

**Discussion questions for groups of teachers:** How do you currently use your students as classroom editors? How might the following activities, resources, and lesson plans be adapted for the grade level you currently teach?

# FOCUS 1: A Community of Editors

Fresh ideas from Northern Nevada Writing Project teachers on the following topics:

\_\_\_\_\_ Students recognize and verbalize their personal strengths and weaknesses with conventions.

\_\_\_\_\_ Based on personal strengths, students serve as editors in only areas they feel competent. Student writers end up with a team (three or four) of editors who check their papers before the teacher does.

<p>Our Classroom Spelling Checkers</p> <p><i>Dan R.</i>      <i>Ariel</i></p> <p><i>Ginny</i>      <i>Stewart</i></p> <p><i>David</i>      <i>Carlos</i></p> <p><i>Mary-Jean</i></p>	<p>Students' abilities with the conventions of writing are as different and diverse as your students. Some come to you on the first day as good spellers already. Some come to you with the ability to put a period in the right place almost every time. Some—for whatever reason—remember where to put commas. Some just remember to capitalize the first letter of sentences and proper names.</p> <p>Early in the year, ask students to rank themselves on four or five different sub-skills of conventions. All students will find one sub-skill they feel better about than the others. Have students sign their names to classroom "Checker Charts," and require your students to visit someone from each "Checker Chart" before writing their final drafts.</p>	<p>Our Classroom Period Checkers</p> <p><i>Calli</i></p> <p><i>Kris</i></p> <p><i>Paula</i></p> <p><i>Dan T.</i>      <i>Ron</i></p>
<p>Our Classroom Grammar Checkers</p> <p><i>Patti</i>      <i>Yuen</i></p> <p><i>Christina</i>      <i>Darre</i></p>	<p>Our Classroom Apostrophe &amp; Comma Checkers</p> <p><i>Mrs.</i>      <i>Archie</i></p> <p><i>Penelope</i>      <i>Debbie</i></p>	<p>Our Classroom Capitalization Checkers</p> <p><i>Pedro</i>      <i>TRENT</i></p> <p><i>Steven</i>      <i>Bonnie</i></p> <p><i>Aliso</i>      <i>Bryce</i></p>

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Here's a **CONVENTIONS** technique that focuses on **EDITING**:

# Creating a Classroom of Editors

From Corbett Harrison, Reed High School

The "Classroom of Editors" was an idea I conceived during a bout of insomnia, as I stressed over the growing pile of un-graded essays that awaited me on the kitchen table. I tossed and turned over ideas to make my reading responsibilities less time-consuming in my still-developing concept of writer's workshop. I never thought the idea I hatched up one night would actually work, but it did. I'm so glad I tried it and developed it further over three or four years.

I was a pretty young teacher back then, and I worked much harder than I should have. I expected my students to end their school year with writing portfolios that were as conventionally flawless as possible. Karen McGee had once said, "If it goes in the portfolio or hangs on the wall, you make sure it is as flawless as possible with its conventions." I agreed with that notion, and I took it to heart. I didn't trust my students enough to edit one another's papers and end up with flawless portfolios, and they certainly weren't taught to trust each other as editors, so most of my response time on their drafts was focused on the editing. I would have preferred to be reading for the other five writing traits, but alas, "conventional wisdom" was my forte, and my students knew it. So I became the editor as well as the final evaluator for every one of their papers. I was always behind in my reading of their papers. I dreamed of a classroom where students could competently take one of those duties away from me. I tossed and turned at night and thought of what that might look like.

Then I heard two students exchanging papers one day during workshop. "I shouldn't read your paper," one student said. "Look at all the comma splices I got on my last draft."

"Just read it for spelling then," the other student said, forcing her paper on the first's desk. "You're a much better speller than me."

I thought of that conversation during my insomnia. I asked, "What if I taught my students that conventions was about five or six very different sub-skills, and that no one (not even me) was a genuine expert on all of them? What if my students all selected the one skill in conventions (*spelling*, for example) that they felt the most competent with? What if I required all of them to serve as a classroom editor JUST for that one self-selected skill?"

My students' papers, before they became final drafts, would theoretically need to be read by five or six classroom editors, all of whom checked for the one sub-skill of conventions they felt the best about. It might take a bit longer to have a paper completely edited, but it wasn't my time that was being taken...and wouldn't my students learn a valuable lesson about writing as

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a life skill? Gosh, my students might just learn that you can trust others (besides a teacher) to read for those conventional skills that confound you.

