Motivating Middle School Students to Revise and Edit

ANGELA M. CONNER, WITH MARGARET R. MOULTON

Partway through my first year of teaching eighth grade English, I became aware of a general apathy in many of my students' writing efforts. I was disappointed in their revising and editing despite our use of cooperative groups and peer revisers and editors. Second drafts had almost as many mechanical errors as first drafts. While emphasis on the writing process seems to look more at content than convention, Andrasick points out that "mechanical correctness does count because, fairly or not, it is often the basis on which the world outside of school judges a writer's competence" (28). But there was no "world outside" of our classroom. I was the only person students had to impress, and that was apparently not enough. Something more was needed.

What I Wanted to Know and What the Literature Says

Spurred by two graduate course assignments—one to publish my students' writing in some form and one to do action research in my classroom—I decided to monitor my students' attitudes, abilities, and reactions to writing for publication. More particularly, I wanted to see if knowledge that their work would be published for a wider audience would increase their interest in revising and editing, encourage them to use their abilities more, and impact their interest in writing.

The literature on publishing student work clearly stated there would be an impact. Bromley and Mannix comment on publishing as motivation to write:

> Publishing makes the reading-writing connection real as it engages students in the writing process and the communication of meaning to a real audience. The opportunity to publish one's work for others to see, touch, read, and reread has special appeal and provides many students with the incentive to write. (72)

Andrasick also sees publishing as motivation to edit more carefully: "Frequent publication creates a powerful claim for students to value mechanical conventions" (28). Publishing can also be a boost to self-esteem, as Holmes and Moulton point out (16). But for whom were the students publishing and how was their work received by audiences other than their peers? Only three of the articles I found even mentioned an audience and then did so only in terms of it being "real."

With the key word *audience* guiding my search, I uncovered more articles. Some essays indicate that poor student writing often arises from the lack of an audience (White 166) or the teacher as an audience of one (Maxson 1). Only a few studies show that writing improved when students targeted a particular audience (Dollieslager 1; Frank 277; Greene 93; Raphael 1). Within this smaller body of literature, only Dollieslager and Greene actually combine the effects of publishing—in anything other than letter format—with the effects of students writing for a particular audience outside the classroom. In both cases, student writing improved. The teachers and students involved, however, had done a single project

for a single audience. My concern, then, was whether or not several consecutive projects, each consisting of different well-defined audiences and publication products, would have an impact on either my students' writing or their attitude.

My Experiment

My five classes of eighth grade composition were comprised of 147 students. Over half of the students were middle class Caucasians living in single-family homes. Another fourth were of African American descent and lived in a mixture of single-family homes and apartments. The remainder were Hispanic and lived mostly in apartments in a lower socioeconomic area than the Caucasian students. After a recent elimination of sixth grade centers, the large Southwestern urban school district had changed the school boundaries for middle schools (now grades six to eight) so that this formerly all-white school was now a mixture more representative of the district as a whole. To appeal to the widest student population possible within my classes, I realized the assignments would have to cover a broad spectrum of genres. With this and the district curriculum in mind, I selected three very different assignments and audiences.

The Research Booklets

Our first assignment consisted of a research booklet to be read by sixth graders, with a goal that they would both learn something from the booklet and, in return, give the author written feedback and a grade. I required students to use skim-reading techniques with a book from the library on a topic that interested them. Preselected books covered such topics as the Loch Ness Monster, the lost city of Atlantis, Bigfoot, visitors from outer space, sportsmanship, and codes and ciphers. From this one class period of library research, students would compile a five-paragraph research booklet. They were instructed to glean the main idea of the book from reading the introduction and conclusion (or first and last few paragraphs). This initial reading would provide them with their main idea and, hence, their introductory paragraph.

They then had to write three supporting paragraphs with facts, evidence, and/or examples from the text. Again, they were to skim the first and last paragraphs of three chapters of sections of the book to find the main idea, then look more carefully within the chapters to fill in the details. A graphic organizer with limited space confined them to taking notes rather than plagiarizing "chunks." After discussing research and concluding that it is primarily performed so people can learn, students were required to state their opinion, what they had learned, and what they wanted their sixth grade audience to learn from their concluding paragraph.

