THE MONTAIGNE METHOD: ADDING CONTENT AND CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH REVISION AS INVENTION

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Revision seems a perennial source of confusion for students and dissatisfaction for writing instructors. For many students, editing and revision are synonymous, while teachers seek a final draft that's been subtly worked over, with layers of thought. We're looking for change—not that other "c" word—correction. In essence, we don't want students to be working so close to the *tail end* of the writing experience as they revise—the proofreading phase. Instead, we would like students to treat revision as an act of invention: something much closer to the *opening* of the composing experience.

A writer should be able to return to invention—a moment in the composing process that's generative and creative, reflective and inspiring—at any stage in working on a text. It shouldn't matter how much time has passed since starting the assignment or how much time remains until the deadline. Revision in this way is Janus-faced, a two-sided possibility: one side can look ahead through proofreading to the eventual reader; the other side can look back to generating new material, starting out, and the internal exploration characteristic of early drafting. This view of revision is aligned with previous arguments for a greater flexibility in the writing process to avoid the lockstep 1-2-3- drill of "prewrite, freewrite, rough draft, revise, proofread, final draft" (Flower and Hayes; Geller; Tobin). Rather than a linear experience, the writing process contains macroloops whereby "the process of composing a draft, or dissatisfaction with the direction

it has taken, stimulates a new phase of prewriting, which leads to the revision of old material and the composition of new sentences and passages" (Hjortshoj 33). Instructors have designed classroom activities that slide revision much closer to invention, making rewriting resemble those opening moments of the writing experience—such as the switching of entire topics during revision (Brockman) or helping students "unsettle" their drafts by developing "alternative sections" and changing genre and audience (Tchudi, Estrem, Hanlon). These approaches highlight the additive dimension of rewriting and downplay the eliminating or corrective side.

In this article, we describe our implementation of the sixteenth-century essayist Michel Montaigne's revision method, which we modified with in-class process notes in order to help students rethink not only their texts but also their fundamental approach to revision. The Montaigne Method—which permits students to add material exclusively—increases students' involvement with revision and steers them away from superficial edits or from reliance on external structures (5-paragraph format). Although we emphasize adding in this approach, we invite other types of revision and maintain that reducing is also crucial. The type of revision we describe initially deemphasizes form and organization in order to focus on generating content. There's good reason to promote less organization at this stage since it potentially leads to more long-term insights when combined later with the elimination of content. A strict avoidance of so-called "bad" or disorganized writing, as Peter Elbow argues in *Writing with Power*, can choke the creation of meaningful texts (301).

Moreover, the only-add rule, used in conjunction with process thinking which we will shortly describe, highlights students' naturalized inclination toward premature editing, affording what Joseph Harris calls a "renewed attentiveness to the visible practice or labor of writing" (578). This development in consciousness is important since teachers should be on the look-out for changes in

students' perspective on revision, not just changes in their drafts (Tchudi, Estrem, and Hanlon 33).

Michel Montaigne, the reputed founder of the essay genre (see figure 1), constantly added material to his published pieces, an endeavor concentrated in his last years of life in which he added the equivalent of an entire volume in the expansive margins around his second published collection of essays (Newkirk "Montaigne's Revisions" 298; 213). According to Thomas Newkirk, Montaigne "compulsively reread this volume, making additions in the margins, sometimes pasting notes onto the pages, the forerunner of the sticky note" (*The Art* 178). Montaigne's

Figure 1: Michel Montaigne's Nonstop Revision

practice of writing on seemingly finished texts is important because he avoided cutting activities common in more self-critical approaches to altering one's writing: "I never correct my first thoughts by second ones—well, except perhaps for the odd word, but to vary it, not to remove it. I want to show my humors as they develop, revealing each element as it is born" (Montaigne, qtd in Newkirk, "Montaigne's Revisions" 858). Montaigne's fascination with revising speaks to Don Murray's view that revision is "the motivating force within most [professional] writers" due to its alluring possibility for discovery (56). Adapting Montaigne's strategy for the classroom, Newkirk asked students to tape their pages onto wider sheets of paper and elaborated on the nature of those additions. Newkirk explained that additions could involve details, dialog, "internal reactions," rebuttals, new examples or scenes, links to other experiences and texts, or new evidence (*The Art* 180), a method we in turn adapted for the high-school classroom with staged process notes.

