Gathering Intelligence, Revising Classrooms

Teaching my students to distinguish between meaningful revision and necessary copy editing, I help them sense the moment when they must set aside the raw train of thought they intended to record and instead strive to precisely express the more useful chain of reasoning that has begun to appear in the grammar on the page. Nearly every day, I encounter a similar moment in my undergraduate expository writing classrooms: my carefully considered lesson plan must be altered or abandoned because my students and I have unintentionally encountered in the complex texts before us a more important struggle than the one I so meticulously designed. We suddenly see something before us that we, all of us together, need to understand; the good work has revealed itself. We practice gathering our intelligence, collectively and individually, to nurture nascent ideas; we precisely name our understandings to nourish our voracious intellects. This is what people do in universities, my students learn. This is the practice we take out of the classroom and bring into the world.

Even my brightest and most nimble students—the undergraduate writing tutors I mentor for our program’s outreach into other CAS classrooms—must practice this rhythm of the hard work and the letting go to reach for something better. In our weekly development meetings, I often remind them that if they are not still curious about another student’s draft—the document they have tried to know well, carefully reading and rereading it to prepare helpful, thoughtful comments aimed toward enabling holistic revision—then they should not expect any good to come of a one-on-one meeting with that student. These exceptional student-tutors are, as we all are at the University, still learning to read. Paying careful attention to the idiosyncratic details of texts, particularly those that we find most baffling, we are able to notice when new educational possibilities open up. Manipulating language to think better thoughts, we unfold unforeseen spaces in texts, classrooms, and minds.

Assessment of my teaching is an unrelenting habit; every day, my students’ writing exercises show me what I have taught them, intentionally or not, and what I have failed to teach them. Some days I serve as a Writing in the Disciplines teacher for economics and psychology honors thesis students; on others, I shepherd a shaky first
draft of a first essay with a first year student. My objective as a teacher is always the same: to help a developing mind (a redundant description, surely, but an honorable emphasis) find a new way to write a better sentence, paragraph, or paper that more accurately describes an understanding of complex evidence that cries out for thoughtful discussion. More precisely, I attempt to help my students earn their scholarly citizenship as they pay closer attention to the valuable insights buried in their incomplete articulations. Not every attempt achieves success, but each occasion offers an opportunity to gather our thoughts and articulate an unexpected curiosity.