From their library research notes, students then compiled a rough draft of each paragraph. I stipulated that the drafts should be revised for clarity and edited for mechanical errors; therefore, each student was to find at least three peers to help with organizing and editing. They were also required to read their drafts aloud, both to see if they made sense and to spot problems with mechanics. This done, students then wrote their final drafts onto paragraph-sized pieces of paper and pasted them into booklets we had made previously.

In addition to the five main paragraphs, students had to write a title page and a bibliography. They also had to interview another student and help write an author biography. I felt this would make the booklets more personal and accessible to their sixth grade audience. When all the pages were pasted in, students chose from a selection of fluorescent-colored paper to make a book cover, which they titled and decorated.

Poetry Books

Our second publishing project was a multi-class anthology of love poems, which would be distributed to each student, the school library, and other teachers in the school district. In preparation, we read many different styles of love poetry ranging from a lighthearted look at Shakespearean sonnets to a contemporary poem written by Tom Romano about his first crush when he, too, was in eighth grade (34). We wrote a journal entry about our own first crush on someone and discussed how this could be turned into a story poem like Romano's. I also distributed one self-created handout per day for three days that showed students how they could easily create simile, metaphor, and personification poems. I then required students to produce one rough draft poem each day for three days and a final draft of each poem the following Monday.

As an ancillary publication to a much smaller audience, we also made valentine cards on the Friday before the drafts were due. Students were to write one of their poems inside each card. I had a

multitude of supplies assembled—construction paper, scissors, marking pens, glue, fabric, yarn, ribbons, and magazines—for the students to use in decorating their cards.

Inner City Games Writing Competition

Taking part in a city-wide writing competition seemed like an apt concluding project for my research into the impact of publication and a well-defined audience for student writing. Sponsored by various local businesses and celebrities, the goal of Inner City Games is to involve young people in sports and team activities. Events and sports clinics are scheduled every Saturday from March through September, culminating in zone playoffs and tournaments. Many of my students had already signed up for the sports activities, and our school was recruiting teacher volunteers when I heard about the competition. Impressive money prizes and scholarships were to be awarded to the top three authors placed in each age category. Students would also have their work published in a book, and all those participating would be presented with T-shirts and medals. The topic, too, seemed appropriate: Students were to pick one value from a list of eight that included responsibility, trustworthiness, honesty, and courage. They were required to write a short story, a news article (up to 500 words), or a poem, expressing what their chosen value meant to them.

Student Reaction

I evaluated student responses to our publications as each project proceeded and in their final drafts, but I also wanted to know how their image of themselves as writers changed as a result of seeing themselves in print. For my research it was important that student reactions be introspective and sincere, so we used various writing prompts and questions to which students responded in informal journals and personal letters to me. Where I quote student responses, I use their own, informal, unedited words.

Revising and Editing

As I watched the students stress out over spelling errors and agonize over how to make our first publication project—their research booklets—appeal to sixth graders, I realized this was the first time I had seen them really concerned with revising and editing their work. In fact, they seemed almost excited by the challenge, although I was disappointed they were far from catching all their errors. Perhaps recognizing what Elbow (in Wyngaard and Gehrke 68) states, that "peer editing can amount to pooled ignorance," I found that many brought their paragraphs to me and were exhilarated if and when I found mistakes for them. Indeed, the more mistakes I spotted, the better. After all, no self-respecting eighth graders wanted sixth graders to find their errors. As Barbara wrote, "I like that the 6th graders are reading [our] books, because then they can see what they're going to have to do when they get in 8th grade!" Gabriel echoed this sentiment: "We knew that the sixth graders had to read the books to see how good that we did. And they would be grading us on how we did . . . and expect us to know how to write. So we had to make it look good because we are like there roll models."

Taking part in a city-wide writing competition seemed like an apt concluding project for my research into the impact of publication and a well-defined audience for student writing.

