

Workshop 6

Conversations Among Writing Peers

Video 11: Conversations Among Writing Peers

Video 12: Peer Conferences

How can peer conferences help students in grades 3–5 become better writers? In this workshop, you will examine the various forms peer response might take in a writing workshop, the importance of an authentic audience for written work, and how peer conferencing can enhance writing skills in grades 3–5. You will also explore teaching strategies for structuring peer conferences and helping students respond to each other appropriately and meaningfully.

“What students value even more than the teacher’s perspective on their writing is their peer’s.”
—Jack Wilde, retired teacher and author of *A Door Opens: Writing in Fifth Grade*

Learning Goals

In this workshop, you will explore how to:

- provide models, protocols, and guidelines for peer conferences
- help students give constructive feedback to one another during peer conferences
- enhance students’ writing skills through peer conferencing and communication

Materials Needed

- Examine the Literature Response Chart (included at the end of this chapter and available as a PDF on the *Inside Writing Communities* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting)
- Lesson descriptions and classroom handouts listed in Teachers and Lessons Featured in Workshop 6 (included in the Appendix and available as PDFs on the Web site)
- “Peer Conferences: Strategies and Consequences,” an article by Jack Wilde commissioned for *Inside Writing Communities* (available as a PDF on the Web site)
- Key Practices To Observe (included the section Analyze the Videos and available as a PDF on the Web site)
- Journal or notebook

Facilitators: You may want to have several copies of the article available for participants without Internet access, as well as copies of Key Practices To Observe, Examine the Literature Response Chart, and the lesson descriptions and classroom handouts.

Prepare for the Workshop

To prepare for this workshop, you will examine strategies you already use and read an article about peer conferencing.

Facilitators: Have participants complete these activities before arriving for the workshop.

What Do You Do?



Karen Smith, one of the experts featured in “Conversations Among Writing Peers,” says that it is validating for student writers to have peers “listen with all their heart and soul.”

Think about a time that another person—a peer or perhaps a teacher—read and evaluated your writing. Answer the following questions, jotting down your answers in your notebook:

- How did you feel about the experience?
- What, if anything, did the other person do that validated you as a writer?
- Did it seem to you that this person was really “listening” to you? How did you know?
- What have you observed among student writers that might support Karen’s idea that it is validating for students to have their peers listen to them?
- How would you correlate this validation with students becoming better writers?

Think about your teaching practice, specifically about ways in which you provide opportunities for students to read their written work aloud, receive feedback, and make revisions based on peer responses. Then answer the following questions, jotting down your answers in your notebook:

- Describe a lesson or practice you use in which students either work together with a peer on a writing assignment or read their written work aloud and receive feedback.
- What are the benefits and challenges of peer responses?
- What questions do you have about peer conferencing and response?

Examine the Literature



To complete this activity, use the Examine the Literature Response Chart found at the end of this chapter.

Read the article listed below, recording your ideas on the chart during and after reading. When you have finished, save your chart to submit as an assignment. You can download a PDF of this article on the *Inside Writing Communities, Grades 3–5* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting.

Peer Conferences: Strategies and Consequences

This article examines the benefits of peer conferences and one educator’s approach to teaching students to become effective peer conference partners.

Wilde, Jack. “Peer Conferences: Strategies and Consequences.” This article was commissioned specifically for Workshop 6 of *Inside Writing Communities, Grades 3–5*, 2007.

Analyze the Videos

Facilitators: When the workshop begins, you may want to spend a few minutes discussing the group's responses to What Do You Do? and the reading. You also may want to direct the participants' attention to the Key Practices listed below.

Key Practices To Observe

"Conversations Among Writing Peers" and "Peer Conferences" explore how teachers help students learn how to respond effectively to each other's writing. They feature commentary from experts on teaching writing at the elementary level as well as classroom illustrations highlighting the practices of several teachers.

