td>Student devotes little time and effort to the writing process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(prewriting, drafting, reviewing, and editing). Works hard to</td>
<td>(prewriting, drafting, reviewing, and editing). Works and gets</td>
<td>was not very thorough. Does enough to get by. 10 pts.</td>
<td>Doesn't seem to care. 0 pts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>make the story wonderful. 20 pts</td>
<td>the job done. 15 pts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus on Assigned</strong></td>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The entire story is related to the assigned topic and allows the</td>
<td>Most of the story is related to the assigned topic. The story</td>
<td>Some of the story is related to the assigned topic, but a reader</td>
<td>No attempt has been made to relate the story to the assigned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reader to understand much more about the topic. 20 pts.</td>
<td>wanders off at one point, but the reader can still learn</td>
<td>does not learn much about the topic. 10 pts.</td>
<td>topic. 0 pts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>something about the topic. 15 pts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>The story is very well organized. One idea or scene follows</td>
<td>The story is pretty well organized. One idea or scene may</td>
<td>The story is a little hard to follow. The transitions are</td>
<td>Ideas and scenes seem to be randomly arranged. 0 pts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>another in a logical sequence with clear transitions. 20 pts.</td>
<td>seem out of place. Clear transitions are used. 15 pts.</td>
<td>sometimes not clear. 10 pts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Requirements -</strong></td>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All of the written requirements (# of pages, # of graphics,</td>
<td>Almost all (about 75%) the written requirements were met. 15</td>
<td>Most (about 50%) of the written requirements were met, but some</td>
<td>Many requirements were not met. 0 pts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>type of graphics, etc.) were met. 20 pts.</td>
<td>pts.</td>
<td>were not. 10 pts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spelling and</strong></td>
<td><strong>Punctuation -</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conventions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conventions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conventions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Conventions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There are no spelling or punctuation errors in the final draft.</td>
<td>There is one spelling or punctuation error in the final draft.</td>
<td>There are 2-3 spelling and punctuation errors in the final draft.</td>
<td>The final draft has more than 3 spelling and punctuation errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 pts.</td>
<td>15 pts.</td>
<td>10 pts.</td>
<td>0 pts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Creativity</strong></td>
<td>The story contains many creative details and/or descriptions</td>
<td>The story contains a few creative details and/or descriptions</td>
<td>The story contains a few creative details and/or descriptions,</td>
<td>There is little evidence of creativity in the story. The author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that contribute to the reader's enjoyment. The author has really</td>
<td>that contribute to the reader's enjoyment. The author has used</td>
<td>but they distract from the story. The author has tried to use</td>
<td>does not seem to have used much imagination. 0 pts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>used his imagination. 20 pts.</td>
<td>his imagination. 15 pts.</td>
<td>his imagination. 10 pts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

______________________/120
This form must be completed for any research activity involving human participants. All researchers must read the Moravian College Human Subjects Research Policy found at Y/Humsub/policy/.

### Part I: RESEARCHER

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Proposer:</td>
<td>2. Department:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie Ott</td>
<td>MEDU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mailing address:</td>
<td>4. Phone:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>341 Delaware Ave Wind Gap PA, 18091</td>
<td>484-860-2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. E-mail address:</td>
<td>6. This is a (circle one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:jamieott96@yahoo.com">jamieott96@yahoo.com</a></td>
<td>a. New Proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Resubmission of a rejected Proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Renewal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Request for modification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Research Start/End Dates:</td>
<td>7. Title of Proposal:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/12 - 12/12</td>
<td>Peer Editing as a Tool for Obtaining Proficiency in a classroom for the Struggling Writer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Part II: SUBMITING PROPOSALS

Incomplete documentation will delay the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) review of your research proposal. Submit all of the following:

1. This Human Subjects Internal Review Board Proposal Form
2. A copy of your Informed Consent form and/or other evidence of Informed Consent to voluntary participation [See HSIRB proposed Policy #MC.116 & MC.117. Can be viewed at Public/hsirb/]
3. A copy of your instruments (surveys, tests, etc.)
Submit proposals to:

hsirb@moravian.edu

Questions: contact
Virginia Adams O’Connell, Co-Chair HSIRB
Department of Sociology
voconnel@moravian.edu
(610) 625-7756

Part III: SIGNATURES

PROPOSER’S Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________

For Student Proposals
I am the Principal Instructor for this student. I have examined the procedures in this study and approve them as described.

