Heather Lindenman, Martin Camper, Lindsay Dunne Jacoby, and Jessica Enoch

Revision and Reflection: A Study of (Dis)Connections between Writing Knowledge and Writing Practice

This essay brings to light new evidence about the relationship between revision and reflective writing in the first-year writing classroom. Based on a robust study of student work, we illuminate a variety of complex relationships between the writing knowledge that students articulate in their reflections—including how they narrate their course progress, approach teacher commentary, and make decisions about their revisions—and the actual writing practices they execute in their revised essays. The essay offers pedagogical innovations that help students use reflective writing in ways that support substantive revision.

If teachers and professionals are right about the nature and power of revision, why are students slow to take advantage of such a good thing? One answer may be that revision requires ability, not just motivation.

Reflection is the metacognitive counterpart to revision. Together, these activities allow writers to stand back and critique their own text (reflection) and, subsequently, to make changes in those texts (revision).
—Christy Desmet, Deborah Church Miller, June Griffin, Ron Balthazor, and Robert E. Cummings, “Reflection, Revision, and Assessment in First-Year Composition ePortfolios”

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Almost thirty years after Linda Flower, John Hays, Linda Carey, Karen Schriver, and James Stratman inquired about the “nature and power of revision,” Douglas Downs identifies it in the 2015 book *Naming What We Know* as one of the key threshold concepts for student writers. As a “concept critical for continued learning” in the work of writing (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2), revising is a “sign and function of skilled, mature, and professional writing and craft” (Downs 67). But like many of the threshold concepts important to effective writing, the practice and teaching of revision are a challenge. Scholars in our field have made it clear that revision as a writing practice is a “recursive but largely ineffable process” (Desmet et al. 19); it is “powerful [and] generative,” “strategic” and “adaptive,” and it “depends on a dynamic interplay of knowledge and intentions” (Flower et al. 16, 18, 20). Teaching students revision is only made more complex due to their understandings of and resistance to it. As writing instructors, we often prompt students toward revisions that are thorough reengagements with their writing and arguments, yet many students see revision as a mandate to fix errors (N. Sommers, “Revision” 383; Richardson 125), a practice only for remedial writers (Downs 67), or a form of punishment (Horning 2). Revision is thus a difficult writing practice to teach due to both instructor expectations that anticipate capacious reencounters with a text and student resistance that interprets revision as editorial or even penal.

As a way to catalyze robust student revisions, scholars and teachers often advocate and enact pedagogies that couple student revision with student reflection (Bower; Taczak; Yancey, *Reflection*). Reflection is an activity of purposeful meditation on one’s experiences (Silver 1; Taczak 78). Kara Taczak argues that reflection, like revision, is an essential threshold concept for student writers, and that “revision, which includes some amount of failure, becomes particularly helpful when writers reflect and learn from these experiences” (79). Reflection can stimulate effective revision because it often prompts metacognition. Given that scholars generally define metacognition as knowledge of one’s own thinking processes and choices (Bransford et al.; Flavell; Schraw; Silver; Tinberg), reflection activities in the composition classroom can promote metacognition by enabling students to examine their writing experiences and thereby heighten their awareness of their writing knowledge. When students pair reflection with revision,
they can use this metacognitive knowledge to recast their writing in more effective ways. As Christy Desmet et al. note in our epigraph, reflection is “the metacognitive counterpoint to revision” because it allows writers to “stand back and critique” and then move on to revise with those new ideas in mind (19). Nedra Reynolds and Rich Rice likewise assert that if we give students the time and heuristics to reflect on their work, substantive revisions will emerge. They suggest that “[c]ultivating the reflective-learning habit . . . should make students more willing to read and rethink,” to carry out the difficult revision practices of “add[ing], delet[ing], or mov[ing] material around” (30). The overarching idea is that through reflection, students would avoid simplistic understandings of revision as editorial changes and instead use their metacognitive writing knowledge to assess their work and make meaningful changes to their texts.

This essay examines the relationship between student reflection and revision, questioning their connections and paired efficacy. In 2013, as director and assistant directors of a large first-year writing program at a public research university in the eastern United States, we invested program resources in teaching students substantive revision practices. That fall, we instituted a new assignment in our English 101: Academic Writing standard syllabus: the Revision and Reflection Assignment. This culminating assignment asked students to revise an essay completed earlier in the term and to compose a reflective memo to accompany their revision. Following the scholarship cited above, we identified reflection as a way to enable students to engage in effective revision practice. In conjunction with this curricular initiative, we designed a large-scale, qualitative assessment to investigate whether and how the inclusion of reflection in our course helped students revise their work in significant ways.

We present here the findings from our study. We assert that these findings deepen disciplinary understandings of revision and reflection by indicating the complex relationships students forge between these two key concepts. For the students in our study, reflection did not always inspire better revision. Rather, our examinations revealed that students’ reflective writing and their revision practices connected—and did not connect—in myriad ways. For some students, there was success: students linked revision and reflection in the ways we would hope and anticipate, as they used reflection to support the development of their writing knowledge...
and direct effective revision practice. But for others, the productive connections between revision and reflection were not realized. Even though these students did engage in reflective thinking and writing, their revisions did not result in substantive and effective reimaginings of their work. Our purpose in this essay, then, is to profile and investigate examples of student writing that demonstrate the (dis)connections between students’ reflective writing and their revisions, considering what these (dis)connections signify and how instructors might prompt students toward better revision and reflective practice.

