

Conferring: The Essential Teaching Act

Conferring can be so hard.

Like any uniquely human interaction, in a conference there is always the possibility that something totally unexpected might happen. I mean, we have no idea what children might say in response to, “Tell me about how your writing is going.” And because a conference is teaching we do *in response* to what individual children tell us and show us, we can’t plan ahead for what we will say and we have to be ready to respond to *anything*. We don’t like to be caught off guard as teachers—it’s not in our nature—but we set ourselves up for it every time we sit down next to students and invite them to tell us all about how it’s going with them as writers.

But conferring can also be so much fun, so satisfying.

As hard as it is, I still find that my favorite part of the writing workshop is when I’m out there having conferences with individual students. I love the side-by-side feeling of the conferences that helps me build such important

learning relationships with my students. I love being able to help a student very specifically with some aspect of writing. I even love the challenge of the unknown in a conference. The same thing that makes conferring hard, namely, not knowing what students will say, also makes it very interesting. It is very boring to go into every teaching day knowing exactly what will happen every minute of that day, having the whole thing planned out ahead of time. That's what leads so many teachers to burn out too quickly. When we confer each day, we know we will be teaching, but we don't know what that teaching will be until we have to do it. I enjoy that. The promise of it is very interesting to me.

A conference in a writing workshop occurs when the teacher sits down beside a student (sit, don't squat or kneel—it will ruin your knees), finds out how the student's writing is going, and then in a very direct but conversational way, teaches (or tries to teach) the student something that makes sense at this time. I added in the “tries to teach” because those of us who have conferred have come away from conferences at times feeling as though we didn't teach very much or very well. We feel that way a lot when we first start, and we worry that it's just terrible for our students. But it's not. Even if we feel our teaching falls short of what we wish it could be in a conference, it is still *so significant* that we sit down and talk to a child about his or her writing. No one ever did that with me when I was in school. And we *teach* just by sitting down and asking about the writing. We teach students that we think of them as writers and that we take their work seriously, if nothing else. So when we are first learning to confer, we have to give ourselves plenty of growing room to have conferences that aren't so good. Even if we're not helping our students as much as we would like at first, at least we're not harming them if we have thoughtful, respectful conversations with them about writing.

Conferences are “the essential act” in workshop teaching because of their individualized nature. Because we invite students to do different kinds of things with writing, and because they are at many different places in their experiences as writers, they need different kinds of teaching to support that very individual work. We also need conferences to help us keep our fingers on the pulse of our classrooms. Conferences help us know a lot about what's really going on “out there” as our students are working.

Teachers confer during independent writing time in the workshop. The minute the focus lesson is over, the teacher moves out and starts meeting with

individuals (and sometimes small groups). “Moving out” can be very important. Many writing teachers feel that if they go out to students, rather than having students come to them, it helps a lot with management. Students know that we are serious about their work when we are out there with them while they are doing it. Moving out to students also serves as a sort of spatial metaphor too, much like bringing students together for the focus lesson. It lets them know that we want to catch them in the act of doing their work.

CONFERRING IS TEACHING, NOT TROUBLESHOOTING

Conferring may look like the “troubleshooting” we know from traditional teaching, where students raise their hands when they need help and we go to them, but it’s not. Not at all. Conferring is a much more deliberate, methodical kind of teaching. Most teachers have some sort of record-keeping system simply for knowing what students they have conferred with and when. They use this record to decide who will have conferences on a given day, their goal being to give students an approximately equal amount of teaching attention—to get around to all their writers routinely. We don’t want to set the conferencing agenda for the day by saying, “Who needs help?” or by going to students with their hands raised. Although we will “help” many writers in conferences, the purpose of a conference is not to help. The purpose is to teach, and everyone needs teaching (whether they need help or not). Also, we don’t want students to become dependent on our help to get them out of binds. As writers, they need to learn that they will encounter difficulties that they have to figure out. So we let our students know from the start that we will be “making our rounds” in conferences and that if they run into difficulties, they will just have to solve them on their own.

Early on in the workshop, I always have students who come up to me while I’m conferring with other students. What I say to them is, “Is this something you can take care of yourself? Because I really need you to do that.” And almost always, they hesitate for a moment and then shake their heads “yes” and move on. I usually explain to the whole class at some point why I am doing this, and, before long, students learn to take care of their own problems during the workshop and not to come to me for everything. I

also explain to them that I do not want them interrupting my conferences except in a very extreme situation that simply demands my attention (something's on fire, the Publishers Clearing House guys are here looking for me, etc.).

Although as a general rule, teachers set the conferencing agenda for the day, in some workshops teachers do allow a select number of students (two or three) to sign up for conferences because they *really need them*. They then balance these "as-needed" conferences with the regular-agenda conferences. When students are allowed to sign up for conferences, we want to watch this carefully to make sure that they are using this structure in productive ways and are not becoming dependent on us for all their problem solving. Some students will want our attention and validation daily, and so they will sign up all the time. If we realize this, we have to deal with them about this issue.