As you watch, look for the following key practices:

- Teachers model meaningful conference structures that students can follow and adapt.
- The "fishbowl" demonstration allows students to see peer conferences in action.
- Teachers give students time to practice peer conferences.
- Teachers communicate reasonable expectations and recognize that conferring skills develop and improve over time.
- Peer conferences help students develop critical listening skills.
- Student writers receive sincere compliments and respectful feedback from their peers without relinquishing control over writing choices.
- Teachers quietly listen to student writing conversations and use these opportunities to assess progress.
- Teachers sometimes coach students during peer conferences, keeping their focus on strategies that help students improve their writing skills.
- During peer conferences, students refer to specific writing strategies taught and modeled in a writing workshop. Classroom charts or other visual reminders of writing strategies help facilitate their conversations.

Teachers and Lessons Featured in Workshop 6

Descriptions of the featured lessons, along with related handouts, are included in the Appendix.

Video 11: Conversations Among Writing Peers

- Jeanne Boiarsky, Third Grade: "Teaching a Peer Conference Protocol: Receiving the Piece"
- Lindsay Dibert, Fifth Grade
- Silvia Edgerton, Fifth Grade

Video 12: Peer Conferences

- Jeanne Boiarsky, Third Grade: "Teaching a Peer Conference Protocol: Receiving the Piece"
- Lindsay Dibert, Fifth Grade: "Talking Revision"

Analyze the Videos, cont'd.

Guide to Video 11: Conversations Among Writing Peers

Use this chart to help identify the pause points in Video 11. Zero your counter at the Annenberg logo at the very beginning of the tape. The entry points below are approximate.

Segment 1 (0:00-13:19)	Opening Segment (beginning at 00:51) Excerpts from multiple peer conferences	
	Interview (beginning at 01:48) Benefits of peer conferences	Jack Wilde
	Introduction (beginning at 02:31)	
	Interview (beginning at 03:43) Value of students listening to each other	Karen Smith
	In the Classroom (beginning at 05:22) Introduction to "Receiving the Piece"	Jeanne Boiarsky
	Interview (beginning at 08:35) Benefits of providing a structure for peer conferences	Jack Wilde
	Interview (beginning at 09:43) Having high expectations	Jeanne Boiarsky
	In the Classroom (beginning at 10:13) Two students practicing "Receiving the Piece"	Jeanne Boiarsky
	Interview (beginning at 12:11) Allowing time to practice conferring	Jack Wilde
	Segment 2 (13:19-19:01)	In the Classroom (beginning at 13:19) Two students conferring
Interview (beginning at 18:20) Moving students toward independence		Jack Wilde
Segment 3 (19:09-end)	In the Classroom (beginning at 19:09) Excerpts from two peer conferences	Silvia Edgerton

Analyze the Videos, cont'd.

Video 11: Conversations Among Writing Peers

Watch the 30-minute video “Conversations Among Writing Peers.” If you prefer to watch the video in segments, you can stop at the times suggested below or use the detailed Video Guide outline on the previous page to help you determine places to stop for discussion. The Video Guide is also available as a PDF at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting.

Answer the questions that accompany each segment below, jotting down your responses in a notebook or using them as discussion starters.



Modeling a New Strategy (approximate times: 00:50-13:20)

In the first segment, Jeanne Boiarsky has introduced her third-grade students to “Receiving the Piece,” a peer response strategy from Donald Graves’s *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. She uses former students to model the strategy. Then her students practice “Receiving the Piece” in pairs. (Stop the video after Jack Wilde’s interview.)

- In what ways does “Receiving the Piece” validate student writers?
- How does the fishbowl demonstration clarify “Receiving the Piece” for the students? In what other instances might you use a fishbowl in your classroom?
- During the sample peer conference, how does Jeanne coach her students to move beyond their initial retelling of each other’s pieces? Think of other ways you might help students learn to become more independent with “Receiving the Piece” or some other conferencing strategy.