Affirming the premise that “not all reflection is created equal” (McGuire et al. 94), our essay proceeds by interrogating the types of reflection we asked students to practice and exploring how students’ reflections shaped their metacognitive awareness and revision practices (see also Emmons; J. Sommers; Yancey, Reflection; Yancey et al.). The three major sections of this essay are therefore anchored in the specific kinds of reflective thinking and writing we asked students to take up in our assignment sheet: narrating progress, engaging teacher commentary, and making self-directed choices. To offer a detailed sense of these prompts, we excerpt parts of the assignment sheet that call for this kind of reflective thinking and use them as the epigraphs for each section (for the entire assignment sheet, see Appendix A). Within each section, we describe patterns we discerned from our data, using examples that typify the range of connections students made (or did not make) between reflection and revision. These (dis)connections range from insightful and productive to surprising and unproductive. Our goal throughout the essay is to compose a detailed picture of how students in our study responded to the invitation to tether reflection to revision, and the patterns we describe point to specific metacognitive and practical challenges that many students encounter in this process. Building on these understandings of the (dis)connections students forge between reflection and revision, our conclusion offers pedagogical approaches that we believe may help students build stronger bridges between their writing knowledge and their writing practice. Before turning to our findings and conclusions, however, we first offer background about the assignment and the research methods that propelled this study.
Assignment, Methods, and Data

This final assignment for the course asks you to look back on the writing you’ve composed throughout the semester, both your peers and my responses to your writing, as well as all of your reflective assignments, to identify moments of writing success and struggle. One goal of this assignment is for you to leverage this knowledge to revise an assignment of your choosing. In addition to this revision, you will also compose a reflective memo that (1) discusses what you’ve learned about academic writing and yourself as an academic writer over the course of the semester and (2) details the changes you’ve made in the revision project and the reasoning behind these changes.

Scholarship within our field has established that student reflection can happen at different points in the writing process and throughout the semester, and it can take a variety of forms, including writing process journals (Beaufort), “rhetorical reflection” between drafts (Irvin), reflections on key terms that inform a “cumulative theory of writing” (Yancey et al. 143), or reflective writing in the context of portfolios (Bower; Desmet et al; Emmons; Reynolds and Rice; White; Yancey, “Dialogue”; Yancey and Weiser). In fall 2013, the curricular changes we implemented in our standard first-year syllabus included what Kathleen Blake Yancey calls reflection-in-action, when students reflect on their texts in-process, and reflection-in-presentation, when students reflect on completed products in a summative performance for an assessing reader (Reflection 23, 15). Throughout the semester, students wrote four linked essays in which they practiced inquiry, analysis, and argument to explore a single topic. For each of these essays, students composed short reflections-in-action intended to help them move attentively between these assignments, to sharpen their meta-awareness of themselves as writers and their writing, and to look ahead mindfully toward how they might develop the next iteration of the project. These reflection-in-action memos were also intended to serve as a resource for the final Revision and Reflection Assignment by providing students with a record of their thought processes and self-directed critiques at different points along the way. The semester ended with the Revision and Reflection Assignment, which asked students to submit the original version of one of their major essays, a revised version of this essay, and a final reflection-in-presentation memo. We
anticipated that the reflective component of our assignment would enable students to be more perspicacious readers and revisers of their own work.

That same fall, with IRB approval, we launched a study of this assignment by collecting a large sample of students’ Revision and Reflection Assignments. Our sample was drawn from twenty sections of English 101 taught by fifteen instructors. The students who gave us permission to study their work represent a range of English 101 students at our institution, from those who needed extra academic support to those deemed academically talented. In total, we collected 152 assignments by randomly selecting up to 10 from each participating section. As a way of visualizing students’ revisions, we used Microsoft Word’s “compare document” feature to combine the original and revised versions of each essay so that we could view the extent and types of changes each student had made in the revision process.

We created two rubrics to assess each student’s revision and reflection work (see Appendix B online). We collected clean copies of student writing, without instructor feedback or grades; therefore, our assessments were independent of the comments and scores students received from their instructors. The first rubric assessed the extent of students’ revisions as substantive, moderate, or editorial. Substantive revisions involve significant changes to the essay’s main argument by adding or deleting major sections, composing a number of new supporting arguments or counterarguments, writing to a different audience, creating a new arrangement strategy, or any combination thereof. Moderate revisions may demonstrate some of these changes but nothing that significantly alters the main argument or its support. At the editorial level, students generally make sentence-level changes that do not alter the substance of the original essay. In our study, 28 percent of students made substantive revisions to their essays, 44 percent made moderate revisions, and 28 percent made editorial revisions (see Table 1).

The second rubric evaluates the quality of students’ reflections. According to this rubric, memos could be assessed as excellent, adequate, or inadequate. We judged memos to be adequate if they met the basic expectations of the assignment by describing their learning over the course of the semester, explaining their goals for their revised essays, and discussing how they enacted those goals through specific changes, with evidence to support their claims. Memos were judged excellent if, in attending to all of the criteria of the assignment, they offered rich detail and significant evidence to support the students’ claims about their revisions and provided
thoughtful assessments of their progress through the course and their learning about writing. Memos were judged inadequate if claims and supporting evidence about the students’ writing were lacking. In the study, 19 percent of students’ reflective memos were assessed as excellent, while 55 percent were judged adequate and 26 percent were inadequate (see Table 2).

To gain a more detailed sense of how students identified and discussed their revision strategies, we used a grounded theory approach to develop forty codes for analyzing the reflective memos (for a list of codes, see Appendix C online). Here we looked for types of metacognitive articulations in the students’ reflective memos, such as instances when the student mentions teacher commentary or a rhetorical concept like cohesion or arrangement. As a means of assessing and coding the assignments, we recruited six English 101 instructors to join our team of four WPAs. We used the cloud-based, mixed methods software Dedoose to record and organize our data and analyses. In order to ensure reliability, we conducted a multistep norming process with our ten-member team. First, everyone independently coded and scored the same set of documents. As a group, we discussed and reconciled initial differences and ultimately reached consensus on these documents, establishing a standard for how all other documents should be coded and evaluated. Second, coders were paired together and assigned a common set of documents to assess and come to agreement on. This step allowed individual team members to fine-tune their application of specific codes and quality assessments. Finally, we used the test function in Dedoose to assign everyone a selection of passages from across the dataset to evaluate. The results from these tests, which rated the team’s consistency in evaluation, helped us align our individual assessments across coders. Through this iterative process, we were able to norm our raters’ evaluations to a level where we observed considerable agreement.

