

December 2013

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Recommended Citation

Algrim, Lori (2013) "Writing Conferences: The Power of a Teacher's Feedback," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 45: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol45/iss2/9>

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Writing Conferences: The Power of a Teacher's Feedback

BY LORI ALGRIM

Texting, emailing, Skyping, and accessing Google are common, everyday occurrences for many Americans. As of January, 2012, there were 800 million people on Facebook, one million people with Twitter accounts, and 130 million members of LinkedIn (Wasserman, 2012). What do all these digital tools and networks have in common? They all provide the immediate feedback that people so greatly desire. It is no surprise that students crave this feedback as well. Elementary teachers spend an average of 6 hours a day with these same students; this is a lot of time in which to provide students with meaningful feedback. And like the immediate feedback that is delivered via these technologies, writing conferences offer an excellent opportunity for teachers to provide positive, meaningful, immediate feedback to students.

Writing conferences often make teachers uncomfortable. Some may fear saying or doing the wrong thing in these writing conferences. Others declare that with the rigorous demands of the curriculum, there is not enough time to meet with students on an individual basis. Those who would like to conduct conferences express concern about students' off-task behavior while a teacher is conferring with an individual student. Each of these concerns is very common and realistic. I, too, was one of these teachers and wondered what I could do to overcome these challenges and fears. Although I met with students occasionally, I realized that this was not sufficient to meet their needs. My awareness of this shortcoming led me to research the importance of writing conferences as well as their structure and critical elements. Fortunately, challenges that teachers face can be overcome with some helpful, applicable information. With common language and guidance from experts, teachers can be better equipped to offer the immediate feedback their students deserve.

The Writing Conference

The process of teaching writing has changed over the decades. Classroom writing primarily consisted of a teacher-directed lesson that focused on a particular skill and was followed by a somewhat scripted writing assignment (Troia, Lin, Cohen, & Montor, 2011). The evolution of writing is widely credited to individuals like Lucy Calkins, Donald Graves, and Donald Murray, who contributed to the shift from an emphasis on the final product to looking at the process of writing. Donald Murray looked at his own experiences as a writer and, thus, introduced the idea of one-to-one writing conferences (Karsbaek, 2011).

Writing conferences are defined as meetings to discuss student work (Routman, 2005) or as discussions between teachers and students (Calkins, 1994). Teachers have discussions with their students every day; if conferring is viewed as discussing, perhaps teachers will feel less apprehensive. Other experts describe writing conferences as conversations. As expressed by Calkins (1994), "Every morning when our children pile off the school bus and gather around us, we confer" (232). When a conversation takes place, each person listens then responds (Bennett, 2007). The same is true in a successful writing conference. Conferring can be seen as a journey, an adventure, and a challenge (Allen, 2009).

Purposes of Writing Conferences

Writing conferences have many purposes. Of primary importance is getting to know students as individuals in order to build relationships with them (Allen, 2009; Bennett, 2007; Ray & Laminack, 2001). In building these relationships, a teacher learns about a writer's needs and can then address these in future instruction (Bennett, 2007; Ray & Laminack, 2001). Once these needs are discovered, writing conferences are used to individualize instruction, teach specific skills, build good writing habits, answer students' questions, and set goals for future writing (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004; Spandel, 2001; Troia et al., 2011). In *Creating Writers: Through 6-Trait Writing Assessment and Instruction*, Vicki Spandel (2001) states that "a conference also offers...a quiet and safe moment in which to receive help on a particular problem" (p. 366). Along with fulfilling these purposes of conferences, many goals need to be met.

Goals of a Conference

One primary goal of a writing conference is to increase students' confidence and help writers improve from their current levels. Teachers do not expect each student to excel at writing, but rather to be the best writer each can be (Pryle, 2009). In addition to this, it is important for students to leave a conference with energy and enthusiasm for their writing pieces (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004). Another goal of a writing conference is to help students build intrinsic motivation, patience, persistence, and flexibility. These characteristics will help students deal with frustrations that may arise while writing (Bruning & Horn, 2000). Applying newly acquired skills to future writing is another important goal of a writing conference. It is wonderful when students apply learned skills to their current writing, but the ultimate goal is to apply this knowledge to future writing pieces (Anderson, 2000; Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Karsbaek, 2011; Rickards & Hawes, 2003). Once students have internalized important writing skills and strategies, they can analyze their own writing. When students are prepared to do this, they demonstrate the independence teachers strive to promote (Allen, 2009; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Ray & Laminack, 2001; Ray & Cleaveland, 2004; Routman, 2005). Much time and effort is needed to achieve this goal; however, if students view themselves as independent, life-long writers, it is time well spent.

