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Guiding peer conferences in the process of writing

Abstract

Children can only become experienced writers by learning to use the writing process through opportunities to write and through modeling of strategies by their teacher. Children will especially benefit from questions and comments that are appropriate to make during a writing conference. This instruction may first take place during all-class conferences and eventually move to conferences between students (Graves, 1983). Conferences may have many purposes, but according to Graves (1994), the most basic purpose for a conference is to give the students time to share where they are in the writing process and to figure out where they are headed.

GUIDING PEER CONFERENCES IN THE PROCESS OF WRITING

A Graduate Journal Article Paper

Submitted to the

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Cheryl Kremer

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Guiding Peer Conferences

Guiding Peer Conferences in the Process of Writing

There is much more to writing than the formation of letters into words and words into sentences (Graves, 1975; King & Rentel, 1979). Writing is more than communicating a message from the writer to the reader. Writing supports reflection and demands involvement. Reflecting on what has been written allows the writer to make discoveries and develop thought processes (King, 1978). Reflection and a desire to communicate lead to composing (King & Rentel).

Observations of children involved in composing have allowed researchers to record what happens when children write. Graves (1975; 1983) suggests writing involves these stages: choice and rehearsal, composing, reading and rewriting. Others have labeled the writing process in other ways. However the stages are identified or labeled, children go through this process naturally, and the process becomes more complex as children grow as writers (Graves, 1983).

Prewriting or rehearsal basically prepares a person for writing; it may involve listing, drawing, reading, or conversing. Composing is taking the ideas and forming them into words and sentences. Often writers will then read what they have written and make changes or revisions (Graves, 1983). Many practitioners also include sharing or publication in the stages of the process (Calkins, 1983) which means children are able to write for a broader audience than their teacher.

These stages of writing are hierarchical in nature. In the early stages of learning to write, children can only focus on one aspect of writing at a time. However, these stages become more recursive, and there is greater interaction among the stages as the writing of children matures (Balajthy, 1986; Graves, 1994; Hillocks, 1987). Mature, experienced writers reconstruct and revise their meaning often during composing (Hillocks; MacArthur, 1994).

Children can only become experienced writers by learning to use the writing process through opportunities to write and through modeling of strategies by their teacher. Children will especially benefit from instruction on questions and comments that are appropriate to make during a writing conference (Balajthy, 1986; Crowhurst, 1979; MacArthur, 1994; Pianko & Radzik, 1980). This instruction may first take place during all-class conferences and eventually move to conferences between students (Graves, 1983). Conferences may have many purposes, but according to Graves (1994), the most basic purpose for a conference is to give the students time to share where they are in the writing process and to figure out where they are headed. In other words, conferences provide the time to reflect. Conferencing is an important aspect of the process because children sometimes have difficulty accessing the knowledge they have on a topic (Hillocks, 1987). Students generally know what they want to communicate but fail to realize that in their actual writing they were unable to communicate it (Tompkins & Friend, 1988). Conferences help

writers see problem areas in their writing; conferences also force writers to see their writing in a new way and to understand it better (Church, 1985; Ferrara, Goldberg & McTighe, 1995; Pianko & Radzik).

Writing conferences between the student and the teacher are extremely important. In student-teacher conferences, the teacher's first role is to overlook mechanics and to help the students "speak about their subjects" (Graves, 1983, p. 105). Teachers can do this by attending to what the student has to say and then asking questions that help the student keep adding to that picture on paper. Teachers might also ask a question about what the student plans to do next; this allows the student to examine the process of writing (Graves). These conferences help students learn through observation of teacher behavior. Also, teachers are often the most knowledgeable editors of writing (Balajthy, 1986; Pianko & Radzik, 1980). Calkins (1983) found that "teacher:child conferences provide a model for peer conferences when they. . .help children assume responsibility and ownership" (p. 131).

However, conferences between students, or peer conferencing, also have benefits. Peers share similar perspectives and common understandings (Daiute & Dalton, 1992). In a study with learning disabled students, teacher requests for information or elaboration did not always affect student writing positively; students that felt unable to meet or understand those requests showed some regression in their writing by moving back to safer topics (Parecki, Palincsar & Brozo, 1992). Student

talk seemed to form "zones through which their peers navigate more readily than those constituted by adults" (Parecki, Palincsar & Brozo, 1992, p. 19). Crowhurst (1979) found that students enjoyed and were motivated by writing for peers. The students wrote longer pieces, and Crowhurst found that 17 of the 21 students in this study reported that peer response improved their writing.