Our first stage of data analysis, based on our coders’ evaluations of the revisions and the reflections, revealed patterns in the types of metacognitive

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<th>Extent of revision</th>
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<td>Substantive</td>
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<th>Quality of reflection</th>
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moves that corresponded with each level of revision. After completing this stage of analysis, we, the WPAs, examined whether and how well students executed in their revisions the claims they made in their reflections. This procedure enabled us to discern patterns in the relationships between particular types of metacognitive moves evidenced in students’ reflections and the changes they made in their revised essays. Specifically, we observed patterns in students’ uses of progress narratives, teacher commentary, and self-directed revision.

The “Narrative of Progress”

Like many reflective writing assignments, our reflective memo prompt asked students to assess both themselves as writers and their writing over the course of the semester. While teachers often incorporate this mode of reflection into assignments because it “allows students to move beyond the product-centered approach and focuses on the learning process” (Allan and Driscoll 39), this reflective practice, as several scholars have found, has its problems (O’Neill; J. Sommers). In addition to the idea that such assessments fall prey to what Yancey calls the “schmooze factor,” in which students use this rhetorical space to ingratiate themselves with the teacher by crafting a neat package of the purported gains they think the instructor wants to see (“Dialogue” 100), Kimberly Emmons warns that prompting students to construct a “narrative of progress” focuses their attention on “personal growth” rather than “recogniz[ing] their writing could proceed in a variety of directions depending on the discursive situations they encounter” (44). Our findings confirm these hesitations. Because of our assignment prompt design, almost all reflective memos we collected included some version of
the narrative of progress, and by focusing on their writing progress, students may have ignored other writing concerns.

Critically, our findings also extend previous scholarly considerations of progress narratives, as we explore the relationship between the writing knowledge students claim to have gained in their reflective memos and the ways this knowledge is (or is not) realized in their revisions. While many students' revisions actualized the writing skills they identified in their progress narratives, many others did not. In these latter cases, students articulated improved writing knowledge in their memos—they talked the talk—but they did not enact it in their revisions—they did not walk the walk.

**Narratives of Progress Realized**

For a number of students, the progress articulated in their memos is evident in their revised essays. For example, Darnell claims in his memo to have improved his ability to compose thesis statements and transition smoothly between ideas. Indeed, in his substantive revision of his rhetorical analysis essay, Darnell executes what he claims to have learned, and more. His reflective memo begins with this familiar narrative of growth:

> Over the course of the semester, I feel that my writing and my writing style have dramatically improved. As [a] writer, I have always had trouble writing theses and making transitions between paragraphs so that the paper flows well. . . . Through all of the papers, essays, and revisions that I have made throughout the semester, my writing style has gotten better and my thesis making abilities have skyrocketed.

Although Darnell’s narrative of progress likely pleased his instructor, it is not purely obsequious. Read in tandem with Darnell’s revised essay, we see that one skill he identifies in his progress narrative—thesis creation—becomes a point of revision and improvement in his revised rhetorical analysis. His original thesis reads:

> In Susan Cain’s speech, “The Power of Introverts,” she asserts that society has developed a bias towards extroverts, while viewing introverts as outcasts, and
she urges the world to not only accept introverts but value them and allow them to thrive in their own ways.

Although Darnell’s original thesis accurately portrays Cain’s argument, it does not take up the work of rhetorical analysis. In his revision, Darnell adds to his original statement above:

She combines the use of pathos by telling personal stories of her childhood and family; logos to astonish the audience with the extent of the issue, and both of which lead to her ethos to avidly argue the importance of accepting and appreciating the unique qualities of introverts.

While this revised thesis could benefit from additional rounds of focused revision, here Darnell moves beyond summary to take on the work of argument and analysis by setting out how the speaker makes and supports her claims. This new thesis prepares Darnell to craft a fundamentally different essay, in content and structure, which we observed in his revision.

Darnell composes a classic progress narrative in his reflection, but his narrative accurately describes his growth as evidenced by his substantive revisions that improve on the original. Darnell’s case, and others like it, demonstrates that even though students may “schmooze” in their reflective memos (they talk the talk), they do sometimes enact this progress in their revisions (they walk the walk). This result suggests that the metacognitive awareness Darnell and other students gain by reflecting on their progress may help them identify relevant writing concerns, which they in turn can work to improve, revising deeply and even effectively.

Narratives of Progress Unrealized

While many students wrote narratives of progress similar to Darnell’s, a significant number of students did not realize these claims in their revised essays. Indeed, some students professed improvement in their memos and wrote lengthy descriptions of the new writing skills they gained in the course, but their revisions showed little attention to these concerns. For example, in her memo Serena purports to have learned about substantive revision practices in English 101. She writes:

One major thing that has changed [within] my writing process is my revision process. Previous to this course my revision process was merely just editing and consisted of correcting grammatical errors. . . . However, ever since our first summary assignment and the complete revision we had to do, I learned
what a revision really should look like. My entire editing/revision process changed for the better. Now I understand that editing includes more than just grammar. I now edit, move, delete and even completely change ideas within my papers. My new revision process really has strengthened my work and taught me that it is okay to change major aspects of a paper if it is making it better. I now look for more than grammar and I am not afraid to drastically change my ideas within my essays.

Serena’s memo voices exactly the type of metacognitive awareness that this assignment intended to encourage. Her reflection suggests that she has gained accurate writing knowledge about revision as a practice in which a writer reconsiders the aims of her writing, and this knowledge should shape how she returns to her previous essay to improve upon it.

Yet Serena’s revised essay tells a different story. Although she bolsters her revision with evidence from a new source, her revised essay, titled “Women’s Colleges,” is very similar to her original. The revision maintains the overarching argument and supporting claims of the original; it retains the same limited arrangement strategy and adds or takes away just a few minor points. In Serena’s case the relationship between the reflective memo and revised essay seem askew: while she notes her now capacious understanding of revision in her memo (one her teacher would likely want to hear), her revised essay does not carry out or enact this understanding (a practice her teacher would surely want to see). She did not “drastically change” either the “major aspects of the paper” or her “ideas.” Serena’s case is not unique. There are many instances in the data we collected where students similarly claim in their memos that they have gained skills and knowledge that have improved their writing, but their revisions do not actualize their assertions.

