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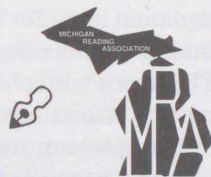
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# Writing Skills: Are They Part of the Process?

ARTICLE BY **TONY DONK**



Glancing around my fifth grade classroom, during our daily Writing Workshop time early last year, I was pleased by the sight of 24 children actively engaged in the process of writing. One small group of four boys was deeply involved with spinning a new tale based on Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Two others were researching how to write a comic book of their own by pouring over the pages of a favorite super hero book. Several children had voluntarily pulled out dictionaries and thesauruses and were helping each other to pick that perfect word and to check on correct spellings. Others were doing peer conferences in an effort to help each other with questions of story content. Everywhere I looked I saw children engaged in activities that fostered writing skills in ever changing and meaningful ways. This scene filled me with assurances that these children were coming to know that writing has many purposes and forms. I felt increasingly confident that they were becoming prolific writers through their engagement with real writing efforts that are fostered in the workshop approach. Yet, from that place in my mind that houses impressions formed as a writer, learner, and professional educator, came nagging questions about "skills." Specifically, I wondered if these budding writers were really learning all that they needed to know and be able to do with such conventions of print as punctuation, capitalization, etc. After all, I wasn't preparing carefully scripted lessons on "skills" the way I had been before implementing the workshop approach.

In an attempt to address these concerns about skill development in this new context, I spent several months last winter studying the portion of our classroom Writing Workshop time designed most specifically to deal with technical skills, this being the individual teacher-student editing conference held just prior to the publishing of the childrens' work. I acknowledge that skills are developed throughout the writing process, but selected the editing conference time as a focus because it was the most accessible time for me to consistently observe and interact with students' skill development. During this time I maintained a detailed journal of the editing conferences I had with each of the students in my classroom. I focused on how and when we dealt with skills in those conferences, as well as my observations of the children's resulting competence with those skills. The results of this effort were used to help me understand how skills were developed while utilizing the process approach to writing in my classroom.

As I became involved in this study of the editing conferences in my classroom, several assertions about how writing skills were effectively dealt with emerged and were reinforced repeatedly:

- The individual teacher-student editing conferences allowed for mutually negotiated skill development within the context of the children's own writing efforts and allowed for immediate and meaningful opportunities for learning. It avoided the pitfalls of those approaches which merely tell



the students about skills in isolation and then hope for applications to future writing efforts.

- This work with childrens' individual writing efforts provided opportunities for assessment, remediation, and teaching according to individual needs.
- Finally, despite the need for dedicating large amounts of time for the conferences, student learning, use, and carry over were greater and reteaching was minimized or eliminated, thus actually making the conference approach a more efficient one for teaching skills.

Each of these assertions will be explored in this article just as I discovered them — through my work with students and their writing efforts.

### **Conferences — Learning About Skills Together Using Children's Own Writing**

As a writer and learner I have come to know that writing skill development is best fostered through active engagement with the writing process. Yet years of educational experiences within traditional school settings have instilled in me a pedagogical process that involves telling children about writing skills via large group and teacher-led instruction, followed by the assignment of some "skill and drill" type of activity. Using the Writing Workshop approach allowed me to replace this inefficient and ineffective large group "telling" by using a more natural and individualized process that focused on the writing work that children were actively involved with. During the editing conference I became a partner in the writing process. This partnership allowed me to share my expertise with the children as we examined the child's writing efforts together. With my support, the children were placed into the position of finding errors and then were given the opportunity to seek out

and make their own corrections of repetitive errors. All of this was done within the context of the child's individual writing efforts. This approach and its benefits are reflected in the recent work done with Margie and Lynn, two students in my classroom.