The social interaction provided by peers adds other benefits. The writer's efforts are acknowledged, the writer is able to see how problems are handled by classmates, and the interaction helps to promote a positive classroom atmosphere (Church, 1985). Peer conferencing also gives writers a wider, more realistic audience (Bruce, Michaels & Watson-Gegeo, 1985; Pianko & Radzik, 1980), and children begin to anticipate and address questions that might be asked during a conference (MacArthur, 1994).

In order to insure the best peer conferences possible, establishing a list of guidelines is important. In a study by MacArthur (1994) with 7th- and 8th-grade learning disabled students, more revisions were made and quality of writing improved when student pairs used an editing strategy. More importantly, the students were able to use the skills learned while conferencing with a peer and apply them as they revised pieces on their own (MacArthur). Calkins (1983) also found that using predictable, general conference questions allowed students to internalize these conferences. Being able to internalize conference skills and questions

allows students more independence in their writing; by using what they have learned while having writing conferences with their teacher and with their classmates, they will be able to apply these skills while working on their own.

Applying Research to the Classroom

Most teachers understand that learning to use the writing process comfortably does not happen overnight. The same is true for peer conferencing. In order for students to maximize their conferencing time together, they must first be comfortable in the writing process. In my sixth-grade classroom, I wanted to provide a predictable and universal guideline for my students to use in the conferencing of their written work.

The Beginning: The Teacher as Model

Once I saw my sixth-grade students beginning to accept the idea that their first draft did not necessarily communicate their ideas in the best way, I encouraged them to ask for a writing conference, with a classmate or with myself, to discuss their writing. Often, I was the person with whom students wanted to meet. This meant that I was very busy. Conferencing with several students during a 45 minute class period, I read each piece aloud with the writer and asked each writer questions when I did not understand. Depending on the student's ability, I would either correct spelling mistakes with them, or I would tell the student the words for which he or she needed to find the correct spelling. When I found incomplete or run-on sentences, I would ask the writer where the

punctuation belonged. I would always tell the student where his or her description had been particularly well done.

Doing these things took a great deal time, but I was able to model with those students the various things to look for when having a conference with a writer. I knew, however, that I needed to free up more of my time during class so that I could circulate around the room and touch base with those students who were not approaching me, and for those students who needed to talk about their writing. Often the students that asked for a conference with me were capable students that were very concerned about the quality of their work. Meanwhile, some students that were less comfortable with writing purposefully avoided contact with me, and unfortunately, their time was not always used wisely.

My students needed to feel comfortable going to each other for assistance, but even more than that, they needed to know what to and what not to say during a conference. My individual conferences with students were showing some of my students appropriate questions and comments. A strategy that reached even more of the class, though, was whole-class sharing. Whole-class sharing would occur toward the end of our writing period. A student that wanted to share with everyone would then read aloud his or her piece and ask for comments. My role at this time was to model appropriate responses by telling the student/author details I remembered or especially enjoyed. If I heard a student give a particularly good comment to the author, I would reinforce it. If I heard

too many vague responses, I would encourage them to be more specific. This strategy allowed the whole class to hear and learn appropriate conference behavior.

The Next Step: Encouraging Peer Conferences & Providing a Focus

As the year progressed, students became more open to sharing their writing with each other, and I began to strongly urge students to talk with each other about their writing. I pointed out students that I knew were good listeners. Sometimes I requested one of the good spellers in class to meet with a classmate struggling with spelling in his or her writing. Still, I knew that some students were having a great deal of difficulty giving helpful suggestions to another student when it came to content. Editing issues, such as spelling and mechanics, were routinely addressed during peer conferences, but I still did not see many students revising the content. I wanted students to remember to discuss more than spelling and mechanics during their peer conferences, so I developed a writing conference form for students to use. Basically, this form was a checklist of points I thought were important to cover during a writing conference. This first writing conference form included the following points:

- Read aloud the piece to the conference partner.
- Fix confusing parts.
- Find places where details could be added or taken out.
- Change words or ideas to better ones.
- Check for capital letters and end punctuation.
- Make sure each sentence is a complete thought.
- Check for spelling mistakes.
- Check for commas.
- Read aloud the piece once more.

I introduced this form to the whole class. I used an overheard projector and went over each item on the form, trying to clarify what each item included. I then required them to use it for a few weeks. I saw some improvement immediately. Students had something to focus on while they talked, and since they were required to use it, it enlisted all students to go beyond a rough draft. Still, some students gave peer writing conferences minimal time. This may have been happening because they did not value the list I had directed them to use. It also may have occurred because some students did not fully understand all the items on the form.