Certainly we could surmise the possible reasons for the disconnect between the large claims students made in their reflections and the minimal changes they made in their revised essays. For Serena and other students in our study, minimal revision work could surely be due to a lack of motivation or constraints on time. But even with these possible causes, the frequency of such cases suggests another possibility: while this reflective exercise seems to have prompted students’ metacognitive awareness of their learn-
ing about writing and revision, for many students this awareness was not enough to help them translate their new knowledge into practice within the context of their revisions.

**Teacher Commentary**

To guide your revision, you will consider the rhetorical concepts and strategies you’ve learned throughout the semester, review the comments I have made on your documents, reconsider the suggestions students have made on your drafts, and reflect on your own ideas and concerns that you articulated in your reflection assignments.

As scholars and teachers have noted and feared, our comments on students’ essays often go “unread and unused” (N. Sommers, “Across” 250). Therefore, part of the work of the Revision and Reflection Assignment was for students to focus on teacher commentary (as well as the comments of their peers) and take these comments into deeper consideration as they revised. Although our study team did not have direct access to teachers’ comments, we were able to read students’ references to these comments, which they frequently quoted in their memos. We were especially eager to see how students engaged with their teachers’ comments in the memo and if an imperative to reflect on teacher commentary could help students improve their revision practices.

Due to the assignment prompt, many students did engage with teacher commentary in their reflective memos: over 70 percent of students in the study mentioned teacher commentary in some fashion. For a small number of these students, their teachers’ comments served as a heuristic, a metacognitive tool they used to help them discover how they wished to approach their own revisions and make purposeful changes to their work. That is, these students leveraged teacher commentary to serve as a prompt that inspired them to thoughtfully solve an identified problem. In response to their teachers’ feedback, these students positioned themselves as agents, who, in Joseph Harris’s words, “have[e] a project, [. . . and have] work to do which [they] have defined” (“Revision” 588). The majority of students, however, responded to teacher commentary as a set of directions to follow. Interestingly, in their memos these students responded by either providing a “play-by-play” account of what they “corrected” in their revised essays.
or claiming they had taken direction from their teachers without actually making these changes in their revisions.

Teacher Commentary as Heuristic

Some students, many of whom revised substantively, treated their teachers’ commentaries as a heuristic that helped them determine the issues to address in their essay. From there, these students took ownership of the revision process and often presented their agentive stance by altering their pronouns in their reflective memos. For example, Anna writes in her memo that she “decided to use more statistics and quotes” in her revision in response to her teacher’s concern “that I was not persuasive enough because I was not supporting my paragraphs with specific evidence.” Anna shifts from the teacher’s original you to I, indicating her greater ownership of the critique and signaling the decision-making process that resulted from this ownership. Likewise, in his memo, Jeremy adapts a direct quote from his teacher regarding his rhetorical analysis: “In the letter, you advised me to ‘focus on forefronting [my] own argument, making sure [I] clearly identify the strategies [I] claim to focus on, and tying [my] analysis of these strategies back to my thesis’” (brackets original to Jeremy). Taking his teacher’s comments as a starting point, Jeremy decided to revamp the thesis of his rhetorical analysis to create a stronger focus for his examination and then rewrote the topic sentences throughout his essay to clearly link his supporting arguments to his new major claim. These students took their teachers’ feedback as an invitation to reconsider their previous writing choices and to decide on their own how to carry out their revisions.

Demetrius’s reflection and revision work provides an extended example of how students identified the heuristic value of teacher commentary and carried out their own plans for revision in response. He writes in his memo about the essay he revised concerning teaching styles at high schools and colleges:

One comment you made on my . . . paper is that I needed "more specific and deeper inquiry." I really agree with this statement because throughout my paper I would make claims without evidence to support them, or [without] draw[ing] them back in to connect them to my argument.

An example of [where I addressed this comment] . . . was when I discussed the differences between the material being emphasized in high schools and colleges.
Demetrius’s revised essay focuses primarily on the teacher’s large-scale concerns, and he treats these concerns as opportunities for him to carry out substantive revision. Demetrius “establish[es] [the] issue,” as his teacher advises, in a more thorough manner in his revision by supporting his claims with more research and performs “more specific and deeper inquiry” by analyzing this research in an improved way throughout. Much like a segment of the students Joel Wingard and Angela Geosits study in their research on revision, Demetrius devises and undertakes a “deep revision” strategy in response to his instructor’s “substantive comments”; and his response to his teacher’s commentary in his memo corresponds with the successful, substantive changes he makes to his essay. Of course, this opportunity to engage thoughtfully with teacher suggestions depends on the quality and genre of the teacher’s comments: as Wingard and Geosits emphasize, the most effective teacher comments are often ones that resist line-by-line correction and instead offer questions for students to grapple with or large-scale rhetorical concerns to address. Demetrius’s example reveals that he was able to use his teacher’s compelling commentary as a heuristic to become an agent of revision and successfully respond to his teacher’s ideas.

Given our analysis, then, a key condition for effective revision (in addition to thoughtful teacher commentary) seems to be the approach students take toward their teachers’ ideas and recommendations: successful substantive revisers treat their teachers’ commentary as a metacognitive tool to determine what issues they might address, and they see themselves in a position to prioritize some comments over others, to agree or disagree, and to speak back to their instructors—in short, to deliberate their own path forward. As Nancy Sommers argues, “feedback plays a leading role in undergraduate writing development when, but only when, students and teachers create a partnership through feedback.” These students’ reflective work shows them to be, in Sommers’s words, “open to an instructor’s comments, reading and hearing their responses not as personal attacks or as isolated moments in a college writing career but, rather, as instructive and portable words” (“Across” 250). The prompt to reflect on teacher commentary, then, may be most productive when students understand how to metacognitively engage with this feedback as agents who ultimately decide how to revise their work according to their own goals.
**Teacher Commentary as Direction**

Identifying teacher commentary as an opportunity for inventive, agentive revision was not pervasive across the portfolios we collected. For most students, reflection on teacher commentary evidently did not motivate them to think on their own about how to make and carry out large-scale revisions, a finding consistent with other scholarship (Dohrer; Richardson; Wingard and Geosits). In fact, the code *teacher commentary* co-occurred more frequently with revisions evaluated as *editorial* than revisions evaluated as *substantive*. That is, students who revised at the editorial level invoked teacher commentary in their memos more often than the group of students who revised most deeply. Pursuing this disconnection between students’ engagement with teacher commentary and substantive revision, we observed that many students approached teacher commentary as simply directive, rather than as a heuristic, and these students tended to revise only at an editorial level.