The Assignment

We applied the Montaigne Method of revision to two types of assignments—a low-stakes assignment followed by a high-stakes assignment several weeks later—with four freshman high school English classes, two honors and two college prep classes, during 90-minute class periods. We began with the choice of two low-stakes prompts: a short personal narrative about a scent that evokes a specific memory, or one or two analytical paragraphs explaining the symbolism in James Hurst's short story "The Scarlet Ibis." The high-stakes assignment called for an analytical essay in which students addressed how poetic devices functioned in Theodore Roethke's "Root Cellar."

After providing students with a brief background on Montaigne and his method, we supplied students with large sheets of paper (17x22) and asked them to tape their drafts to the middle of the paper (see figure 2). As they read and re-read their drafts, we asked them to revise their work only by adding material. For these rounds of revision, they were not allowed to cut or replace any of

the content of their short responses; we explained that students would have a later opportunity to revise by cutting and replacing material. Students were not committed to using all the material or "side addition" they generated; instead, "just as for Montaigne, the technique, and all that open space, invites elaboration" (Newkirk 180). These additions could occur through a number of means—using arrows, numbers, symbols. Taping the page draft to the

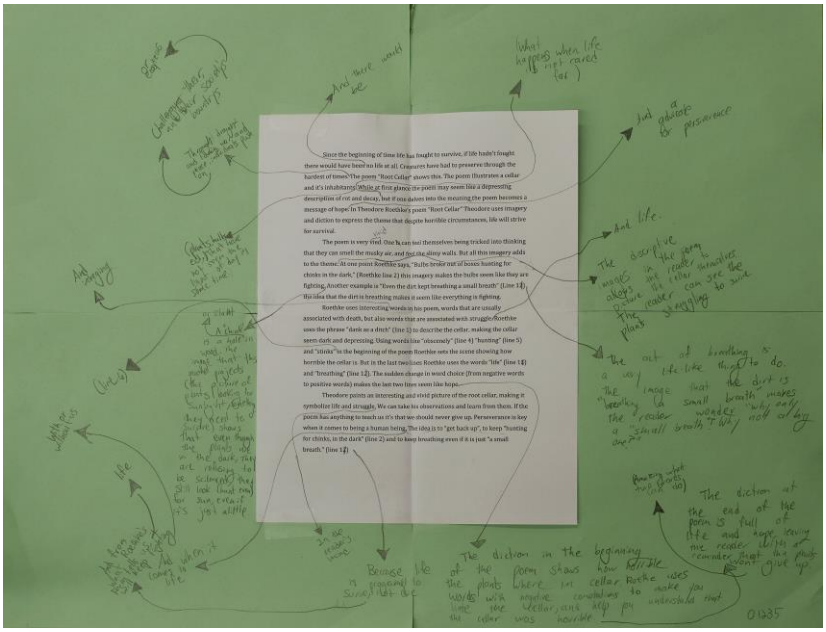

Figure 2

middle of a larger sheet, students are no longer restricted by the one-inch margins, benefiting from another four to five inches around their entire essay—an increase in space which promotes the addition of words, sentences, and even paragraphs if need be. As one student characterized the end result, a Montaigne-style draft resembles "a squid with too many arms that's been run over."

Each time students partook in this method of revision, they did so for thirty minutes. If the students felt "stuck" in their

revision process, we encouraged them to build onto those additions by asking themselves the following questions:

What needs further clarification? What needs to be defined?
What could use some more description?
How can I strengthen the points I have made? What are my own internal reactions to this draft? What might a reader of this draft think?
What could a naysayer question in this draft?
What connections can I make to other things in the text and/or life?

