Writing Conferences

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Research on the writing process suggests that writers learn the most about writing when they share and reflect on their writing. In classrooms, this is most commonly done through writing conferences as part of the revision stage. Whether they occur with pairs, with small groups, or with the teacher, the social benefits of sharing writing improves writing. The writing conference lies at the heart of the writing workshop. The writing conference lets you engage in the teaching dynamic that many wish to reach in their profession- a unique one-on-one interaction between the student and the teacher. Donald Graves identifies in his article: *Six guideposts to a successful writing conference,* the six characteristics of successful writing conferences. He stated that “Conferences should: (1) have a predictable structure; (2) focus on a few points; (3) demonstrate solutions to students' problems; (4) permit role reversals; (5) encourage use of a vocabulary appropriate for writing; and (6) stimulate pleasure in writing. Most teachers use some variant of these characteristics in their classroom” (Graves 1982). There are many positive benefits that occur during writing conferences, some of which being that they involve a non-threatening audience of peers, peers or teacher can provide immediate feedback and can immediately ask for clarifications, they can promote positive attitudes about writing and increased motivation to revise, and students experience a wide range of writing abilities and topics.

When a writing conference works well, it’s a wonderful thing! You’re able to talk with the student, get a dialogue going, make suggestions, and feel as though you accomplished a great deal and have already improved the student’s writing tremendously. But, writing conferences can also be challenging as the student may not take constructive criticism well, and may have had teachers in the past who have assigned, corrected, and graded their writing harshly. There may also be some confusion, and it can ultimately be very time-consuming, so it’s important to have a grip on classroom and time management. There are many writing conference fundamentals that authors Fletcher and Portalupi describe in depth in the book *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide,* where they state that the six fundamentals of the writing conference are: listen, be present, understand the writer, follow the student’s energy, build on strengths, and teach one thing. I will delve into a number of these fundamentals in the core of my paper.

My first recommendation for teachers using the writing conference technique would be to understand the writer while being present as a reader. Fletcher and Portalupi state in their book that “It’s important to try and react to the student writing as you would respond to any other piece of writing you would enjoy reading. If the piece is funny, then you should laugh, and if the piece is serious or sad, let the reader know that you feel sadness while reading it” (Fletcher & Portalupi 49-50). By doing this, you start reacting as a human being, and that means bringing your whole heart into the writing conference so that you can give the student writer your undivided attention. You want to improve the quality of what they write, but first you must receive it as a reader. In order to leave an effect on a student, you must first show how their writing has affected you. It’s also important to understand the writer and where they come from, by drawing prior knowledge about the history of the writer. Fletcher and Portalupi also state that “You might ask yourself certain question that will “read” the student you’re working with, such as: What can I learn from her body language? What kind of writing is she attempting? Where is she in the process? Once you understand the student’s intention, your goal is to help them achieve it” (Fletcher & Portalupi 50). You must also take into account what you have learned about that student in past conferences, such as: Is this a genre she’s never tried before? What are her strengths and weaknesses as a writer? What surprises me about the student? You decide what kind of direction the conference should go depending on the student, and whether she is a struggling writer or a stronger writer. It usually takes more than one writing conference to fully understand a student’s purpose, process, and audience, so it’s important to let your understanding of the student develop gradually over time.