In some cases, students expressed their approach to teacher commentary as directive through a play-by-play account of their revisions. That is, they tended to take their teachers’ words as direct instruction on what to fix and how to fix it. For instance, when Xavier presents his revision work in his memo, he articulates the ways he strictly followed his instructor’s suggestions. The sentence structure of his reflection is telling:

You commented saying the evidence I used in the claim seemed irrelevant because my analysis of it was lacking. I revised it by adding in another piece of evidence that together with the first supported my claim… You commented that the conclusion of it was unclear due to word choice so I re-wrote the sentence. . . . Lastly, you commented that my evaluation (end of page five) was unclear. . . . I re-wrote that portion of the evaluation.

Xavier’s reflection follows a particular sentence pattern that suggests a posture of strict obedience: *you told me to do X, so I did X*. Much like the student responses to teacher commentary described by S. Richardson, Xavier’s reflective memo “suggest[s] deference to the teacher's opinion and direction and a reluctance to adopt more independent moves” (124; cf. Dohrer 51). Rather than assessing the value of a teacher’s suggestions with his own goals in mind, as we saw with Anna, Jeremy, and Demetrius, Xavier, like many students in our study, simply offers a checklist of teacher-indicated
errors to correct. As noted in the previous section, teacher commentary that points students to large-scale issues is more likely to prompt them to revise substantively. In Xavier's case, his teacher does appear to have given him feedback on higher-order concerns, especially pushing him toward more rigorous analysis. Despite this type of feedback, Xavier recasts his teacher's call for substantive revision as a sentence-level issue. As Howard Tinberg explains, "it is metacognition that endows writers with a certain control over their work" (76). Conversely, if students do not take a metacognitive approach to the work of revision, and instead treat their teachers' comments as to-do lists to simply carry out, they may cede that control.

While not all editorial revisers followed the play-by-play pattern as closely as Xavier, many of them invoked teacher commentary as a simple set of directions to follow without taking up the advice to revise substantively. For example, in his reflective memo, Arun reports that according to his teacher’s comments, “Your main concerns with my original paper, were that it lacked a clear thesis, it lacked in depth analysis, and it became too much of just a list of examples.” He then reports the sentence-level changes he made in response to these comments:

My original thesis statement was, “police brutality is a universal problem that needs to be stopped, especially in one situation at [our university].” […] But I revised my thesis statement to say, “Police brutality is a universal problem that needs to be stopped and punished because it is unlawful and hurts people.” My new thesis now involves a reason why it is that police brutality should be stopped and by me adding the portion about punishment I have more that I can analyze throughout my paper.

In his reflective memo, Arun pinpoints a substantive concern (thesis revision) identified by his teacher, but his revision—the one he recounts in the memo itself—is only slightly improved with the addition of a reason (“because it is unlawful and hurts people”) to support his slightly expanded claim (“stopped and punished”). His new thesis still communicates a vague sentiment about policing rather than addressing a real point of contention in the debate over police brutality, such as the definition of “brutality” or when the use of force is justified. Further, his changes to the rest of the essay are largely editorial. For instance, he “add[s] analysis” through a process of systematically tacking on a sentence to each of three paragraphs.
These cases, frequent in our study, were especially troubling to us: they suggest that when students treat even meaningful teacher commentary in their memos as mere direction, they may generate superficial and editorial revision at best. It is possible that some students who devoted their energies in the reflective memo to proving they followed the direction of teacher commentary may have limited their potential for critical engagement with the work of revision.

**Self-Directed Revisions**

The revisions you make to the essay of your choice must be substantive. While you will be expected to bring our style and grammar work to bear on this revision, these are not the only changes you should be making. Rather, your work in this revision is to rethink major parts or aspects of the essay such as appeals, arrangement, introductions and conclusions, integration of research and so on.

The third major area we asked students to address in this assignment was to identify their own significant writing concerns for their essays and then revise accordingly. Scholarship on revision shows that experienced writers possess the ability to identify higher-order concerns that they can then act on in their revisions (N. Sommers, “Revision”). Flower et al. explain that a skilled reviser engages in a “diagnostic process” in which he or she “defines the problem to be solved, calls in a vocabulary for analyzing it, and supplies strategies for solving it” (46). By studying the Revision and Reflection Assignment, we hoped to learn more about how students moved through this self-initiated diagnostic process and chose revision strategies to improve their work.

We observed that many of the students who revised their essays substantively made revision decisions of their own choosing. The code
self-directed was attached to memos associated with substantively revised essays almost twice as frequently as it was attached to memos connected to editorial revisions. In the memos connected to substantive revisions, we observed students in dialogue with their own work, expressing an intellectual project and an approach to revision that reached beyond advice offered by teachers or peers. Substantive student revisers used the reflective memo to record their metacognitive reflections regarding how and why they revised as they did. However, we also observed some students who took a less productive self-directed approach. These students used the memo to identify small changes to their work and to persuade their instructors that the edits they made actually signaled substantive revision.3

**Self-Directed Reflections, Substantive Revisions**

Kanika’s reflection represents an especially good example of a self-directed metacognitive practice that enabled substantive, successful revision. Writing about her approach to revising her essay on preventing concussions in sports, Kanika observes,

> Because I used more than one stasis [in the original essay], I figured I could easily just re-structure my paper but I ended up scrapping the entire thing and starting new. My new paper is in one stasis (action) so all my points are ideas to prevent concussions in sports.