Clarifying the Writing Conference Form

Encouraged by a colleague, I asked students what they felt should be discussed during a peer conference. I wanted the students to have more ownership of this conferencing guide, and I wanted the list of conference prompts to make sense to them. I used their suggestions to create a new form. The second form included the following points:

- Read aloud the writing to the partner.
- Does it make sense?
- Fix any confusing parts.
- Is it interesting or entertaining?
- Add description and more interesting words.
- Rearrange ideas into paragraphs - similar ideas, same paragraph.
- Take out ideas that aren't on the topic.
- Choose an appropriate title.
- Look for sentence problems: run-ons, too short or long, incomplete.
- Capitalization
- Overall appearance
- Punctuation
- Spelling

- Did you meet the assignment's requirements?
- Read the writing out loud once more.

Once again using the overhead projector, I introduced this new form to the students. I reminded them of the discussion we had in class about the form, and I told them I had used their suggestions to create a new form that might be more useful to them. I again required them to use it for awhile before I asked for their feedback on it. This student-generated form seemed to increase the number of students critically thinking about their writing. I saw more students actually discussing their writing and not just going through the motions to please their teacher. I found that I asked less **if** they had conferenced and asked more **how** peer conferences helped. One student told me she could understand the new form better. Other students were using the thesaurus to aid in word choice much more frequently. When working on a computer, students frequently asked a peer to read what was written before it was printed. Students would come to me with a rough draft that had words crossed out and changed to better ones, arrows showing where information had been moved or added, and editing marks correcting capitalization and punctuation.

Student Feedback

After using the student-generated form for about a month, I asked for some feedback from my students. I wanted to learn their opinions on its usefulness to them during their writing conferences with each other. Meeting in small groups, the students took the form they had helped to create, and they went over each item on the form together. They discussed

which items they felt comfortable using and which items they felt they used consistently during revising and editing. They were also instructed to mark the items they used little or not at all. The students marked each item with a rating of good/well, okay, or poor/not at all.

After surveying the whole class, students told me they knew how to edit and revise their writing using the form, and the majority felt they were able to do this well. However, students were uncomfortable with or unsure about using three prompts: 1. adding description and interesting words, 2. rearranging ideas into paragraphs, and 3. looking for sentence problems.

Only half the students felt they were able to use those prompts to revise or edit their writing. The remaining students knew they could improve their use of these prompts during peer conferences. The problems these students were having may have arisen for many different reasons. Some of these students did not feel comfortable going to just anyone for a peer writing conference. Consequently, they would go to a best friend, and while this friend might be a good speller, he or she might not be as skilled in correcting problems with run-on sentences. Other students having difficulty with those prompts simply did not want to take the extra time and effort to use a thesaurus, even though they knew how to use one. Many simply did not have enough confidence in themselves as writers yet. As conference partners, they seemed reluctant to offer suggestions about adding description and rearranging ideas. As writers, they seemed unable

few students, too many of my students were getting short changed. I did not know what all of my students needed and what they were capable of because I did not have enough time to circulate around my classroom.

By modeling good responses to writing with individual students during writing conferences and with the whole class during sharing, I laid the foundation for good peer conferences later. Good peer conferencing will not automatically happen for all students. Some students in my classroom needed a great deal of encouragement and support before they were comfortable discussing their writing. I found that my students benefited from being given guidelines for their writing. This gave them a focus and allowed them to internalize revising and editing strategies. In the case of the students I was instructing, some were able to finally move on from peer conferences to revising and editing on their own without a form. Many of my students, however, required more instruction and practice in select areas, especially paragraph and sentence formation and adding descriptive detail. Throughout the school year, my students needed reminders about quality responses to writing and instruction in strategies that enabled them to produce better written work. Developing a conference form that students use during peer conferences is an on-going process which needs to be examined and revised frequently. I found that student feedback not only helped revise the form students used, but their suggestions and comments also pointed out areas for further instruction

to see areas lacking description or paragraphs that jumbled many ideas together. If I prompted them to look at one of these areas in their writing, the students generally knew a good way to correct or modify it, but they did not trust themselves; they still needed some instructional support when it came to correcting run-on or incomplete sentences, adding descriptive words, or moving sentences around into better paragraphs.

Benefits to the Teacher

Surveying the students on their use of the writing conference form was a very helpful step in understanding their use of conference prompts. It showed me which areas students felt confident about: correcting capitalization, removing ideas that didn't belong, making sure the writing was interesting or entertaining. It pointed out those areas of writing where students needed more instruction: paragraph formation, correcting incomplete or run-on sentences, adding description.

Once I saw students demonstrating the ability to conference well with each other, I stopped requiring students to use the writing conference form. This, of course, did not happen at the same time for all students. Some students could internalize important conferencing points more quickly than others.

Most beneficial about this process of developing a conference guide was that it allowed me to learn more about all my students. At the beginning of the year, I was spending too much time meeting with a handful of students. If I spent class time involved in conferencing with a

which continue to be addressed through whole-class mini-lessons and individual student-teacher writing conferences.

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