Margie and Lynn were eager writers who had survived years of frustrating and demoralizing school writing experiences due too much emphasis on their poorly developed technical skills. They eagerly joined into the writing experience once they realized that the major focus of their work could be in developing and sharing their own writing ideas. They spent hours together developing a story that provided an alternative version of "Little Red Riding Hood." Following the procedures established for our workshop time, they eventually completed a "final" draft, attempted to have classmates assist them with initial editing, and then signed up for an editing conference with me. As that conference began they read their story to me eagerly. We then talked about how our job during this conference was to get their writing ready for sharing with others by eliminating any technical errors that might confuse their meaning for the reader. Given this understanding they were eager to begin. As they read their work I had followed along and noted several repetitive errors dealing with a lack of quotation marks, a lack of any paragraphing, and inappropriate switching in verb tense. We worked for about 1/2 hour discussing and editing. I would explain the reasoning behind a suggested change and then help them to make their own edits. As we



moved through the pages of their work, they assumed more and more of the responsibility for recognizing and editing errors. Each time they would explain the reasoning behind their actions before actually making the change.

Toward the end of our conference time, they were doing all of these things with remarkably improved accuracy, confidence, and no obvious signs of frustration!

Through the use of their own writing, and working cooperatively with the teacher, they were learning that the function of editing is to accurately communicate their vision for their writing to the reader and in doing so they were learning the skills necessary to accomplish this. As the teacher, I shared my expertise in writing skills with them as we explored their writing work. Our conversations did not have the one-sided dimension seen in "telling" approaches. Rather, there was a comfortable "give and take" that allowed them to see the importance of the suggestions to the improvement of their own work. They were then given the opportunity to practice their newly developed skills with support and a growing confidence. This was an important opportunity for these two girls who had spent several years in school being told about these skills without being able to make the connection between the telling and their own writing efforts. Margie and Lynn became real world writers who were just beginning to learn about the importance of conventions of print and how it could impact their own writing in meaningful ways.

### **An Opportunity for Individualizing Children's Skill Work**

During my early years as an educator I would have missed the opportunity for learning that was shared with Margie and Lynn. At that stage I was taught that

the nature of classrooms necessitated that not only should children be taught by "telling" in large group settings but that the teacher needed to "shoot for the middle" of learning abilities. The assumption being that the "high kids" would get it anyway and the "low kids" would eventually catch on. (I'm not at all convinced that Margie and Lynn would have eventually caught on!) But, even in those early days I realized that children needed individualized instruction, assessment and remediation based upon their own particular strengths and weaknesses and that this is the essence of a truly individualized approach to learning. In writing it is the children's engagement with the task of writing which reveals their particular needs. In the case of writing skills in my classroom, these needs were revealed and remediated through the editing conference. During the give and take of the conferences, I was able to make assessments of needs based on the children's own writing skills and their discussion of their writing. Remediation was tailored to each child's individual needs. Additionally, new skills could be taught as they were needed or anticipated for the particular growth of the individual writer. Dozens of examples of this were seen in my classroom throughout the time I studied the editing conferences. Two examples will serve to illustrate this point:

Christine was a highly skilled writer, both technically and creatively. She was given to writing short stories of considerable length and advanced technical ability. Our conference involved the editing of her most recent "epic," a wonderful story inspired by our reading of *Where the Red Fern Grows*. After reading through her story, we proceeded in the usual fashion of observing and discussing technical



errors and then making appropriate edits. Christine's errors revolved around such minor issues as using "past" instead of "passed." The only repetitive error was the use of a comma placed before "and" whenever it was used. Remediation for Christine consisted of discovering errors, which she then corrected almost without assistance. The problem with the commas required a relatively short explanation and a few examples. It was interesting to note that Christine had misunderstood a lesson somewhere in her past concerning the use of a comma before "and" when used to join several words in a row. She had extended the rule of placing the comma before "and" to all situations in which the word "and" was being used. The conference served to uncover and eliminate this misunderstanding. With these issues dealt with, we were free to use the remainder of the conference to explore the potential for using more complex skills.

For a writer of Christine's skill level, lessons about the conventions of print dealing with such issues as punctuation and capitalization were generally unnecessary. The task of writing revealed her individual skill level and a few minor issues that required remediation or further instruction. It was clear in working with Christine that she was a writer who was prepared for skill work involving greater sophistication and complexity. To provide her with anything less would have been a great disservice to her development as a writer. The individual conference allowed for this discovery, as well as the opportunity for the type of instruction that stretches the writing skills of a writer like Christine.