Students completed four notes about their revision process over the course of using the Montaigne Method for the low- and high-stakes tasks. These process notes were intended to just give a "this-is-how-I-experienced it" account of the student's use of the method and not in-depth analysis. The initial process note asked questions concerning students' general perception of revision based on their previous experiences and was completed before we introduced the Montaigne Method. The second and third process notes asked students to reflect on revision as invention and on their own revision tendencies with questions such as "In general, do you feel you are better at adding or cutting?" and "Specific to today's revision experience, at what points did you want to add or delete material?" Another question asked students to compare that day's revision experience to another activity from their lives and to explore the ideas about composing that arose from that figuration. Another question gauged students' self-efficacy by asking them to rate the success of that day's rewrite. Regarding the high-stakes assignment, students revised in ten-minute intervals and reflected on their process after each interval. After finishing their revision of the high-stakes assignment, students wrote their final process note recounting their overall experience with Montaigne-style revision. Once students revised and reflected on the Montaigne Method of revision, they could freely engage in a more traditional revision of adding, cutting, moving, or rewording the content of their rewrites, as they saw fit.

Engagement, Introspection, and Confidence

By the time students reach high school, many students' experience of revision has become fairly superficial and prescriptive, and their rewrites often show little sign of self-motivation or independent thinking. Since revision is often taught as a stage of writing that is done once or twice at the end of the writing process, students tend to turn to late-stage aspects—grammar, spelling, diction—and rarely to content-related issues. Some students view their content as vulnerable, as Andrew[1] noted, "sometimes the eraser can feel like a scalpel slicing away what was originally written." Others don't know what to revise on their own and ask for a checklist; these students will likely "fix" only what a "teacher tells [them] to," as one, Joseph, recorded in his process note. Other students view revision as an unnecessary part of the writing process. In describing her usual experience, Quinn likened revision to flossing one's teeth:

> *I would compare revision to flossing your teeth. You always mean to do it because your dentist tells you to. But you rarely get around to it, and when you do, you've done it so little, so your gums begin to bleed (because they aren't necessarily used to having string stuck up inside them). This gum bleeding discourages you from flossing even more. You look in the mirror and smile. You think your teeth look fine.*

Pretty much the entire rhetorical situation of typical classroom revision is captured in Quinn's extended metaphor: student disengagement with revision which is externally motivated by a teacher (medical authority); revision as a recommended but unappealing practice and thus avoided (flossing); revision as uncomfortable because not regularly practiced (bleeding gums); resultant denial and disengagement (teeth look fine without flossing).

An unfortunate by-product of standardized testing is how it has turned writing and rewriting into a people-pleasing plug-and-chug

activity. It is easy for students to mimic structures. They learn in middle school that a paragraph is at least five sentences. In Massachusetts, where we teach, students learn in ninth and tenth grade that a paragraph written for a high school level Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) open response question should be around eight sentences. They learn that for the tenth grade English Language Arts MCAS long composition, their answer should be five paragraphs. With this conditioning, it is no wonder that these writers are flabbergasted by a revision technique that requires them to change the content of their writing when a draft has already met length requirements.

The Montaigne Method, while not a panacea for all revision issues, deemphasizes prescribed form and instead steers students toward the generation of content, regardless of its eventual form: students add single words, phrases, sentences, whole passages, even pages. As students partook in the Montaigne Method, their investment in the creation of content (over surface editing) increased. For instance, Daphney observed: "*When my writing is purely invention, I get to add a lot more detail and notice what I didn't have before. My thought process is more focused on what I need to accomplish and finish. Also, my thoughts mostly just think about what the subject is.*"