As a class, we started the process by deciding what six things made up conventions in our classroom. I started the conversation by asking, "What most often makes my red pen come out on your papers?" That first year, the class came up with: 1) spelling; 2) punctuation; 3) comma splices; 4) grammar; 5) homonyms (their, there, and they're); and 6) capital letters. We then secretly ranked ourselves from "personally easiest" to "personally hardest" on those six things, and most students had very different rankings from their friends. The discovery we made was this: we're all good at some...and confused by others...and those that confuse me don't confuse every other person in this very classroom. We discovered we had the ability to edit each other's papers, one conventional sub-skill at a time.

We constructed a classroom chart (similar to the one on page 182) that directed writers who might need to have their—let's say—spelling checked to those students who felt competent to check for spelling. The rule became: if you ask for an edit, you owe an edit in return. Your "return edit" must be on the skill you're good at. My kids kept track of who owed whom edits: "So-and-so checked my paper for spelling, so I owe so-and-so an edit for comma splices in return."

My classroom of editors functioned better than I ever thought possible. Not having to be everyone's complete editor allowed me to keep up with the papers that poured in. For the most part, my students' portfolios were error-free, and I ended up with huge chunks of my weekends back.

Classroom of Editors Post-It	
___	My spelling was looked over by _____.
___	My "end punctuation" was looked over by _____.
___	My commas and apostrophes were looked over by _____.
___	My capitalization was looked over by _____.
___	My grammar was looked over by _____.

Three lessons I learned after five years with a "Classroom of Editors" in place

1. All your students will rank themselves "better" at something easier...like *capitalization*...and, if you're not careful, you'll end up with 20 capitalization editors and zero grammar editors. In the second year I said, "Cross out the one sub-skill of conventions that is the absolute easiest for you, then rank the other five from easiest to hardest." Students weren't allowed to serve as classroom editors for the one that they had crossed out. That brought much more diversity to my students' self-perceived strengths.
2. *Punctuation* is too big of a sub-skill for students to objectively rank themselves in; one bad experience with an apostrophe will make some students think they are genuine punctuation idiots, even though they might totally understand the period or the question mark. In the second year, I broke punctuation into two categories: a) end-of-sentence—

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or outer—punctuation and b) within-the-sentence—or inner—punctuation. I usually only had a few students who felt competent enough to deem themselves my *inner punctuation editors*, but we still found ways to make it work. And...I have to tell you: with a healthy group of students to serve as *external punctuation editors* (which you'll get once you break punctuation into two types), almost all of your comma-splice and run-on sentence problems disappear; they catch them for each other. I discovered students who understand periods can explain comma-splices and run-ons to their peers much better than most of my punctuation worksheets and whole-class overhead projector lectures.

3. In year three, my students stopped signing their names directly on my Classroom of Editors charts. They began writing their names on Post-It notes instead. This gave me the ability to "graduate" certain students out of one category of editing into another where our class might have more need. If, for example, I had a plethora of spelling editors but few grammar editors, and I knew one of my spellers was pretty darn good at grammar too, all I needed as a quiet conversation, a compliment of that writer's personal grammar skills, and he or she was more than willing to move over to another category to help the classroom out. Or, in contrast, if a writer has classified himself or herself as a spelling editor, and their "editees" still have lots of spelling errors that should have been caught, it was easy to talk quietly with that student and ask permission to have him/her check for something different.

Only once did I have a student who really couldn't competently edit for anything. He had pretty darn good written voice, so he could contribute to our classroom response groups in that way (indeed, students often sought him out to help them with their papers' voice), but there was no way of hiding that he was a terrible editor for conventions. We all knew it. He asked one day if he had to have his Post-It note on **any** of the classroom editor charts. "No one asks me to edit for them anyway. They all know."

"Does that seem fair?" I asked. "We all edit for what we're good at in order to get help where we might need it. That's the purpose of our classroom of editors."

"I'll read double-hard everyone's for voice to whoever edits my paper. I just can't do the conventions."

So...he became our class's official "voice Tester" for everyone who agreed to edit for him. No one ever complained or felt slighted. His portfolio had only a few conventional errors at the year's end. Everyone else's had an extra blessing of voice in theirs.

That's what a community of writers does.

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