In this passage from her reflection, Kanika exhibits the qualities of a self-directed reviser. Informed by stasis theory, but not evidently by specific teacher feedback, Kanika diagnoses a higher-order concern in her original essay: diffuse focus.4 Kanika’s original essay lacked clear direction because it operated in two different stases; that is, it addressed two different types of questions. In her introduction and conclusion, Kanika explored the issue of preventing concussions, a question of policy. In the rest of the essay, however, Kanika addressed a question of cause and effect: who was at fault for the prevalence of concussions? As a way of unifying her argument, she focused on just one question in her revision: how can concussions be prevented? In the revision, Kanika replaced every supporting paragraph in the original essay with a policy discussion of how to prevent concussions. The resulting piece is improved in coherence and argument, as Kanika treats a single issue in this debate from beginning to end. The reflective process thus created
space for Kanika to metacognitively assess the essay’s substantive needs, and in her revision she executed the changes she identified.

As Kanika’s work illustrates, self-directed revisers often addressed higher-order issues through the lens of specific rhetorical concepts at the core of our curriculum, including stasis theory, exigence, arrangement, argument, counterargument, audience, and the rhetorical appeals (logos, ethos, and pathos). Some self-directed revisers leveraged other conceptual supports for revision, discussing in their memos concrete planning tools they used to revise, including creating reverse outlines and drawing flow charts to test ideas. Students explained in their reflections that these strategies facilitated their ability to both generate and execute the revision plans they devised, and their substantively revised essays support their claims. The successful self-directed revisers in our study demonstrated metacognitive practices associated with more experienced writers: they were better able to diagnose a writing problem, identify a solution, and work to solve that problem in the revision. The assignment’s requirement to reflect on rhetorical concepts for these students seems to have supported these practices.

**Self-Directed Reflections, Editorial Revisions**

Unlike Kanika, some students who made self-directed reflective claims did not engage metacognitively with core rhetorical concepts or specific writing strategies, and their corresponding essays were not substantively revised. For example, Steve reflects:

> I believe that overall, my ideas and my sources were the strong point of this essay, but the reason that it received a low grade was the fact that it was full of small errors and confusing wording that distracts from the points that I want to be made. I believe that you commented that my sentence cohesion in this paper was the main problem, or this is at least what I found to be the most glaring issue of all.

Although Steve mentions his teacher’s comments, his word choice in the memo is similar to Kanika’s in that it indicates that he is taking self-directed initiative and ownership of the essay (“I believe”; “I want to be made”; “I found”). But along with many other students in our study, and novice writers more generally, Steve brings an error-correcting perspective to the project of revision, and even though he identifies sentence cohesion as a “blaring issue,” he simply adds, deletes, and substitutes words, phrases,
and sentences, without making any significant changes to his essay (see Dohrer; Flower et al.; N. Sommers, “Revision”). He writes, “So in order to make a more cohesive paper I tried adding transitions and correcting several cohesion errors.” In Steve’s case, the requirement to reflect on rhetorical concepts from the course did not prompt him to critically evaluate his essay using his acquired writing knowledge, a metacognitive move essential for effective revision; rather, it provided a space for him to relay the small editorial changes he made.

Another common issue among self-directed, nonsubstantive revisers was their use of the memo to convince their instructors that the editorial changes they made throughout the essay were actually significant. Robert, for instance, admits to the smallness of the changes to his essay on foreign language education in the United States but argues in his memo that they had a profound effect on his essay as a whole. He writes,

If you look at the beginning of the essay, during my experience [personal narrative] and the subsequent paragraph, I made small revisions to certain sentences which clarified my thoughts. These revisions are substantive because they serve as a way to partition the rest of my essay, even before I begin talking about the data behind foreign language education in the US. (emphasis ours)

Like the reflections of several self-directed, nonsubstantive revisers, Robert’s robust explanation of the changes he made follows the assignment’s instructions to include “detailed discussions” of revisions. However, despite Robert’s remarkable effort at persuasion in the reflective memo, his actual revisions do very little to improve the overall effectiveness of the essay. Ironically, Robert exhibits the kind of metacognitive skills that are central to effective revision but instead misdirects those energies toward talking himself (and his instructor) out of doing the global, substantive, and difficult work of revision.

**Implications and Conclusions**

This study contributes to our collective knowledge in composition studies by drawing on a robust dataset of student writing to describe students’ revision and reflection practices and to discern patterns of connection that students forge between these two critical “threshold” concepts. Our results add depth to previous scholarship that asserts that reflection, if implemented and taken up well, can play an important role in fostering
students’ metacognitive writing awareness, which in turn can support their ability to revise their writing in substantive ways (cf. Beaufort; Irvin; O’Neill; Reynolds and Rice; N. Sommers, “Across”; Yancey et al.). In particular, we found that students are more likely to make successful, substantive revisions if they engage in such metacognitive practices as using teacher commentary heuristically and centering attention on higher-order rhetorical concerns. In addition to these positive conclusions, our study also elucidates the challenges students often encounter when pairing revision and reflection (cf. Emmons; O’Neill; J. Sommers; Yancey, Reflection). Specifically, we conclude that, for many students, the metacognitive awareness prompted by reflecting on course progress may be too abstracted from the actual practice of revision to be helpful. For assignments such as ours, it may therefore be more productive to focus students’ attention on knowledge and practices that are more concretely tied to the work of revision rather than encouraging students to compose progress narratives. Further, our investigations indicate that when students treat teacher commentary in their reflections like a checklist, frame revision as error correction, or overestimate the importance of small changes, their revisions are likely to be editorial or moderate at best.

Stepping back and viewing our findings in their entirety, then, we assert that students in our study—and, by extrapolation, students more generally—likely need more opportunities to explore how revision and reflection are connected and how creating strong links between the two might help them compose more effective writing. Our study indicates that assigned reflective writing, even when instructions about how and on what to reflect are seemingly clear, does not automatically yield the kind of metacognitive awareness that best supports substantive revision work. We therefore surmise, alongside Allan and Driscoll, that just as students need intentional instruction in order to expand their concept of revision, they likewise need intentional instruction to broaden their concept of reflection and, even more, they need help better understanding (and practicing) the reciprocal connections between the two (48). In these concluding paragraphs we offer pedagogical recommendations that take up these needs. The activities we suggest are based on the changes made to our curriculum in response to
our study findings, and they aim to develop students’ insight on the ways revision and reflection animate one another. We believe these recommendations will enable students to engage in more critical reflective practices that lead to stronger revision work. We also posit that these pedagogical recommendations will support teachers not only to use reflection to teach revision but also and critically to use revision to teach reflection.