During a writing conference, teachers should follow three components: observe, compliment, and teach, which should dramatically improve the one-on-one session with the student. Teachers that want to be present as a reader and understand the writer during a writing conference, should try using the observe component throughout the conference. Alison states from her blog *How to Conduct Writing Conferences with Students in the Primary Grades* that “You should observe what the student is working on and what strategies he/she is using or not using. You could have the student read aloud a portion of their writing to you (this is especially helpful if you teach students who aren’t yet spelling traditionally), or you may quickly skim the piece of writing silently” (Alison 2017). You may ask them if they’re applying a certain concept or strategy to their writing, and if so, how. During this observation component, you are trying to gather information. You want to figure out what your compliment is going to be, as well as what you’re going to teach during the rest of the conference. You may also write down anecdotal notes or complete part of a checklist. Sometimes, however, this observation component actually happens before the conference begins. Alison also states that “You may decide to pick up the student’s writing folder the previous night and read through it, so that you already know that they needs to work on including strong details or work on using less run-on sentences. Choosing the focus of the conference beforehand can be very helpful in saving time” (Alison 2017). When you already know your compliment and teaching point, then you just skip the observation component entirely. I think it’s important that we as teachers are flexible enough to recognize what’s important in the moment, even if it means deviating from our original intentions. One of the most important parts of this component is to respond to the content of the child’s writing as a reader! If the piece made you laugh, then laugh. If the child is writing about something sad or difficult, express your concern. If you can relate to the piece of writing or a challenge the child is having, make a comment about this. It’s common to forget to respond to the writing as a human being because you’re so focused on what your compliment should be or what your teaching point is. Students need to hear your reactions as a reader – they are not writing robots, so we have to avoid becoming teaching robots, too.

My next recommendation for teachers using the writing conference technique would be to build on the student’s strengths rather than point out their flaws or weaknesses in a paper. “Student writers can be highly sensitive people, and aren’t always open to new suggestions from their teachers or their peers” (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). That’s why it’s important to give them concrete praise in the beginning of the writing conference- something specific about their paper that they can be proud of- whether it be that they used strong, detailed, sensory imagery, or that they did a great job of including correct punctuation throughout their paper. It’s true that as teachers and humans in general we quickly discover and point out the errors and flaws of a paper rather than the strengths and the parts that the students did well on, but it’s important to try to unlearn those bad habits. Many young writers are too scared to take chances in their papers because of previous harsh grading and editing from teachers, but if you give them a specific praise and leave them with more positive feedback rather than negative, then this will ultimately improve the student writer and boost their self-esteem and confidence in their future writing pieces.

Teachers that want to build on the student’s strengths during a writing conference, should try using the compliment component throughout the conference. The compliment shouldn’t be something that is disingenuous but instead something that reinforces what the student is working on in class. If the student is doing a great job with sensory imagery, you could say “Wow, you are really using our sensory imagery chart! I see you’ve included ‘sparkling,’ ‘tropical,’ ‘savory,’ and ‘delicious’ in your piece. This helps the reader understand that you must be writing about a positive reaction to some type of food in your story. I know you will continue using sensory imagery words in other pieces you work on, too. Keep up the good work!” You should also start your sentence to a student with a “Keep doing x” rather than just an opportunity to say “good job!” You want to provide positive feedback and build a relationship with the student – but you also want the student to continue doing the “good thing” on their papers. “As educators, we are so eager to dive right in and fix what is incorrect with our students, but sometimes we forget to take a step back and build upon what is already there. The “low” writer could have the eloquence of writing with a beautiful craft and elaboration” (Alison 2017). The punctuation and organization of the piece of writing will come in time. Teachers should be building on the descriptiveness and asking this particular writer to share more experiences of his/her life. In the blog post *Building Writers, not Scribes,* Cameron Carter states that “Teachers should also build writers through creativity and choice. In order to improve one's writing, he or she must write more. The more you allow your students to write, whether it is a specific prompt or a free-write, they will show evidence of improvement in their writing” (Carter 2017). You should also allow students to have free-choice in their writing. Our goal as educators is to get the students excited about learning by allowing creativity and choice!

My last recommendation would for teachers using the writing conference technique would be to teach one thing to the student. Fletcher and Portalupi state that “1n a conference there is a natural flow that begins with understanding and moves towards teaching a particular skill, technique, or strategy. These one-on-one encounters with a student are relatively rare in the classroom, and they give you a rich opportunity to stretch the writer you’re working with. It’s important to teach the writer, and not the writing” (Fletcher & Portalupi). The idea is to add to the young writer’s repertoire or strategies- not just improve a specific piece of writing, but to improve all the writing that the student will do. It’s about improving the writer as a whole and to prepare them for their future writing pieces, not just about correcting the writing at the moment and dismissing their other writing pieces. It’s also a good idea to just teach one concept or strategy because if you overload the student with too much information, they will leave the conference confused and with too much to fix on their paper, and will in turn become overwhelmed and be worse off than they were before the conference.