In his analysis of Roethke's "Root Cellar," Joshua's additions included two complete sentences of elaboration as well as a list of ideas for future development which could become separate paragraphs. On the low-stakes assignment, Henry added a significant passage of sensory detail and reflection (indicated in bold type) to his description of his grandfather's camp which enriched his blanket statements:

> *My grandpa had to sell my camp.* ***Maine was special to me. It was my own private getaway, my home, my life, my first vacation. Maine was part of my life which I could never get rid of. I could go up to my aunt's house, but it's just not the same. Her house doesn't smell the same. Her house doesn't have the wooden walls with cabinet and***

> ***speckles of dark wood. Her house doesn't have the light purple floors that creak when you walk on them. It doesn't have the old bedroom sets or the personal freshwater spring, or the steep hill leading up to it, or the burn in the rug from when my cousin dropped her marshmallow, which was on fire. It doesn't have the good times and the bad times. It doesn't have the same memories that my cabin did.*** *For the rest of my life, whenever I smell a campfire, my memories in Maine will flash before my eyes.*

On the high-stakes assignment, Liz added several sentences (indicated in bold type) to the end of her paragraph interpreting Roethke's positive and negative connotations:

> *Much of the poem is spent describing how awful the cellar is, but then at the very end it says, "Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath." Breathing has a positive connotation. It's related to living and doing, showing that even with all the bad parts of the basement, everything down to the dirt is straining to live. That line portrays hope.* ***The abrupt transition from negative descriptions to lines brimming with hope mirrors the life shining through all the ugly, gross parts of the basement. The two hopeful lines bring the whole tone of the poem over from a dark side, into positive. The threads of life in a basement make the entire cellar seem earthy and lived in, rather than just a nasty hole in the ground.***

In the process note following this round of revision, Liz demonstrated a transformation in outlook from revision-as-editing to revision-as-invention. Specifically, Liz admitted that she "would've turned [her original draft] in as a final draft" because she would have felt she "didn't have too much to fix," but as she cycled through the Montaigne Method she looked "for deeper connections to strengthen [her] argument."

The Montaigne Method resulted in a different type of draft from students: one with more substantial material albeit with less organization. For instance, on the low-stakes assignment, the valuable content added by Lisa clarified her examples and quotes from a primary source. During the revision process, she refined her explanation with addition, which is noted in bold type:

> *In the quote, Doodle's mother is warning him not to touch the dead bird. That is similar to what they did with Doodle.* ***In the quote when the mother says "there's no telling what disease that bird might have, "the possible disease of the bird represents the possible death of Doodle. They don't know when or what kind of death it will be, but the family, at the time when Doodle was young, knew that they did not want to get attached to him.*** **They let Doodle be and just waited for him to pass away.** ***Doodle's family did not give him a name because they didn't want to get attached to him. When they finally figured out he had a chance of living, they gave him a name that would look good on his grave. It was a name they assumed he would never live up to. As time passes and Doodle strives in life, they begin to call him Doodle instead.***

Although Lisa's additions are valuable to the point she is trying to make, the syntax was muddled by unnecessary repetition. The overall organization of this student's assignment became rougher as well: this student's original draft contained only one paragraph, a structure she abided by even after adding a plethora of material. This diminished organization, however, is not problematic since it's an issue that can be addressed closer to the end of the writing process. Revision-as-invention often necessitates temporarily stepping away from audience concerns such as clarity and organization. As Peter Elbow has discussed, it is nearly impossible to find new meaning and simultaneously keep one's audience in mind (in this case, the teacher as audience)("In Defense").

Revision-as-invention is a type of "internal revision" in which the writer constitutes the audience, rather than "external revision" (Murray, *The Essential* 130). It is therefore important that students' addition work during the Montaigne Method be loosely graded—if at all—or better yet, remain private writing.