Taking the Next Step (approximate times: 13:20-19:00)

In this segment, Lindsay Dibert’s fifth-grade students have been talking with peers about their personal narratives and receiving feedback in the form of questions. After two students finish this initial conversation, they spontaneously begin to confer about the leads they have written for their pieces. (Stop after Jack’s interview about students becoming more independent.)

- What specific behaviors did you observe in Stephan and Emily’s conference? What do they reveal about the quality of the students’ interaction?
- How does Stephan and Emily’s conference compare to the two third graders’ conference in Jeanne’s classroom? How would you account for the differences?
- Lindsay checks in with Stephan and Emily to see what they have accomplished during their conference. What other ways could you evaluate the success of peer conferences in your classroom?

Observing an Independent Peer Conference (approximate times: 19:00-end of video)

In the final segment, three of Silvia Edgerton’s fifth graders engage in a conference during writing workshop, with two of the students responding to the third student’s personal narrative. (Play to the end of the program.)

- Earlier in the school year, Silvia used her own writing to model peer conferencing. What benefits do you see in this teaching practice?
- During their conference, the students refer to revision strategies displayed on a chart on the classroom wall. Describe resources that you already have in your classroom or resources you could add that would help students confer. (cont’d. next page)

Analyze the Videos, cont'd.

- Silvia's students use strategies specific to bilingual writers, such as Spanglish (a mixture of Spanish and English that has evolved in the Hispanic population of the U.S.) and code switching (mixing English and a second language) to write more authentic dialogue. How could you apply similar strategies with students who speak only English, keeping in mind the dialects and colloquialisms your students use?

Video 12: Peer Conferences

Watch the 30-minute video "Peer Conferences." Apply what you have learned in "Conversations Among Peer Writers" as you observe the classroom examples.

Answer the questions that follow each segment, jotting down your answers in your notebook or using them as discussion starters.



Jeanne Boiarsky's Class (approximate times: 00:30-16:00)

After describing "Receiving the Piece" to her third graders, Jeanne Boiarsky answers students' questions. Next, she uses the fishbowl technique to model the strategy before students practice in pairs.

- Think about the questions Jeanne's students ask about "Receiving the Piece." What do these questions reveal about thinking and learning among eight- and nine-year-olds?
- How does the fishbowl help clarify "Receiving the Piece"? How does it complement Jeanne's directions?
- What strategy does Jeanne use for pairing her students after the initial peer conference? What are some possible advantages and/or disadvantages of her strategy? What other strategies might you use to set up peer conferences in pairs or groups?

Lindsay Dibert's Class (approximate times: 16:00-end of video)

The second half of the video features Lindsay Dibert and her fifth-grade students. Lindsay introduces a new revision strategy in which the students listen to each other talk about their stories, take notes, and ask questions. The video concludes with a look at students engaging in peer conferences using the new strategy.

- What are the benefits of talking about a piece of writing with a peer rather than reading it aloud? At what point(s) in the writing process do you think this strategy would be effective?
- Lindsay gives her students autonomy by allowing them to choose the location for their conferences. Evaluate how well you think this strategy would work in your classroom and with your students.

Looking Closer

Rain gutters—the ones found on buildings—are mounted on walls throughout Zaharis Elementary School to hold books so that they face forward and are more inviting to students.

Extend Your Learning

Examine Your Practice

The teachers and experts appearing in “Conversations Among Writing Peers” have found that even young students can respond helpfully to each other’s writing when they are provided clear expectations and support, especially in their first attempts at conferencing. Read the following quotation, consider your own students, and answer the questions below.

“I think you get different results in peer conferences, depending upon whether you structure the response or not. Just as with anything else, some kind of structure is helpful, especially in the beginning, with students who are just learning how to respond.

