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Abandoning the Red Pen: Conferencing with Adolescent Writers

Al Weber

It was moments after Richard left my office that I realized that conferencing with student writers bewildered me. I felt like I had taken an eight-year-old to "Toys R Us" and not found him one thing he liked. I had offered all my expert advice, but Richard seemed disinterested, if not aloof. He alternated between peering at the ceiling and staring glassy-eyed at the paper. When he did speak, he moaned non-committal "Uh-huhs" or guarded "Yes, ... buts" to every suggestion. The paper had become more of me and less of Richard as I struggled to find him answers. I wondered why I had tried something different and abandoned my red pen for this misery.

"I realized that the primary goal of a conference was for the students to talk, not me."

A few years later my attitudes changed toward conferencing. I spent three hours conferencing with student writers about their work, but by day's end I felt energetic and helpful. In the intervening years, trial and error had revealed some of the secrets for making conferencing a rewarding task. I realized that the primary goal of a conference was for the students to talk, not me. When I encouraged, questioned, and listened, students discarded their non-verbal masks, moved their lips, and interacted with their writing. The burden of responsibility for a written piece was lifted from my professional back.

While not all students left my office enthused to write, most felt ownership of their papers. This article discusses the teacher roles of encourager, questioner, and listener as well as suggests appropriate ways of making students question their own writing.

Teacher as Encourager

When I pontificated during the conference, most students clammed up. Some copied down my comments so they could incorporate my suggestions word-for-word in their revision. Others dutifully took notes as if they were in a lecture. When I encouraged, the students interacted with their writing. Some even asked if they could write down an idea that had occurred to them. Below are some suggestions for promoting student talk during the conference.

1. When I was a young boy, my father encouraged me to work with wood by putting it in my hands and having me pound the nails and struggle with the sanding. One time he took away the wood, not allowing me to complete the task. I lost touch and interest. Students also need to hold their own paper during the conference. By taking the students' writing physically away from them, the project becomes the teacher's work.

2. If the students physically hold their own paper, it is easier for teachers to refrain from making written comments on it; this also encourages students to make notes to themselves about revision and actually correct their own mistakes. When my father "fixed" my mistakes on the project, I withdrew. When he made suggestions

and allowed me to redo my project, I stayed involved.

3. In a writing workshop setting, where students conference during classroom time while others are at different stages in the writing process, conducting the conference at a student's desk is advantageous. First, it allows you to limit the length of the conference. The teacher can end the discussion by moving toward the next writer. When the student talks to you at your desk, the student controls the conference time; the student decides when to end the discussion. Second, you don't have students lined up waiting to see you.

4. When my dad gave short demonstrations about some sanding or finishing technique, I knew what to do. The same holds true for conducting a conference. Let the students know what happens during a conference, its purpose. Provide mini-lessons where you demonstrate good and effective conferencing techniques, like asking questions. As Donald Graves states, "Be predictable in order to be unpredictable where it counts ... on the main focus" (274).

5. If you are compulsive about talking, limit your comments to descriptive statements that retell what you heard. Peter Elbow suggests that you point to the words or phrases which "successfully penetrated your skull," summarize what you found to be the main points, or simply tell the writer what happened to you as you read his words (85-87). The problem with teacher talk is that you can do one of two things which inhibit the student from verbalizing their thoughts. First, you can praise the student too much. Too much adulation predisposes adolescents to please you or compete with their peers. Second, teacher talk is usually seen as prescriptive and closed-ended. Once you indicate your preference, students tune out and disregard their own ideas.

6. Avoid offering students specific suggestions and recommendations about the content of the writing. When you direct the student to include specific words, phrases, or descriptions, you subvert the students' ownership of their writing.

Student: "I'm not sure what else to say about the prom."

Teacher: "Describe what the girls wore."

Student: "Will that make sense?"

Teacher: "Sure, talk about their shoes, dresses, and hairstyles."

Student: "But I don't talk about how the boys dressed."

Teacher: "You can add another paragraph about that and another one about how the chaperons dressed."

Student: "I never mention the chaperons in the paper."

Teacher: "Oh, that will make the paper much stronger because...."

Here the teacher argues for his point of view and does not help the student find his own.

The teacher becomes even more directive in the following example. The result is total confusion:

Teacher: "You might describe the exterior of the car in more detail."

Student: "Maybe I can say, 'The blood red Vet throbbed at the light waiting to lurch forward.'"

Teacher: "Use the word crimson instead. It gives the car a refined look. And maybe tell how the car lurched in the next sentence. How about, 'The wheels spun like a whirling dervish?'"

Student: "What's a whirling dervish?"

Teacher as Questioner

Asking questions is the key element for encouraging students to talk during a conference. Good questions invite students to respond and lessen the temptation for the teacher to ramble on. Bad questions put students on the spot and turn conferencing into a dialogue of hostility. Below are several suggestions for asking purposeful questions.