Because the Montaigne Method draws attention to the act of adding, students become more aware of their choices in revision with a resultant increase in their metacognitive awareness about composing. For one, asking writers to channel their revision efforts to just adding, regardless of the format of those additions, helps writers notice the nature of their self-talk about writing. Do they tend to be self-critical? Do they tend to worry about correctness and audience and to delete while they write? Accordingly, one student noted that he is better at "cutting [material from his own writing] because it is straightforward and easier for [him] to eliminate the bad than to create the good." Another observed that "cutting is definitely easier because you just say 'Oh, this doesn't fit here. Let me remove it' and you cross it out. Adding, though, is harder because it's like a puzzle piece; you have to find where it fits." Through reflection in process notes, many students became aware that they struggled with being overly critical of themselves in their self-talk during revision. One student noted that he feels that he is "too critical of [his] own writing and cut[s] things out too much." Another student admitted that she has "never been confident with [her] writing, so [she's] constantly doubting [herself]." Students also evaluated the relevance of their additions and considered whether further rounds of revision, ones which entailed the cutting and replacing of material, were needed. For instance, a student noted that when she revises, parts of her writing "sound too similar and [are] repeating." Another noted that she "need[s] to cross out a few sentences so [her] essay becomes good."

A more introspective and calmer writing environment is created when revision resembles invention, one in which students appear more patient and willing to explore deeper into their drafts. As one student noted, "I've been trying to be as slow as

possible. I usually speed through things (especially writing) and I don't want to be left with nothing to write." Another student noted about this revision experience that it "gave me a good amount of time to sit down and think about how to make my essay better.... If I don't like something, I generally get rid of it and start from scratch." The reflective and permissive task environment established by revision-as-addition also leads to greater motivation to write. As another student relayed his experience of the method: "When you don't have to remove any of your thoughts, you actually feel the urge to write more and more of anything you want. It makes you calm and relaxed. It makes your mind feel free almost like you're in another place." The importance of maintaining a calm, measured pace while writing should not be underrated because "motivation [to write] thrives on calm and confidence" (Boice 1).

Lastly, the Montaigne Method helped students perceive the natural fluctuation of the writing process. The process notes, done at different moments during the session, functioned as snapshots of students' writing experience along the way. Students' perceptions of the Montaigne Method and of the success of their rewriting varied at different moments—helping students develop greater awareness of revision as a process taking place in time. Because the experience changes moment by moment—moving from frustration, insight, satisfaction, and so forth—the process of writing unfolds and becomes visible. Nate started with success noting that "it took some time to think of the first sentence, but then after I wrote it, I wrote the second sentence easily and already thought of a way to add onto my thesis statement." After another ten minutes Nate said that he "made absolutely no progress whatsoever" and wrote "I suppose I'm finished," but then ten minutes after that "was able to add some more small parts into the body paragraphs." Jess started her revision by "adding things to introduce the quotes" and "improved on parts [she] thought would be boring to read." After ten minutes, she added "a lot more detail" and "feel[s] like every time [she] looks at it, there isn't anything to add, but then when [she] read[s] it again, [she] keep[s]

finding new things to add." Instead of seeing revision as a monolithic experience, students noticed its fluctuations, reinforcing the idea that the composing experience occurs through time. An obstacle might arise in one minute, but the writing experience will likely change to something more productive if one is patient and reflective enough. It's a short step from seeing revision as a moment-by-moment matter to maneuvering the whole time line of writing: moving revision closer to invention, invention closer to an audience, and so forth.

The Montaigne Method challenges the idea of what revision means to writers. When students participated in this method, the end result was that they obtained more valuable material overall and broke through the confines of habitualized structures—ones caused by state assessment, classroom context, and past instruction on revision. Students became more aware of their writing choices: choices they make in general and choices specific to this writing assignment. In a way the Montaigne Method is as much about this awareness of process as the generation of new material. Revision as invention enables writers to explore their thoughts and modify their content sooner rather than later—when they are naturally and mentally more accepting of changes in their writing.

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Notes

[1] The names of all students have been changed.

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