“The structure in peer conferencing can act like training wheels. The first thing it can do, just as training wheels do, is make it safe. It makes it safe for the writer to share if he or she knows that the first response is going to be a positive response, and then that there are going to be questions, and then they are going to have an opportunity to ask questions. But I would view it as exactly that—as a type of training wheels. And when you feel that students get it, that they feel safe in the conferencing and they feel good about the kind of feedback they’re getting and they’re able to receive it, then you can remove the training wheels.

“And once the training wheels are removed, the structure of the conferences can be negotiated based on what the writer feels he or she needs to hear to take the next steps with a paper and what the students listening to the writing feel is important.”

—Jack Wilde

Guiding Questions



Notebook:

Reflect on the quotation from Jack Wilde and consider your own students. Then write your answers to the questions below in your notebook. If you are working in a group, share your responses.

- What are your expectations for peer conferences?
- As student writers become more confident using a prescriptive strategy for peer conferencing, how can you help them learn to seek responses from their peers more spontaneously and independently?
- How do you measure whether or not a peer conference has been successful?
- Do all students necessarily move forward at the same rate, and if not, how do you negotiate that some students may be ready and able to work spontaneously and independently while others still need additional scaffolding or skill-building?

Try an Activity

Assess a Peer Conference



Interactive:

Go to the *Inside Writing Communities, Grades 3–5* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting

In this interactive, you will watch a video of two authentic peer conferences, answer the questions provided to help you assess the effectiveness of each conference, and compare your evaluation to another teacher’s.

Put It Into Practice

The videos, activities, and readings in this workshop illustrate effective practices for helping students respond to one another as writers. Now apply what you have learned to modify or develop your own peer conference protocol.

Create a Lesson Plan Assignment:

Create a lesson plan introducing a peer conferencing strategy to your students. Use one of the strategies featured in the workshop, or you can modify one of the strategies. Be sure to include the following:

- how you will introduce peer conferencing
- strategies for grouping peers
- specific guidelines and structure for conferences
- how you will assess the lesson and the strategy you implemented

After experimenting with the strategy in your classroom, describe what worked and what didn't work, any changes you would make to the strategy or to teaching the strategy to your students, and whether you plan to use the strategy again.

Reflect on Your Learning

What Did You Learn? Assignment:

Summarize what you have learned about peer conferencing from the experts' statements, classroom examples, and the readings and activities in this workshop. Use the questions below to guide your thinking. When you have finished, save your written summary to submit as an assignment.

- Which classroom practices from the video reflect what you currently do?
- Which practices or ideas are new to you?
- What changes do you plan to make?
- What support and/or resources will you need to implement these ideas?

Assignments

If you are taking this workshop for graduate credit, submit the following assignments for Workshop 6: Conversations Among Writing Peers:

1. Examine the Literature

Read an article about peer conferencing and complete the Examine the Literature Response Chart.

2. Create a Lesson Plan

Design a lesson based on the peer conferencing strategies you have learned in this workshop.

3. What Did You Learn?

Write a summary of the ideas and strategies you explored in this workshop.

Related Resources

Print Resources

Calkins, Lucy McCormick. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Rev. ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994. ISBN: 0435088092

This classic addresses every aspect of the writing workshop, including topic choice; teacher conferences; peer response; writing across the curriculum; and revision, editing, and publication.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick. *Lessons From a Child*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983. ISBN: 043508206X

A long section on peer conferencing and response in the writing classroom is included in this book.

Graves, Donald. *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. Twentieth-Anniversary Edition. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003. ISBN: 0325005257

One of the seminal works in writing instruction, this inspirational text includes the "Receiving the Piece" protocol.

Morgan, Bruce, and Deb Odom. *Writing Through the Tween Years: Supporting Writers, Grades 3-6*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2004. ISBN: 1571104062

This case study explores how the authors (both teachers at the same school) returned to their roots as writing workshop teachers and re-inspired their students to write.

Workshop 6: Conversations Among Writing Peers

Examine the Literature Response Chart

Title	Big Ideas	Notes and Questions
Peer Conferences: Strategies and Consequences		

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