INSTRUCTOR’S Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________

INSTRUCTOR’S Name (Type or Print):

Dr. Charlotte Rappe Zales

Part IV: PROPOSAL

1. This research involves ONLY the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude or achievement). (Circle one.) Yes | No

2. This research collects interviews or surveys ONLY of elected or appointed public officials or candidates for such. (Circle one.) Yes | No

3. This research involves ONLY observations of public behavior. (Circle one.) Yes | No

4. This research involves ONLY existing data, documents, records or specimens. (Circle one.) Yes | No
5. List the research funding sources, if any.
   N/A

6. The results of this research will be published. (Circle one.) Yes | No | Uncertain

7. Summarize the Purpose of Research, including objectives and procedure/design

   **1. Objectives:**
   * To document and report on the observed experiences of the students learning to use the writing process.
   * To document the reported and observed experiences of incorporating writers workshop into the 9th grade writing classroom
   * To monitor the improvement of the students' writing when implementing peer editing into the writing process
   * To improve the writing of 9th grade students.

   **2. Procedures**
   * I will teach students about the steps of the writing process.
   * I will assist the students in practicing the writing process before having students utilize the steps on their own.
   * I will assist the students in the editing step of the writing process through introducing peer review.
   * I will facilitate student/teacher conferences to check for progress and understanding of peer editing and the writing process to create more proficient and organized expository writers.

   **3. Research Design**
   * I will keep a double entry journal to record what happens in the classroom and to keep track of my thoughts and ideas about it.
   * I will give the students a pre-incorporation of writing strategy survey to gather their current thoughts about writing.
   * I will give the students a post-incorporation writing survey to gather their thoughts about writing after using peer editing and the writing process in completing expository assignments.
   * I will hold student/teacher conferences to hear the students' thoughts about peer editing and writing workshops during class time to see how students feel about this process.
* I will provide both student and peer editing check sheets for students to utilize as a guide for checking writing and providing feedback.

* Data analysis will be ongoing throughout the study so adjustments can be made when it is deemed that the adjustments will be necessary to improving student understanding.

**Purpose of the Study:**

Teaching students how to write is critical component of creating effective communicators (Corbet, E., Myers, N. Tate. G. 2000). In order to most efficiently and effectively teach expository writing, students must be provided an opportunity to work with their peers so that they can evaluate writing as part of the process of learning how to write (Berride, E. 2009). Effective is developed through a process of trial and error in the classroom (Boyd, D. Stoferman, K. and Straw S. 2010). Therefore, my study will be based on observing and recording the observed effects of incorporating peer editing and peer-centered writing workshops into the 9th grade, English classroom.

8. **Describe the processes used to obtain and manage subjects.** Specifically, note a. the subject pool and characteristics of subjects, b. intended number of subjects, c. sampling method, and d. what is required of subjects. Attach additional pages as needed.

**A. Subject Pool and Characteristics of Subjects & B. Intended Number of Subjects** - The students for this study will be selected based on the students that enter my classroom next year. I will be conducting my study in a 9th grade, academic level English/Language Arts class that will have approximately 25-30 students. The students are both male and female and include a variety of ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The subjects will be told about the study at the beginning of the year and will be given a letter to take home for their parents/guardians to read and return. The participation in this study is 100% optional. Participation in this study will not affect a student's grade in any way. All students in the class will be involved in learning how to partake in the peer editing and peer review process; however, I will only use the data from the students whose parents/guardians sign the participant sheet. Students will be able to drop out of the study at any point in time without penalty if either the student or guardian chooses to no longer participate. Regardless of participation in the data collection of my study, all students in the class will be subjected to the same peer editing strategies and activities, but I will only use the data for my study from those parents who have consented that their son or daughter participate in my study.
C. Sampling Method – Student pre/post-surveys, student work, student/teacher conferences, expository writing assignments.

D. What is Required of Subjects – Subjects will be required to use peer editing and the writing process when completing expository assignments.

9. This research is intended to investigate issues associated with the following GROUP(S) vulnerable to risk. (Circle all that apply.)
   a. Subjects under the age of 18
   b. Prisoners
   c. Pregnant women
   d. Handicapped or mentally disabled persons
   e. People with special vulnerabilities (e.g. allergies, taking special medications, etc.); Please identify

   There may be students who have an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) or a 504 plan. I will not know for sure until I get my class list next year.

If you circled any or all of 9a through 9e, explain why you need to use the group and the methods you will use to minimize risk.