Before the sixth graders received the booklets, we shared them within our classroom and, to stay focused on the writing aspect of the project, I gave the students a simultaneous evaluation task. I asked them to take a piece of paper and fold it into three sections. They then wrote their names and book titles on the top of the sheet. First, the author of the book was required to read and evaluate the finished product: Was the booklet well organized? Had our format been followed? Had the booklet been edited effectively? Did the presentation look attractive? Each subsequent reader was required to write on the sheet a letter grade and justifying comment for each category. Perhaps not altogether unexpectedly, this exercise proved to be our most fervent editing stage, as students spotted each

Students gain insight from editing each other's work.

others' problem areas or spelling mistakes. Whiteout passed between desks faster than our softball during class games of silent ball. All students were concerned and cooperative with each other. When each student's book had been fully assessed, the author had one last opportunity to fix it. Students really did take their assigned audience seriously. Tyson explained in his journal:

> I like doing research booklets rather than . . . a report. It is more fun doing the research because you have to be more specific. I like it when the 6th graders read them that way I can be an example to them. I will also have to do a little more work to make it as good as I can.

Despite this enthusiasm for editing on the first project, the first drafts of our second project—the love poems—were somewhat disappointing for me. Almost every student handed in typed poems on the due date, but many had not taken the care I had hoped for. I retyped all the poems to create a consistent layout, brought a working copy to class, and circulated this during each class period for editing. To my surprise and relief, some students were extremely thorough. It was one thing, I discovered, for them to lazily edit their own papers, but some were mortified to find I had edited for them and insisted that their way was best. Despite my request that all poems be titled, I found that many students preferred to hide behind anonymity and had neither titled nor signed their works. So, as I typed up their work, I had also typed in possible titles for them to consider. This led to some of the most serious editing I had seen so far. In her action research with student newspapers, Bailer suggests that "if an editor completely revises the article before press time, the reporter loses ownership" (66), so this fervent editing may have been the students' way of taking back ownership. Of course, there were those students who felt they had done their part already and wanted nothing more to do with their poems, even though I reminded them that we were publishing a class book. As was, perhaps, inevitable, one student had taken the theme of love one step too far and detailed more than could be realistically considered for an eighth grade publication and his audience of students, parents, and community. Sadly, he was unable to see that his original poem was inappropriate. I did, however, include the edited version of his poem in the book.

For the third project, the Inner City Games competition, students had a choice of genre. Revision began early as students tested out possible ideas by debating with peers over what would work best. Many students dashed off quick poems and were surprised when peers were disparaging, saying "This'll never win!" or "This isn't nearly long enough!" or "You haven't followed the topic. This is supposed to be a story, not an essay!" As Megyeri explains, "My writing *awkward construction* on a paper is not as meaningful as one student telling another, either in groups or in front of the class, that his word choice doesn't 'sound right'" (74). We went through the usual ritual of reading each other's work, using detailed revising and editing checklists. This time, however, the students did seem more concerned with having a polished final product, and many more made the effort to type their drafts after we discussed the importance of presentation and decided that judges might well discount entries that were too difficult to read. Kevin explained:

> It does make a difference to me in my writing if I know it is for a competion entries rather than just for you to read because I can say almost anything

> when I'm doing an assignment for you. If I'm writing for judges, I have to write as neat as I possibly can. Plus it's kind of pressuring.

I graded what the students thought was a final draft, as so many of them seemed to feel cheated if they did not get a grade. To my disappointment, however, I did find the need to re-edit many of the entries. These students then had to amend their entries before I would submit them, and almost all were prepared to do this. They were then required to submit a *final* final copy. Throughout the three projects, the students' interest in revision and editing visibly increased over earlier writing tasks, but their ability to edit did not quite keep pace with their interest.

Audience Response

With the first project, students were quite concerned with writing for a specific audience. Joseph felt the research books "were hard because I had to go back into saved sixth grade work to see how I wrote and comprehended things. I also had to make it neat so they can read it." To get a response from our audience, I made out a questionnaire for the sixth graders that required them to sum up what they liked or disliked about the books and, most importantly, what they had learned. When the booklets were returned to the classroom, the students were eager to see the response sheets. Brooke really seemed to appreciate her wider audience: "I think that it was cool that six graders were reading it that way someone besides my [friends] and teachers so I can have different [comments] and ideas." Almost everyone agreed that this research project had been much more rewarding as a result of having the books read and reviewed by someone other than me. Students were also intrigued to think that they, as researchers, had been able to pass on their knowledge to others.