Types of Conferences

Many teachers view writing conferences as solely one-on-one conversations with students during writer's workshop; however, many different types of writing conferences can be used with students. Routman (2005) declares, "Effective teachers use a variety of conferences to meet students' needs" (p. 206). The four primary types of writing conferences are whole class share, quick share, roving conferences, and individual conferences. Each can be used throughout writer's workshop to maximize opportunities to confer with students.

Whole Class Share

Whole class share is defined as a formal conference conducted with all students looking on and giving feedback (Graves, 1983, 1994; Ray, 2006; Routman, 2005). During these conferences, one student reads his piece aloud, briefly talks about it, and then the class is encouraged to give feedback and ask

questions. Following this, the teacher may reiterate the highlights of the feedback and use this to teach or reinforce a writing skill. Upon completion, the writer returns to his writing and uses the feedback provided to move forward with his piece. During a whole class share, it is ideal to have two or three students share their writing. These conferences may be conducted before or after writer's workshop, and it's best to keep each conference to less than 5 minutes.

Whole class sharing has many benefits. These conferences serve as an excellent tool to model effective conference strategies and procedures. If the opportunity arises, the teacher may teach a mini-lesson during the conference and the whole class will benefit. Whole class conferences are an efficient use of time and allow students to have their writing celebrated in front of the entire class, which can really boost self-esteem and encourage a student to write more. Because the whole class is present, listens to the piece read aloud, and responds, whole class conferences also serve as opportunities to teach Common Core standards for listening (Routman, 2005).

Quick Share

If time does not allow for a whole class share, many teachers incorporate a quick share, which is defined by Routman (2005) as "a miniconference that takes a minute or less and celebrates a memorable line, an engaging lead or paragraph,...taking a risk, or attempting something new (conversation, humor...)" (p. 216). These conferences are effective in celebrating students' writing and providing quick feedback on a specific skill or strategy that has been successfully implemented. These quick shares can be read aloud by the teacher or the student and are an excellent opportunity for positive, public feedback. Because quick shares are conducted as a class and are aimed to engage the entire class, students' behavior is often less disruptive (Troia et al., 2011).

Roving Conferences

Roving conferences, occasionally called "drive by" conferences, take place during the independent writing portion of writer's workshop. These conferences are usually very quick, take only a minute or two with each student, and usually occur as the teacher circulates around the room and checks in with students (Anderson, 2000; Fluckiger, Vigil, Pasco, & Danielson, 2010; Graves, 1983, 1994; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Ray & Cleaveland, 2004).

As the teacher moves about the room, s/he often looks for students who appear confused or may be having a hard time getting started (Pryle, 2009). When working with students at their own desks, teachers can offer guidance on specific parts of a piece, assess strengths and needs, encourage or prompt students if necessary, and answer questions about a writing piece. Roving conferences can be very beneficial. Stopping by to talk with a student about his or her writing demonstrates that the teacher is interested in the student's writing (Anderson, 2000). Another benefit is that there is little transition time needed as the teacher quickly moves about the room; this helps with management because the teacher is constantly circulating the room and is highly visible (Ray & Laminack, 2001). Although these conferences are individually based, the students who are seated nearby can listen and learn from the conversation that is occurring. Finally, stopping at a student's desk to comment or celebrate the writing can build self-esteem (Rickards & Hawes, 2003).

One-on-One Conferences

The type of conference most teachers visualize when hearing the words *writing conferences* is the individual or one-on-one conference with a student. It may be defined as the teacher sitting next to a child, giving that child her full attention, and providing feedback in a private setting. One-on-one conferences are typically conducted in a designated area of the classroom with a teacher calling students over to meet with her. When conferring with individual students, teachers discuss progress, answer questions, provide individual feedback, and set goals (Routman, 2005). These conferences, like roving conferences, take place during the independent writing portion of writer's workshop.