Our first pedagogical recommendation aims to direct students’ metacognitive attention to the why of revision over the what. In our study, we observed that when students focused primarily on cataloging what they did, their reflections became simple lists and play-by-plays of their changes rather than more critical, self-directed engagement with their work, and not surprisingly, their revisions were largely editorial (cf. Taczak). By contrast, those students whose memos focused on why they made the changes they did were able to engage in more capacious thinking about their writing and make more self-directed choices in revision. To move students away from what-focused reflection work, our assignment instructions now prompt students to pursue questions of why. In fact, our revised assignment includes template sentences based on the memos of successful revisers in our study (e.g., Anna, Darnell, Demetrius, and Jeremy) that reveal at the sentence level how one goes about explaining the reasons behind their revisions (e.g., “When you made X comment on my Rhetorical Analysis assignment, I realized W; therefore I did Z in my revision”). Prompts such as these will, we hope, help students gain a deeper understanding of how the memo functions as a rhetorical space to engage the kinds of critical and deep metacognitive thinking that correlates with thoughtful revisions.

Second, we recommend reflective activities that enable students to see and therefore assess their revision work. Our curriculum has now incorporated a new in-class activity where, after students have had some time to revise their original essay but are not yet finished, they create a revision-in-progress document that visually represents the changes they have made using the “track changes” or “compare documents” feature in Microsoft Word. Studying this revision-in-progress document as a text in itself, students conduct a brief analysis of the changes they have made to see if they have successfully revised the essay according to their goals and,
if not, to consider additional or alternative revisions they might undertake. Students also reevaluate their goals and reconsider the direction for their revision. This intermediate intervention invites students to pause and metacognitively examine their revisions thus far, visually represented, before carefully plotting out their next moves. We believe that building in this pause for students to analyze their revisions-in-progress will help them move more recursively between revision and reflection, improving both their reflective and revision practices.

Third, we see the need for students to critically evaluate the connections they are making between their revisions and reflections. To position students to take up this work, we created a reflection-on-revision-and-reflection exercise in which students place in conversation their in-progress memos and in-progress revisions to see how they are speaking to one another and what they are saying. Here, students inspect their work considering such questions as the following: Do the changes I make in my revised essay align with the work I discuss in the memo? How am I revising in light of my teacher’s comments, and what is my memo saying about the efficacy of these revisions? Do I make revisions based on higher-level rhetorical concerns, and do I explain in my memo why I believe it is important to make the changes that I do? Basically, am I walking the walk or just talking the talk? We believe that building into the curriculum exercises that enable students to critically evaluate the conversation between their reflective writing and revisions will help them to discern how the two are (dis)connected and to create stronger ties between them so that their work as a whole evidences both deep thinking about writing and thorough and effective revision.

These three pedagogical recommendations aim to help instructors guide students’ practices of revision and reflection and explore their relationships. As we conclude, we do want to make a final note regarding how our findings shed light on the scholarly conversation regarding the assessment of reflective writing, especially as it relates to portfolio assessment. For instance, in his oft-cited essay, “The Scoring of Writing Portfolios,” Edward M. White argues for evaluation practices that give more weight to the reflective component of portfolios than the revised work included in the portfolio. He advises teachers to focus their evaluative attention primarily on the reflective essay instead of deeply reading the oeuvre of revised essays within the portfolio (593). White recommends this approach
because it increases efficiency and consistency in grading portfolios and because it centers on students’ own assessments of their work in the grading process (594). Our study prompts some hesitation regarding this suggestion. Because our findings reveal significant disconnections between the promises of the memos and the work composed in the revisions, we see it is critical to assess reflection and revision in light of each other. Evaluating the reflective component alone may not allow the teacher to gain insight into a student’s actualized or applied knowledge, growth, and practice. As we see in the cases of Serena and Arun, many students can articulate sophisticated principles in their reflective memos but may not know how (or take time) to implement those understandings. Indeed, White acknowledges that “[t]here may well be important qualitative differences between the reflective letter and the contents of the portfolio” (594). Our study shows that such differences occur frequently enough that looking at the reflective component alone may obscure crucial disparities between students’ theoretical knowledge and their ability (or motivation) to put that knowledge into practice.

At the beginning of this essay we noted that scholars identify revision and reflection as crucial threshold concepts for writing students. Based on our study’s findings, we affirm the central positioning of these two concepts in composition, but we would like to offer another, hybrid threshold concept: reflective revision. Certainly, existing scholarship promotes the combination of these two concepts in various ways. Our research suggests that this intertwining is not only essential but also reciprocal. Without strong reflective practices, students struggle to revise their essays in deep, meaningful ways. Likewise, uncoupled from the work of revision, students’ reflections on how they might revise or what they know about writing have the potential to become flights of fancy, possibly painting an unrealistic picture of what they can or should do. As Harris cautions, “You can’t just think changes to an essay; you need to make them” (Rewriting 104). Students need to grapple with the strengths and weaknesses of their actual revision work to fine-tune the metacognitive thinking that will lead to more successful revision in the future. Reflection sharpens revision, as existing scholarship makes clear and our study affirms, but revision also sharpens reflection. For

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**Appendix A: Assignment Sheet**

**Revision and Reflection Assignment**

First Draft Due:  
Final Draft Due:  
Reflective Memo: 2 single-spaced pages  
Revision: 4–5 pages

As we’ve discussed throughout the semester, revision and reflection are key components to growing as a writer and thinker. This final assignment for the course asks you to look back on the writing you’ve composed throughout the semester, both your peers’ and my responses to your writing, as well as all of your reflective assignments, to identify moments of writing success and struggle. One goal of this assignment is for you to leverage this knowledge to revise an assignment of your choosing. In addition to this revision, you will also compose a reflective memo that (1) discusses what you’ve learned about academic writing and yourself as an academic writer over the course of the semester and (2) details the changes you’ve made in the revision project and the reasoning behind these changes.