During this part of the writing conference, you should choose a strategy to teach the student that’s within reach. Alison states that you should “Encourage the student to try out a new strategy that he/she’s not applying yet (one that would be applicable to their work). Encourage the student to focus on using a strategy consistently, if they’re using it inconsistently right now. Follow up on previous instruction by reminding the student how to apply a strategy or encouraging the student to apply the strategy in a new way” (Alison 2017). You should also explicitly state what you want the student to try, and give an example. The example can come from a published book, a piece of writing you did as a class, a piece of writing you modeled during a lesson, an exemplar from another student, or a sample mentor text you created. You may also do some writing to show the student what you mean, but don’t write on students’ work, because want to give kids ownership over their writing. They have the final say in whether or not they use a certain strategy. So, maybe write down ideas on a sticky note, and the child can choose to include them, or not. Lastly, have the student try out the teaching point in some way. This may be by adding to or correcting his/her own work, or by writing something on a sticky note that he/she might choose to include later. Alison also states that “If it’s a strategy that the student really needs to use, and it’s a non-negotiable, you should request that they fix their own work right then and there, and it’s not a choice” (Alison 2017). At the end of the conference, always make sure to follow up with some sort of encouraging statement to wrap it up and leave the student feeling confident and proud of their writing piece.

Writing conferences with ELL students can be a challenge, but also a very rewarding experience altogether, for both the student and the teacher. Listening to individual students in writers' workshops can be difficult, but understanding the words of students who speak a different first language than yours can be downright daunting. Luckily, there are a multitude of ways for us as teachers to master the art of listening in conferences with English language learners. In the article post titled *The Art of Listening in Writing Conferences with English Language Learners*, authors Andie Cunningham and Ruth Shagoury state that “You should repeat back what the child says to you. We unconsciously and automatically translate any speaker's words into the idioms of our language and culture, and this often means we lose the meaning the child is trying to create. By repeating the words back, we can ensure we've got them right, as well as the ideas the child is attempting to convey” (Cunningham & Shagoury). It’s also important to try to establish eye contact. Some cultures discourage children from making eye contact with adults, so this can be a difficult task. But eye contact allows you to communicate so much nonverbally with any child, so that they have your attention, respect, and interest. When a child turns away from you, either from distraction or shyness, a gentle touch on the arm or back will often bring them back to eye contact with you. Cunningham and Shagoury also advise in “Avoiding asking yes/no questions. If your questions only require a one-word response, you'll be spending far more time talking than the child. Open-ended questions also encourage more reflection for both you and your students. The exception, of course, is for children in the silent period, who can make themselves known by nodding "yes" or "no" to your guesses, and can work toward one or two word responses through these nods” (Cunningham & Shagoury). Lastly, you should respect silence. When you ask a question, wait till the child is ready to answer. Give your students time to sort through what you've asked in their native tongue and English, and let them take all the time they need to formulate a response. It feels unnatural to break the hectic pace of many writer's workshops by encouraging these long pauses in conferences, but they are vital for children to sort through their thoughts and develop a reflective stance.

Overall, I feel as though writing conferences are extremely beneficial for the student and the teacher, and will tremendously improve a students’ writing and have them feeling more confident about their writing skills at the end of the conference compared to the beginning. As a teacher, if you employ the many fundamentals of the writing conference such as understanding the writer, being present as a reader, building on their strengths, and teaching one thing, the student will thrive in the writing conference and will dramatically improve their writing skills. If you also make sure to include the three components of the writing conference, which are to observe, compliment, and teach, then the student will benefit even more, and their writing will become stronger. These writing techniques also work great for ELL students, along with other strategies that are specifically created to better improve an ELL’s writing, ultimately benefitting the student more during the conference. All in all, I believe that if you follow these many steps throughout the writing conference, you will see a huge difference in your students’ writing, and will see dramatic improvements during the school year, that will better prepare them for their future English classes and future writing throughout their lifetime.

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