With the second project—the poetry book—students had mixed feelings about audience. They were at first reluctant to write their feelings for the ancillary valentine project, fearing that I would read their cards. Once these fears were assuaged, however, they attacked the supplies with gusto. They became more eager with the circulation of the first draft of the anthology. At that point, Lisa recognized, like Kalmon, "the talents of some kids who were usually labeled 'troublemakers'" (55):

> It kinda makes me see [love] in another way. I never [knew I] looked at love the same way everyone else does. People that are really bad actually did some really nice poems that I would never believed they could write.

The first reaction to the publication came from people outside our class. The school's graphic artist had grudgingly agreed to make and bind 150 copies, but he said it would take a few weeks. Yet, two days later he tracked me down in the counselor's office to hand me the first copy, hot off the press and with its inky cover smudged from his sense of urgency. "This is it!" he said enthusiastically. "The first one." The counselor took the book from me. "Wow! This is neat. Can I have a copy?" To this the graphic artist replied, "I've printed you up 165. I know you only wanted 150, but I thought you'd like to have some extras."

As I handed out copies the following day, the tension in the air was palpable. I had not anticipated such an excited reception. As Gina explained:

> It was a fun day to get our poetry books. It made me feel good because it makes people see who I really am . . . I never had my name published into anything before. The poetry is good because we get to show everybody how good our writing talents are.

Almost instantly, a student came up to me: "You've spelled my sister's name wrong, Mrs. Conner." "Oh no," I replied. "What happened to your editing, Juan? You were supposed to catch mistakes like that, remember?" And then a plaintive, "Mrs. Conner, my poem's not in the book!" Cries like this happened two or three times each period, and each time the student calmed down and eventually located his or her poem. Sadly, there were two or three students whose poems were not in the book because their work had not been turned in. Like some of the students in Holmes and Moulton's research, "The concept of an authentic audience had little meaning for them until after publication" (15).

I invited each class outside into the school courtyard for a ceremonial book signing. I wanted the students to delight in autographing each others' copies, and so they did. Lori expressed what most students felt: "When I read the poems I was so impressed with what I done . . . When I signed all my friends' books I felt that 'wow,' all these kids want me to sign their books." Teachers walking through the courtyard were intrigued, too, and came over to see what was happening. They all requested copies of our book, and the librarian wanted all the spare copies for the school library and faculty lounge. In-

terestingly, it was the lower achieving students and those without easy access to a computer who were most excited to see their names in print. Those who possessed home computers were far more nonchalant. But for those students excited by seeing their names in print, the project and the time spent on it were entirely validated.

Interestingly, it was the lower achieving students and those without easy access to a computer who were most excited to see their names in print.

With the third project, the Inner City Games competition, students were aware of their audience from the start as they commented on each other's ideas and first drafts. That awareness intensified when I gave them the entry forms that would be stapled to the back of their work. On the day their entries and completed forms were due, many students had fancy folders, slip covers, colored paper—anything that might make their work stand out from the pile. Those who had faltered along the way were now most concerned that they be allowed an extra day to finish their entries. I asked students to tell me in an informal letter how they felt about writing for the competition. Cassie's letter summed up the feelings of a majority of students:

> I feel that knowing my writting is going to be judged for a prize, I write in a more complex way. I know that when a teacher reads my writting, it's for a grade; when my writting is being judged, it's for a prize. I get more excited about a prize than a grade.

We waited for the results for quite a while. At first I thought students had forgotten about the competition, but as we approached our track break (time off between trimesters in a year-round school), various hopefuls began asking me if I had heard anything from the sponsors and when their participation t-shirts might arrive. Then came the big day: the validation of our hard work. One of our students, Lisa, had won second place in the middle school category and a $500 scholarship check, which would be presented to her at a formal Inner City Games presentation ceremony. I asked Lisa how she felt about winning the competition as we hugged and jumped and gave each other "high fives," but there was no need then for words. The following day, she wrote me this short statement: "Getting second place in the writing contest was really cool. I really like writing and winning this, I think, will boost my confidence in writing more. It's a real honor."