**Your Revision**

You have the choice to revise your Rhetorical Analysis, your Experience and Other Evidence essay, or your Considering Another Side essay. To guide your revision, you
will consider the rhetorical concepts and strategies you’ve learned throughout the semester, review the comments I have made on your documents, reconsider the suggestions students have made on your drafts, and reflect on your own ideas and concerns that you articulated in your reflection assignments. The idea here is that you demonstrate how you’ve continued to fine-tune your rhetorical skills over the course of the semester and that you can now use these new understandings to revise your work. Your revised essay should reflect your end-of-the-semester knowledge and rhetorical expertise.

**Substantive Revision:** The revisions you make to the essay of your choice must be substantive. While you will be expected to bring our style and grammar work to bear on this revision, these are not the only changes you should be making. Rather, your work in this revision is to rethink major parts or aspects of the essay such as appeals, arrangement, introductions and conclusions, integration of research, and so on. *You will not succeed at this assignment if you focus only on grammatical changes to your sentences.* As we work on the revision and the reflective memo, we will continue to discuss what substantive means.

**Your Reflective Memo**
As you revise this earlier essay, you will also compose a two-page, single-spaced memo directed to me that reflects on (1) what you’ve learned about academic writing and yourself as a writer over the course of the semester and (2) your goals for your revision essay and the ways you’ve attempted to reach these goals.

1. Explain to me your progress as a writer over the course of the semester and discuss how you’ve learned the nuances of academic writing. Reflect on all the writing you’ve done this semester and provide evidence for your claims, using examples from your writing by responding to the following questions: What have been your challenges? How have you addressed these challenges? What adjustments have you made over the course of the semester to improve your writing? What are you particularly proud of? What do you still need to work on? Where do you see improvement? Your reflection assignments should be particularly important for this part of the memo, as they have asked you to reflect on your writing consistently throughout the semester. In addition, please reflect on the following (about academic writing in general):

   • How was your prior knowledge of writing expanded, confirmed, complicated, and/or altered? Please give specific examples of where, why, and how.
   • How was the writing you did for ENGL101 similar to or different from the writing you’ve done (a) in the past and (b) for other situations?
   • What did you learn in this class that you think you may draw on in the future? What questions about writing do you still have?
• What approaches to writing (if any) do you think you will continue to use as you write for and beyond school?

2. Explain to me your goals for the revision and discuss the specific changes you’ve made and the reasoning behind these changes. For example, you might find that when you first composed the Experience and Other Evidence essay the description of your experience felt vague and did not quite engage the issue the way you had hoped. Or, you may find that your arrangement in your Rhetorical Analysis lacked cohesiveness and purpose, and after working on arrangement during the Final Position Paper unit, you can now devise a better arrangement strategy. In your reflective memo, you would discuss how you made changes to your experience description, citing the specific changes you made; or, in terms of the Rhetorical Analysis example, you would discuss how you reevaluated your arrangement and created a new organizational strategy with a greater sense of purpose.

Use of Detail: Detailed discussions in your memo are vital because they highlight for me the thinking and decision making that directed your revisions. Here is where I gain a sense that you are making conscious, careful, and rhetorically effective decisions. Furthermore, the idea behind the reflective memo is that you offer me a guide to reading your revision. In essence you’re saying, “Here’s why I did what I did.” By only making general statements about your revision, you won’t offer your reader (me!) a roadmap for reading your work and understanding your decisions.

Detailed discussion means that you take up two major concerns:

• First, you point to specific instances of revision: “I created an emotional appeal in my Considering Another Side essay by offering a detailed description of how mice are treated in research laboratories (see page 3, paragraph 2).”

• Second, and crucially, you explain why you made the choice that you made. You want to think in “because” statements. “I created an emotional appeal by offering a detailed description of how mice are treated in research laboratories.” Why? the reader asks. “Because,” you respond, “the appeal depicts mice in horrid conditions and offers insight into the gravity of the situation of animal testing. Without understanding the physical condition of animals such as these mice, readers would not know how extreme the situation is.”

Audience
I am the audience for the reflective memo, so you should direct your comments to me. Because I am the audience, you can also draw from class discussions, meetings with me, and smaller course writing activities as well as our textbooks. Drawing on
these materials offers you a way of showing how your work in the revision builds on the work we did in class. You might even refer to comments I’ve made on your papers throughout the semester. Here’s an example:

Throughout the semester, I’ve had difficulty conceptualizing a specific audience for my essays. You note this concern in your response to my Experience and Other Evidence essay where you state, “I’m having a hard time seeing who your audience is here; who are you speaking to? What values does this audience have and how are you addressing them?” In my revision to the Experience and Other Evidence essay, I address this concern by . . .

Notes

1. Our research study, “Studying Revision Practices and Metacognitive Awareness in Academic Writing Students at [Public Research University]“ (#528519), was granted IRB approval on November 15, 2013.

2. Our data analysis process was driven by grounded theory (Charmaz; Glaser and Strauss; Strauss and Corbin) in that we limited our interpretations as much as possible to those that emerged from the data themselves.

3. A small subset (5 percent) of the assignments we collected were evaluated as substantive revisions with inadequate reflections. These outliers led us to wonder: were some students able to apply the concepts they learned to revise effectively and improve their original work, but without the capacity or motivation to articulate why or how? Closer inspection revealed that 71 percent of the revised essays of these outliers were evaluated as worse than the corresponding original documents and poor overall. Students made major, self-directed changes in these documents, but those changes diminished the quality of the original essays.

4. Stasis theory is an ancient rhetorical strategy at the center of our English 101 curriculum in which rhetors classify the types of issues at play in a debate; stasis theory offers rhetors a systematic means of inventing and analyzing arguments.

5. This exercise is similar to one Harris describes in Rewriting in which he requires his students, when they turn in a revised essay, to also submit a version that visually tracks the changes they have made. His students then write a reflection that describes why and how they made these changes, using the track changes document as a reference (107). Our exercise differs, however, in that students complete this exercise midway through their revising rather than at the end.
6. This exercise shares some features of Yancey et al’s “theory of writing” assignment in their Teaching for Transfer curriculum, where students articulate their conceptualization of writing based in part on previous reflections on writing they have composed (75–76). The focus of their assignment is the transfer of writing knowledge to contexts beyond first-year writing (76).

Works Cited


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