One-on-one conferences lead to many positive results. First, they allow teachers to differentiate instruction based on the individual needs of students. A struggling writer may need more encouragement or guidance, which can be provided during an individual conference (Martin & Mottet, 2011). It is also an ideal time for teachers to provide positive feedback without the time constraint of writing comments on students' papers. The time spent with students on an individual basis enhances the teacher-student relationship, which is beneficial in all areas of the classroom. In addition to these benefits, conferences may present challenges as well.

Challenges of Writing Conferences

One challenge teachers may encounter is managing the classroom and conferring at the same time. A way to keep all students engaged in writing is to have clear expectations in place prior to writer's workshop. Having anchor charts clearly posted in the classroom allows children to problem-solve on their own to avoid disrupting the teacher while s/he is conferring with an individual student. A challenge for whole class share may be that some students may not be comfortable sharing their pieces with the class. Routman (2005) suggests asking students beforehand if they are willing to share their pieces and having them practice reading their work aloud to themselves prior to reading in front of the class; this can increase students' comfort level and maximize use of class time. One final challenge that may present itself is limited time to confer with students during writer's workshop. If this is the case, a teacher may conduct quick shares or roving conferences to keep the momentum going and meet with many students (Fluckieger, et al., 2010). To ensure consistency of writing conferences, certain critical elements should be implemented in each type of conference: a routine conference format, the teacher as a listener, verbal feedback, and clear expectations.

Conference Format

It is important that a predictable daily routine or workshop structure is in place so students are comfortable with their responsibilities while a teacher is conferring with students (Allen, 2009; Bennett, 2007). The general format for a conference is as follows:

1. A student reads or talks to the teacher about his or her writing piece while the teacher listens and decides what would help the writer the most in future writing.
2. The teacher gives feedback or helps the student set a goal for the piece.
3. The child asks questions or restates the goal and goes back to work on the piece.

Within this format, keeping conferences short is of key importance. Donald Graves (1994) suggests trying to keep a conference to 2 minutes, if possible. Others such as Bennett (2007), Spandel (2001), Fletcher & Portalupi (2001), and Pryle (2009) support the *keeping it short* viewpoint and suggest

keeping a conference to 5 minutes or less. If a conference lasts too long, students may lose their writing momentum. Therefore, it is best to confer quickly and efficiently and send the student back to the workshop environment to continue writing.

May teachers misunderstand the main purpose of writing conferences and instead feel the goal of a writing conference is to correct the mechanics and edit student work. However, focusing on ideas, content, organization, voice, etc. before conventions and mechanics helps students become better writers (Rickards & Hawes, 2003). As Lucy Calkins (1994) states, we need to "teach the writer, not the writing" (p. 228).

One final element in the format of writing conferences is to focus on one skill or strategy with the writer. A conference may be too overwhelming for a student if the teacher tries to fix everything that is wrong with a piece of writing (Anderson, 2000; Calkins, 1994; Ray & Laminack, 2001; Routman, 2005). When comparing a writing conference to a photographer taking a picture, Lucy Calkins (1994) explains, "The photographer doesn't snap a picture while scanning an entire scene. Instead, he selects a single focus" (pp. 239-240). It is important for teachers to help students select a single focus to improve their writing one skill at a time.

Teacher's Role as Listener

Another key element to a successful writing conference is the teacher's role as listener. Samantha Bennett (2007) explains the importance of careful listening and shares that when someone really listens, this can excite the writer. In addition to this, it should be noted that the one doing the most talking is the one doing the most work. Vicki Spandel (2001) stresses the importance of listening and tuning in as the writer is talking. The teacher should not be thinking about the next question to ask but rather should be listening intently. Spandel states, "So often students feel no one listens—*really* listens to them. One minute of good listening can be worth twenty minutes of canned writing advice, however conceptually sound" (p. 366).