Conclusions and Ideas to Further My Knowledge

I began this action research with several questions and concerns and an open mind. What did my students and I learn, then, from our publication projects?

Purpose and Individual Interests

Initially, I had been concerned that the assignments appealed to the widest number of students. The mix of genres seemed to work well. Each student responded particularly well to one out of the three projects, outperforming him or herself, though not always with the mix and match I had expected. Shawn enjoyed the research project: "I enjoyed going further than just a story or research on a piece of paper. To me it makes it more interesting and make me put some time into it." Cindy also liked the research booklets, but for a far different reason: "The thing that I like the most was . . . that we made them into a little book of our own." Overall, however, the poetry books were the most popular, perhaps because the students had gained something material for themselves. Thus, as in Wyngaard and Gehrke's classrooms, students had created a legacy for their future selves and had become "a member of their own audience" (68). Crystal eloquently explained:

> Mrs Conner, I have not got to thank you enough for [helping us make the poetry books]. My mother told me to tell you thank you. She loves them and if we could do it more for a grade . . . On the way to California I read the hole book to my mom and dad and they told me to keep it for ever.

Improving Writing

Another concern I had was whether we could raise the quality of student work, and we did, to a degree, but still not as much as I had hoped. All made

significantly more effort with revising and editing, but I learned that rather than let them wallow in "pooled ignorance," I needed to more directly teach them how. As Madrasco points out, "Deficiencies in proofreading [and revising] skills are usually due to a lack of instruction" (33). My students were panicked over possible mistakes, but rereading their work over and over did not help them find their errors. Using editing check sheets and reading their work aloud were insufficient. Yet, as students "begin to publish and get feedback from others, they learn to give even single words the same grooming they give themselves: they comb their prose for the smallest confusions caused by unconventional punctuation," says Andrasick (28). Renee certainly "combed" her prose:

> In the editing, that is different. In the writting I try my hardest to do even without presure or knowing people are going to read it. In editing a report or a story that is just for a grade I edit it once, but in a report or story that is for compitition then I edit it like 16 times.

Katie was equally concerned:

> To me, [publishing] makes me want to succeed more. It makes me work harder knowing that probably more than one persons would be reading it . . . When I did the research paper for my book, I wanted it to be practicly perfect, because a lot of different people would be judging it. If only one person looked at a peice of writing, they would only be looking for maybe one or two things, but if other people looked at it, all of the stuff in the research paper, or poem etc. would be looked at and judged.

Knowing they were to be published did motivate students to make more effort with revision, editing, and presentation, most especially after the first working copy of the text had been produced.

Self-image

For students' sense of self-worth as writers, the projects were more successful than I had dared to hope. "I enjoy writing to be published," Ron said. "I like to do this so that I may one day inspire others." Students definitely appreciated themselves and each other as authors once they had seen the poetry book and themselves in print. Nick wrote, "It felt weird to see mine and my friends poems in a published book. It did kind of make me feel proud of myself because I've never written any kind of poetry. I've never ever had anything published before." The book signing was a wonderful celebration of their writing, and the passersby who ogled their books then and the parents who praised them later also added to their self-esteem.

I believe it's important for eighth graders to publish because they are so immensely concerned with image and impressing others. They wanted the sixth graders to be amazed by how much their own writing would mature by the time they reached eighth grade. In turn, the sixth grade teachers said that their students really were impressed by the older students' more mature writing skills. Unfortunately, the eighth graders were less able to accept criticism magnanimously; they loved getting back the sixth graders' comments when they were positive but discounted almost all of the negative comments by saying that the sixth graders "didn't know what they were talking about."

From a teaching perspective, a younger audience was very good, as students had to choose their wording more carefully. There was much less direct copying from the researched texts. Also, in terms of audience, the sixth grade was far more immediate; with the competition entries there was a long waiting period, although this is more realistic of real-world publishing. However, the students' hard work was validated when Lisa won second place and when the participation t-shirts and medals arrived on campus.