1. Ask and wait. The tendency to ask too many questions before students have time to think is a pattern teachers fall into easily. Another reason to wait is that teachers love to answer their own questions and, thus, take over the conference. When this pattern occurs, students often make evasive responses to questions, like my student Richard, until the teacher desperately supplies a direct answer or solution. Some students even piece together the teacher "answers" into their final paper and await the glowing praises of their mentor.

2. Ask questions that you think the student can answer. The purpose of the conference is to give students a chance to put their thinking into words and discover alternatives. Questions which explore the students' perceptions, judgments, and observations are more productive than rhetorical questions or closed-ended ones that assume a right or correct answer. Good questions help students focus on what they know. "Don't you think the ending would be better if ..." implies your point of view. "What do you like about your

conclusion?" is an appropriate question when the student strongly states his liking for a paper's ending.

3. Develop questions for specific purposes. Table 1 provides examples of questions that help students discover a topic, talk about their writing, restate their thinking, analyze their writing process, and examine their writing organization.

4. Keep questions open-ended so that students must provide answers which are more than one word. For example, the question, "Did you feel the introduction was effective?" is closed-ended, so the student can respond with a simple yes or no answer. "Why do you think your introduction is effective?" forces the student to verbalize what he considered the strengths or weaknesses in the beginning. Below is a short list of closed-ended questions that are reworded to open-ended ones (in parentheses).

- Do you think the second paragraph says what you want it to say? (What does the second paragraph say? Tell me more about what you said in the second paragraph.)
- Can you clarify the idea about the bag lady? (How can you clarify the part about the bag lady?)
- Does the ending fit with the beginning? (What's the connection between the ending and the beginning?)

5. Make questions genuine. Poor questions imply a right idea, so students supply pat answers. Nanci Atwell suggests "asking about something you are curious about as an inquisitive human being" (95). Such questions provide authentic responses from the students. They seek clarification and reaction rather than canned answers. Good questions are more than prompts to get the students to talk.

6. Respond emotionally to writing. When students are reluctant to answer questions, give honest reactions which describe your feelings, so students perceive you as a genuine reader rather than an objective evaluator.

Another technique is to restate the question in exaggerated form. For example, if a student's response to the question, "What does the car look like?" is "Every other car," embellish the question to, "Is the car chartreuse with oversized wheels and fur interior?" This form of questioning is a humorous way for students to show detail rather than just tell about it.

Teacher as Listener

My third concern was to listen. When I did all the talking, I was the one who was learning. I took

away their opportunities to be real authors in charge of their own destiny. Students did one of two things when I rambled on. Some students, like Richard, completely relinquished ownership and responsibility and felt that writing had nothing to do with their world. Others felt guilty and inadequate about not being "correct." My talk interfered with their ability to see that the stuff of writing is difficult to quantify as right or wrong. Thus, these students' self-concept worsened as the course progressed. Below are a number of suggestions to help teachers listen during a conference.

1. Give nonverbal body cues, so students know you are listening. Look directly at the student and tell what you heard or understood. Keeping your eyes away from the paper and on the writer helps you focus on the student's reaction. Nod your head to show that you're with the student. Lean toward the writer and avoid the detached posture of reclining away.

2. Base your next question on the student's response rather than on a predetermined question or frame of reference. The sample questions in Table 1 are not prescriptions. They are examples of possible directions for getting students to talk. The next questions take into account the tone, feelings and reactions of the students talking about their writing. They naturally follow from the student's initial response.

Student: "I'm not sure that is any good."

Teacher: "Pam, you sounded disinterested when you read the section about your camping fears."

Student: "I really was afraid of the bears."

Teacher: "Did you do anything to deal with that fear?"

Student: "We hung our pack in the trees, made noises when we left the tent, and packed out our garbage."

Teacher: "Do any of those ideas fit with your intent in that section?"

Student: "I can see a way of focusing on that fear."

In this exchange, Pam's tone of voice led me to ask the initial question. Her enthusiastic comment which followed led me to ask a concluding question about inserting this material into her paper.

3. Use verbal cues like restatements and reflective expressions. For example, the statements "If I understand, your idea is ..." and "This is your decision and the reasons you gave are ..." show students that you are listening and understanding what they are saying. Reflective state-

ments like, "You feel that the first part ..." and "You had a difficult time writing about that experience," show an understanding of the students' feelings concerning their written ideas.

4. Don't read the entire piece. When conferencing writing in progress, have the student read small snippets and tell you what they wrote. This allows you to concentrate on the organization and ideas in the paper rather than the surface elements which are better addressed during the editing conference.

5. Listen for cues. Carnicelli suggests this technique for written drafts that have a potential that the student cannot see (119). The teacher discussed the material with the student, listening for verbal and nonverbal signs of interest. If the student shows a spark of interest, the teacher attempts to get the student talking about the material.