In *How's it Going? A Practical Guide to Conferencing With Student Writers* (2000), Carl Anderson explains that when we truly listen to students, we communicate that their writing matters. When as teachers we respond to the content of students'

writing, we show we are really listening to students. Anderson states, "The payoff for the 'deliberate act' of listening is this: we nurture the genuine connections between us and our students, and those connections have so much to do with the success of our conferences" (p. 22). When listening to students read their pieces, the teacher needs to respond first as a reader showing a genuine interest in the writing (Rickards & Hawes, 2003). In their book, *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*, Fletcher & Portalupi (2001) stress the importance of a teacher being present as a reader:

Try to react to student writing as you would respond to any other piece of writing you would enjoy reading. Laugh if the piece strikes you as funny. If you want to affect a student, it's important to first let that student see that his writing...has affected you. (pp. 50-51)

A teacher's body language is a strong indicator of how well s/he is listening. It is important that a teacher leans forward, eagerly. Eye contact is also essential when listening to a student (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). When discussing the significance of active listening, Samantha Bennett (2007) compares it to sitting and having tea with her best friend:

If we are having a conversation at my dining room table, I don't answer the phone when it rings... I am locked eye-to-eye and fully engaged with her delightful storytelling, asking her questions to prompt her to tell me more. (p. 124)

Similarly, a teacher must give a student undivided attention during a writing conference. Sitting at eye-level, rather than standing up and learning over a student at his or her desk, is a respectful way to engage with a student during a conference. It may help students feel more like you are collaborating rather than speaking down to them (Pryle, 2009). Active listening, eye contact, and sitting at a student's eye-level are all necessary in building trust and strong relationships so a teacher can give verbal feedback during a writing conference.

Verbal Feedback

The words chosen when communicating to a student during a writing conference are of fundamental importance. How a teacher communicates is crucial to a student's self-perception (Johnston, 2004). The

language one uses often builds an identity in a student's mind. For example, if a teacher tells a child s/he is quite a poet, the student is likely to continue writing poetry, for now the student identifies as a poet. It is imperative that teachers set a respectful tone by communicating using a positive tone of voice. Anderson (2000) describes a *conference voice* as speaking in a respectful tone and using a volume no louder than others in the room. A teacher's tone of voice and facial expressions show a student if s/he is really interested in what the student is saying. Once the respectful tone is established, the content of feedback plays a key role. It is recommended that teachers begin a conference by affirming what a student has done well and reinforcing writing strengths and attempts (Routman, 2005).

Questioning and feedback are critical components of a writing conference. A teacher needs to ask authentic questions to show the student that s/he wants to know about the writing (Ray, 2006); these questions should be heartfelt and unscripted (Spandel, 2008). Direct, honest feedback is the most useful and enhances learning (Anderson, 2000; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Graves, 1994; Martin & Mottet, 2011). Feedback should be targeted at a specific skill or task to help students focus on and improve in a particular area. In her book *Creating Young Writers: Using Six Traits to Enrich Writing Process in Primary Classrooms*, Vicki Spandel (2008) writes about a teacher who provides direct feedback by telling her students *writer's secrets*. This teacher whispers sentences such as, "If you put spaces between your words, everything you write is really easy to read. Want to try?" (p. 279). This provides specific feedback to the writer in an engaging manner and helps the student respond positively to the teacher's feedback.

Teacher's Role in Setting Expectations

Setting goals and expectations will help keep the conference focused. According to Routman (2005), it is best if students have input in setting goals for themselves as writers and if the teacher demonstrates writing and thinking through modeling and shared writing so students are well aware of expectations during a writing conference. Anderson (2000) also asserts that the teacher needs to be clear about these expectations. A teacher should learn as much as s/he can about a student's potential so as to encourage the writer to expect more of himself.

Setting high expectations is a sign of caring (Graves, 1994). Related to this, Johnston (2004), author of *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*, claims the following:

Children with a strong belief in their own agency work harder, focus their attention better, are more interested in their studies, and are less likely to give up when they encounter difficulties than children with a weaker sense of agency. (pp. 40-41)

When a teacher sets clear expectations and demonstrates confidence in students, they are more likely to work hard and reach for their full potential as writers.