Conclusion

Atwell says that "a sense of audience—the knowledge that someone will read what they have written—is crucial to young writers" (265). With due respect, however, it seems to be the certainty of audience—entwined with a particular means of publication—that is crucial to motivating young writers to act as writers. All of my student writers felt the additional pressure of publication and were begging for a break from AUDIENCE by the end of our third project. But it's a break they were unlikely to get, as I'm one teacher who has seen for herself how necessary this final stage is in the writing process: publication and an audience greater than one. Like Dozier and her colleagues, I had a student ask me why we weren't diagramming sentences, and several students begged me for worksheets, but the next trimester we were reading drama and writing dialogue and scripts . . . and finding that videotaping was another form of publication.

Works Cited

Andrasick, Kathleen D. "Independent Repatterning: Developing Self-editing Competence." *English Journal* 82.2 (1993): 28–37.

Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987.

Bailer, Alice C. "Learning through Publishing: Why We Must Sponsor Student Newspapers." *English Journal* 84.7 (1995): 66–67.

Bromley, Karen, and Diane Mannix. "Beyond the Classroom: Publishing Student Work in Magazines." *The Reading Teacher* 47.1 (1993): 72–77.

Dollieslager, Rick. *Exciting Them to Excellence: Publishing Student Work.* Paper presented at the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two-Year College of the National Council of Teachers of English, Chattanooga, TN, February, 1993. [ED 362 231]

Dozier, Lynne, et al. "The Three Ps: Prose, Poetry, and Profits." *English Journal* 84.7 (1995): 37–42.

Frank, Laura A. "Writing to be Read: Young Writers' Ability to Demonstrate Audience Awareness When Evaluated by Their Readers." *Research in the Teaching of English* 26.3 (1992): 277–98.

Greene, Beth G. "Reading, Writing, Publishing." *Journal of the Wisconsin State Reading Association* 35.1 (1991): 93–94.

Holmes, Vicki L., and Margaret R. Moulton. "'I am amazine to see my write in print': Publishing from ESL Students' Perspective." *TESOL Journal* 3.4 (1994): 14–16.

Kalmon, Stephen L. "Our Own Pulitzer Prizes." *The American School Board Journal* 183.9 (1996): 42, 55.

Madrasco, Jan. "Proofreading: The Skill We've Neglected to Teach." *English Journal* 82.2 (1993): 32–41.

Maxson, Jeffrey. *The Closed World of the Writing Classroom: Student Subjectivities as Created By, and Breaking Out of, Bounds.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Milwaukee, WI, March, 1996. [ED 403 557]

Megyeri, Kathy A. "Reading Aloud Student Writing." *English Journal* 85.3 (1996): 74–79.

Raphael, Taffy E. *Acquisition of Expository Writing Skills.* (Technical Report No. 421). Urbana, IL: Center for the Study of Reading, October, 1988. [ED 293 119]

Romano, Tom. *Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995.

White, Edward M. "Writing for Nobody." *College English* 31.2 (1969): 166–68.

Wyngaard, Sandra, and Rachel Gehrke. "Responding to Audience: Using Rubrics to Teach and Assess Writing." *English Journal* 85.6 (1996): 67–70.

ANGELA M. CONNER teaches English at O'Callaghan Middle School, Las Vegas, Nevada. MARGARET R. MOULTON teaches in the College of Education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

2000 Edwin A. Hoey Award Winner

The Edwin A. Hoey Award, cosponsored by the Weekly Reader Corporation, recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers of grades 5–8 who have demonstrated excellence in teaching English language arts and inspired a spirit of inquiry and a love of learning in their students. The 2000 Selection Committee for the Hoey Award is pleased to announce that Linda Rief of Oyster River Middle School, Durham, New Hampshire, is the latest recipient.

Rief has taught 7th and 8th grade language arts for the past 17 years. She is "an extraordinary teacher who knows the value of connecting with her students—both for their sakes and for her own," says one of her colleagues. She is the former coeditor of *Voices from the Middle* and a finalist for the New Hampshire Teacher of the Year 2000. She also won the NCTE Richard W. Halle Outstanding Middle Level Educator Award in 1999, and was an alternate for the 1989 U.S. Department of Education Christa McAuliffe Fellowship Program-New Hampshire, as well as a Teacher Fellow in Writing, Summer 1988, at The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.

The Hoey Award will be presented during the Middle Level Luncheon at the NCTE Annual Convention held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, this November.