Student as Questioner

There is always a group of adolescent writers who aggressively seek my opinions and advice about their papers. Unlike Richard, they curtly ask, "How do you want me to say this?" or "What's the best way to write this section?" I cringe when I hear, "How long do you want this paragraph?" Like a parent giving orders to a twelve-year-old child, we plunge into our vast storehouse of knowledge and give students our advice. Like this overprotective parent, we never let the "babies" make their own decisions.

The point of the article is to show teachers ways of avoiding the role of the "Answer Person," especially with poor, unskilled, or uninterested writers. However, there are appropriate times to give students guided advice, real criticism, and professional editorial assistance. It occurs when students feel in possession of their own writing.

The first indication that students feel ownership of their writing is when they start asking questions related to content or style and not just correctness. These questions are characterized by being open-ended as well as related to some specific aspect of their work. Students also demonstrate that they have considered options. In other words, they are writers stuck in their own thinking. Below is a conference dialogue I had with Kevin, a seventeen-year-old in my freshman composition class.

Student: "I'm not clear about another student's comment that my procedure needs a rationale."

Teacher: "Why not ask the student?"

Student: "I did, but I think that I give the rationale as I describe the CPR steps."

Teacher: "Give me an example."

Student: Reads two examples from the paper.

Teacher: "Yes, I agree that you give reasons. Why don't you think they would be effective in the beginning?"

Student: "The reasons are my way of introducing each step. I'd lose this structure. Would it be more effective the other way?"

Teacher: "Yes, because the steps of the process are confusing to me with the reasons at the beginning of each."

Student: "What if I put the reasons together in a rationale and create a separate section under the present introduction. I really like my anecdote as an introduction."

Teacher: "Try it."

I offered Kevin some direction because he showed that he had thought through some of the problems of the paper and was not looking for "the" correct way to solve them. He understood that writing is a process of discovering options and having the reasoning, conviction, and guts to follow some and discard others.

A second way that teachers can ascertain whether students are ready for advice is to ask students for the kind of feedback they feel would be most helpful to them. The more the students demonstrate that they will not give up ownership, the more advice you can give. This is a judgment call on the teacher's part and requires knowing the background and temperament of the student. Like a good athletic or music coach, the conferencer needs to know when to push students beyond their comfort level or to ease off from criticism. One way that I know that students are still engaged in their writing is when they verbally fight me for their point of view. These students see me as another writer with a different point of view, not as a grader or guru.

Student as Writer

When students take ownership of their writing and are willing to stand up for their ideas and stylistic decisions, they are writers, albeit not necessarily professional, expert, or even good ones. But, they are writers regardless of level. They now possess the mentality to withstand the brutality of constructive criticism, an oxymoron if ever one was uttered. No one likes their ideas questioned, disregarded, or ignored. It's a pain-

ful, anxious, often embarrassing moment which makes us look deeply into ourselves. Yet, the good writers know it's part of the writing process.

While being a mentor for student writers is a positive role, becoming their spiritual leader is self-indulgent. Judging writers as good due to their morally uplifting ideas or criticizing them as bad because they lack adult sophistication goes beyond giving advice. These biased views defeat the major reasons for conferencing: to encourage, ask questions, and listen.

The suggestions in this article will hopefully contribute to a change of attitude and behavior toward conferencing on the part of writing teachers. Our initial job is to help writers want to write and, as Tom Romano aptly states, "Make the student feel worthy, comfortable, and accepted" (86).

Table 1
Conference Questions

Topic Questions

(Help students find the topic or "spine" of their writing)

- What are you writing about?
- How did you choose your subject?
- What would you like me to listen for?
- What's the main idea of the paper?
- Who's the audience of the paper?

Process Questions

(Help students become conscious of how they function as a writer)

- How's it going?
- What do you think you will do next?
- How did you go about writing this section?
- What changes did you make?
- What do you want to add? Delete?
- Where are you in your draft right now?

Content Questions

(Help students respond to their ideas)

- What part do you like best? Why?
- What part are you dissatisfied with?
- What other details would help the reader see the _____?

- What ideas did you consider including but decided not to?
- Which examples worked best for other readers of this paper?

Structural Questions

(Help students comprehend basic structure and style)

- How did you decide to end a paragraph and start another?
- Why did you put the paragraph about before (or after) the others?
- What does the ending have to do with the beginning?
- What part was the most difficult to fit in the paper?
- Why do you think the intro is effective?
- What repetitions or patterns do you see in your writing?

Restatement Questions

(Help students reformulate or restate their ideas)

- Why was your dog so sick?
- You can't get started?
- That was a horrible situation, wasn't it?
- Read me again why the dog ate the golf balls.
- Would you say this differently to an eight-year-old? A fifty-year-old?

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