Christine's classmate, Theresa, serves

to illustrate the other end of the spectrum in technical skill ability found in this and most typical classrooms.

Theresa's conference dealt with her fictional account of a story about a young girl who was mistakenly "kidnapped" while using a car in a game of hide and go seek. This story had been discussed in depth during peer conferences to assist Theresa with a variety of content issues. Theresa had taken the advice of her classmates and had made many fine revisions. As she read her story to me I noted that it consisted of huge passages of run-on sentences with virtually no punctuation. Consequently even she had difficulty reading and understanding her own work. We spent nearly all of our time working on how to recognize a sentence and how to determine the appropriate end punctuation. We followed the usual pattern for editing and eventually Theresa was talking through her own corrections and making them with minimal guidance and support.

In conferencing with Theresa it became clear that her technical ability was quite immature. She needed a great deal of support and instruction to remediate her work. As with Christine, the particulars of this remediation were revealed through her own writing. The editing conference provided opportunities to give Theresa instruction and remediation to meet her individual needs so that she could continue to develop as a writer in her own unique and timely way.

Despite their placement in the same grade level and classroom Theresa and Christine typify the great disparity in skill levels seen in nearly all classroom settings. To subject them to the same type and level of instruction would be



ineffective and a waste of precious time. Rather, allowing them to become engaged with the task of writing produced writing efforts which permitted individualized assessment of skill development and opportunities for remediation through the editing conference.

### **But There's Not Enough Time!**

As I reflected upon the wonderfully productive editing conferences I had with children such as Christine and Theresa, I became overwhelmingly convinced of their worthiness and appropriateness for providing writing instruction. Despite this I occasionally became concerned about the amount of time these conferences consumed. Sometimes these concerns became so great that I would attempt to find "shortcuts" which nearly always proved to be unsatisfactory. However, a closer examination of the results of these conferences revealed that the time spent was in fact actually quite efficient given the success of this teaching technique. Subsequent examinations of the children's writing work frequently revealed a greater awareness of areas we had focused on, as well as vastly improved abilities in those areas. Margie, Lynn, Christine, Theresa, and the other children in my classroom made important strides in their technical abilities as a result of work done in the editing conferences. Those 20 - 30 minute conferences replaced *hours* of "telling" and "skill and drill" work that had been part of my previous and more traditional program. Those hours could now be used for the editing conferences. Examination of the children's writing work and progress suggested that this had been an excellent trade off. Consequently, the individual conference can be viewed as being time efficient and effective for the teacher and student.

### **Some Final Thoughts**

In conclusion I must return to the

original questions which inspired this study and reflection upon the effectiveness, in teaching technical skills, of the individual student-teacher editing conference used in the Writing Workshop approach in my fifth grade classroom: "Are the children learning all that they need to know and be able to do with the conventions of print, such as punctuation and capitalization?" I suggest that the answer is a clear and resounding "yes."

Through the editing conference children were able to explore the conventions of print, using their own writing efforts, with the expertise and support of the teacher. Skills were encountered as children came to need them in their writing. This then became an opportunity for both the sharing and the practice of skills in meaningful ways. During the conference the teacher was allowed to assess individual student needs and use appropriate instruction and remediation. As a result of the conference, students gained confidence and proficiency in writing skills which carried over to subsequent writing experiences. Additionally, the time taken for the conferences was available due to the fact that large group instruction and practice were no longer necessary. Given all of this, students emerged from the process as writers who not only could, but did, learn what they needed to know about writing skills. Most importantly, they were able to "do" what writers must do ... use skills to communicate their writing vision most effectively.

*Tony Donkis is a fifth-grade teacher in the West Ottawa Schools who is currently on leave to complete doctoral coursework at M.S.U. He is a member of the Kent Reading Council.*

1. It should be noted that pseudonyms are used throughout this article, and composites drawn where necessary to protect the anonymity of students referred to in this article.
2. Special thanks to Dr. Diane Holt-Reynolds for her assistance in the framing of my ideas, as well as her suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.