Setting the Tone of Respect

Not only are there expectations for students, there are also expectations for the teacher. It is imperative that the teacher reflect upon the conference and ask how effective it was and what was taught to the student during the conference (Ray & Laminack, 2001). A teacher must also be aware of his or her own personal tastes relating to writing style; when conferring with a student, the teacher needs to appreciate students who do not write in this preferred style and remain objective and professional when conferring with these children (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Teachers must balance feedback so it is helpful without changing the voice of the piece. The piece needs to remain primarily the student's, not the teacher's. (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004).

In respecting the students, teachers need to believe in students' abilities, offer thinking time, and have patience (Johnston, 2004; Spandel, 2008). It is important for teachers to provide wait time after asking a question in order to demonstrate patience and respect for each student (Allen, 2009). Setting a positive tone and modeling respect for one another helps to build a safe environment in which students may feel more comfortable and willing to share. This opens the door to new learning and invites all students to enter.

Building a Classroom of Writers

Setting a positive tone, listening attentively, providing direct feedback, and incorporating a variety of writing conferences benefit students in many ways. Through conferring, students learn how to become editors of their own writing and become accustomed

to thinking about their own learning process. Students also practice many important, lifelong skills as they listen attentively and think critically. Another benefit is that students apply the feedback and skills they were taught to future writing across all curricular areas.

Participating in writing conferences helps students see themselves as writers. Because a teacher took the time to read a student's writing, ask questions, react to the piece, and offer authentic feedback, this student now sees that his writing matters. Writing conferences are personal; thus each child can have his or her needs met and learn specific skills and strategies that will improve current and future writing. If this leads to more confident writers, students are more willing to help others with their writing, thus building relationships and a culture of writers.

Meeting the Challenges of Conferring

We all crave immediate feedback. Just look around and notice all the people checking their phones and computers for messages or feedback via text, email, or voicemail. Students crave the same feedback and teachers need to provide this in order to connect with their students and improve learning. We, as teachers, need to be flexible and expect the unexpected. Conferring is challenging work and takes a lot of time and effort (Allen, 2009). Anderson (2000) declares, "Conferring, after all, creates a feeling of anxiety—even panic—in us, whether we are new to workshop teaching or we are workshop veterans" (p. 3). It's okay if we don't have the perfect system, but there is no excuse to avoid conferences. We need to continue to practice and work it out (Bennett, 2007). Most teachers do not like to be caught off guard and when we confer with students we set ourselves up for unpredictable responses and being put on the spot. This, however, can also make conferring interesting (Ray & Laminack, 2001).

Professional development is needed for teachers to better acquaint themselves with the types of conferences as well as the important elements needed in a successful conference. In-services or workshops may be offered to better educate teachers on the structure and practice of conferring. It is also very helpful if teachers work with two or three supportive colleagues to observe one another's classrooms and

reflect on their conferring (Ray & Laminack, 2001).

Two excellent resources are *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring With Student Writers* (Anderson, 2000) and *The Art of Teaching Writing: New Edition* (Calkins, 1994). It is important to incorporate various types of conferences into classrooms and make conferring a priority, no matter how uncomfortable it may be at first. According to Katie Wood Ray (2001), "Conferring is very challenging, and you will probably struggle with it for quite some time before you begin to feel at ease. But most really good things in teaching—as in all of life—are like that, aren't they?" (p.171).

While many may feel that certain personalities lend themselves better to conferring, this is not the case. Carl Anderson (2000) supports that there is no one best personality trait that is right for conferring. All types of teachers with various experiences can make conferring work for them. Even if you are a bit reluctant, give it a try and see what transformations occur in your students. After all, in our ever-changing world, we, as teachers, need to be willing to modify our teaching to best meet the needs of our students. It is our responsibility to maximize our time with each student and provide the feedback students deserve. Anderson (2000) expresses:

A few words, a smile, a nod of understanding. That's all it takes to show students we care about them. That's all it takes to inspire some students to stretch themselves as writers. That's all it takes to change some students' writing lives. (p. 23)

Why wait to positively impact a child's writing life? After all, as emphasized by Anderson (2000), "Writing conferences aren't the icing on the cake; they *are* the cake" (p. 3).

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