I am basing my study around a class of 9th grade students; therefore, the members of my subject pool are all under 18 years of age. To ensure that all minors in my classroom are partaking in the study with risk, I will not allow the publication of any data to be included in my study without the consent of a parent or legal guardian. All students in the classroom will also be given a pseudonym at the beginning of the study to protect anonymity, any published findings will not include the legal names of students on my roster, and any observations or data that is collected during the study will be destroyed at the close of the study to maintain privacy for all students. Additionally, I may have students in my classroom that have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and I want to make sure that I include all students on my roster in my study for as long as they are willing participants. If I were to exclude students with IEPs from my study, then the effectiveness of my proposal and findings would not be accurate, since the data would be skewed through the elimination of a group. To minimize the risk for my students, I will assign each of then a pseudonym so they remain anonymous; I will keep the pseudonym key in a secure location, along with all materials associated with the study (student work samples, field notes, vignettes, etc.). If these materials
are at school, they will be in a locked cabinet designated just for this and nothing else, and if they are at my home, they will be in a secure location in my home and kept under lock and key when not being referenced or reflected upon by me.

10. The subject group(s) for this research may unintentionally include individuals with the following characteristics, which increase the vulnerability to risk. (Circle all that apply)

a. Subjects under the age of 18
b. Prisoners
c. Pregnant women
d. Handicapped or mentally disabled persons
e. People with special vulnerabilities (e.g. allergies, taking special medications, etc.); Please identify__________________________

If you circled any or all of 10a through 10e, explain the methods that you will use to minimize risk to these individuals.

I teach students under the age of 18; therefore they are in my subject pool. To minimize the risk for my students, I will assign each of then a pseudonym so they remain anonymous; I will keep the pseudonym key in a secure location, along with all materials associated with the study (student work samples, field notes, vignettes, etc.). If these materials are at school, they will be in a locked cabinet designated just for this and nothing else, and if they are at my home, they will be in a secure location at my home. Also, my class roster may include students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs). If so, those willing participants will still be exposed to the same subject matter and methods that are taught to the remainder of the class, but with implemented accommodations as listed in the individual plans of students. There may also be students with 504 plans in the class that my study will be focused in. If so, those students will also be subjected to the same practices that are used to teach peer editing to the other students in the class, but I will make any accommodations that are listed in the SDI (Specially designed instruction) component of the student’s 504 plan. I will also notify the student’s school appointed guidance counselor of the study to implement additional support service availability for any student that may need it. Notifying the counselors that are appointed to work with my 9th grade students will serve as an additional precaution for students to ask questions and perchance voice their desire to eliminate their involvement from the study if they feel a need to at any point in time. The precautions that are taken for students with IEPs and/or 504s will also be taken for pregnant students that may participate in my study. If any
pregnant student decides to drop from the study at any point in time, she will not be penalized. All parents, guardians, and counselors will be notified of the study, and students will be told that they can ask questions and voice concerns to myself a counselor at any point in time. All pregnant students will be given the protection of a pseudonym, similar to all other students participating in the study, but their pregnancy will not be referred to in my notes or publication to ensure privacy of the student.
## Appendix L

### Coding Index & Preliminary Theme Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Page Numbers from Field log</th>
<th>Related Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>38, 47, 68, 74, 82</td>
<td>Student-student relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>12, 16, 19, 23, 26, 48, 54, 61, 70</td>
<td>Student Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Evaluation</td>
<td>48, 76, 88, 89, 101</td>
<td>Student reflections, teacher feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Leadership</td>
<td>22, 45, 57, 59, 68, 101, 106, 109, 110, 112, 121</td>
<td>Questioning, collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>8, 14, 23, 26, 28, 31, 33, 38, 46, 50, 56, 62, 68, 77, 88, 101, 103, 122, 126</td>
<td>Metacognition, oral responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>24, 25, 37, 39, 46, 49, 52, 87, 88</td>
<td>Student collaboration, leadership, peer reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>21, 26, 67, 79, 80, 83, 88, 94, 101</td>
<td>Confidence, engagement, formative feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preliminary Theme Statements

Discussion Skills: Engaging in reading and evaluating the writing of peers promotes the development of discussion and speaking skills by enabling students to participate in meaningful discourse with one another.

Confidence: Evaluating and revising the writing of peers increased confidence, motivation, and engagement for learners.

Engagement: Evaluating and reviewing the writing of peers engages students in classroom activities that are centered on writing.

Active learning: Participating in peer revision activities allowed students to become active learners through discussing and evaluating writing with peers while becoming metacognitively aware of their own thinking and writing processes.

Student response: Peer revision opportunities encourage students to actively participate in working with peers to become strong writers and evaluators.
Questioning: Incorporating writing workshop opportunities into the Language Arts classroom empowered students to ask insightful questions that led to higher levels of confidence.