KEEP THE CONFERENCE SHORT

Conferences need to be kept short, not necessarily because that's the best way to teach an individual, but because we have lots of individuals to teach. A good conference lasts anywhere from about two to seven minutes. This would mean that on a good day in a forty-minute independent segment of the workshop, we would have six to eight conferences. At this rate in a daily writing workshop, most of us would see all of our students at least once a week. Now, some days are better than others. All kinds of things can happen, and sometimes our students are engaged in inquiry that we don't want to interrupt during independent writing time, and so those numbers are very approximate. But on any given day, our goal should be to have as many quality conferences as we can with as many students as we can.

Whenever I'm feeling like I'm not getting to my students often enough in conferences, I have to remind myself of two things. First, I have to remember that if I've only had three conferences with Sara during the past five weeks, that's three more conferences than I ever had in my *whole life* as a student. That helps me remember how significant it is that I'm having them with her at all. Second, I have to remember that I want my students to learn to do just fine without me; I want them eventually to feel like they don't

WRITERS' VOICES ON . . .

improving writing through conferring

I wrote this story . . . *Leo Cockroach* . . . *Toy Tester*, and initially I wrote it like Robert Benchley, sophisticated and talking to the audience. The editor said, "I love this story but maybe you can pare it down," I said okay, and I tried. She said, "But maybe you could pare it down some more." I said, "Okay, you're probably right." I began to like it more as it played out as a straighter story without so much "nudge-nudge-wink-wink." The editor had strong suggestions and she made it a better book. (Kevin O'Malley, in Anna Olswanger, *BookLinks*, 27)

Similarly, Karen Hesse comments,

Occasionally, I go astray. Either I can't hear the voice clearly in the beginning (*Letters from Rifka*, *Phoenix Rising*), and I have to struggle to find my stride in the book, or I write what I think is a picture book (*Wish on a Unicorn*, *A Time of Angels*), only to discover I have much more to say on the subject than can be handled in that format. This, among other things, is why I so appreciate the assistance of a perceptive editor to help me find my way. I have been blessed to work with editors who guide me toward the realization of the potential of each book. (in Judy O'Malley, *BookLinks*, 54–57)

Brian and Andrea Davis Pinkney confer with each other when they aren't collaborating on a project: "She always has a fresh eye in looking at my artwork. . . . She's very good at details, in noticing the details in the artwork that I sometimes miss, only because I'm looking at the bigger picture so much." Brian also confers with his father (Jerry Pinkney) when he is illustrating. When he is writing,

however, in addition to conferring with Andrea, Brian also confers with his mother (Gloria Jean Pinkney). "Sometimes she will call him and tell him about something she is writing and read it to him and ask for his opinion. When he writes something he shows it to her for her opinion, as well." Likewise, Andrea, who works as an editor, says "whenever she writes anything that she is going to submit to an editor for consideration or when revising something at every stage, it does not leave the house until Brian has read it" (in Betty Roe and Mike Roe, *Tennessee Reading Teacher*, 20–24).

So writers don't sit in schoolrooms and editors don't pull up chairs and sit alongside them, but in a writer's life the interactions between editor and writer are perhaps most like those between teacher and student during conferring. There are important differences to note, however. An editor, in working with a writer, is primarily concerned with making the piece of writing the best it can be. The editor's responsibility is to the publisher, and the investment of time is to make better *writing*. A teacher, on the other hand, in conferring with a student, is most concerned with developing the student as a writer. The emphasis during conferring is on *teaching* the student to write well. The teacher's responsibility is to the student, and we have to make sure our work makes them better *writers*.

Olswanger, Anna. 1999. "Talking with . . . Kevin O'Malley." *BookLinks* 8, no. 6 (July): 27.

O'Malley, Judy. 1999. "Talking with . . . Karen Hesse." *BookLinks* 9, no. 1 (September): 54–57.

Roe, Betty, and Mike Roe. 1997. "Meet the Author/Illustrator . . . Brian and Andrea Davis Pinkney." *Tennessee Reading Teacher* (Fall): 20–24.

need me at all. They will never get that feeling if I am in their faces too often. So I've got to let my teaching in conferences surround their work as writers, but not take it over or keep it going.

THE FOUR PARTS OF A WRITING CONFERENCE

Conferences are short, focused sessions with individual students, and we get as many of them in as we can each day. Let's think through now what happens in a conference. In her book *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1994), Lucy Calkins explains that a conference is made up of three parts: *research*, *decide*, *teach*. I would add to those three a fourth component: *make a record*. Thinking of conferences in this way can really help us refine the teaching that we do with individual students. Defining these terms briefly, they mean essentially this: *Research* means that we find out how the student's writing is going first. Then, based on how it's going, we *decide* what would make sense to *teach* the student, and once we do that, we teach it to him or her in an individualized, on-the-spot focus lesson. When we're finished, either the student or the teacher (or both) *makes a record* of the conference by jotting down its essential content.

Research

The research part of the conference is an assessment that happens at the beginning. It involves trying to get a handle on how things are going for this writer, and a feeling for what the writer is doing and trying at this point. What we learn during this part of the conference will help us decide what to teach. We generally open this part of the conference with an inquiry of the writer. This inquiry may be as general as, "Tell me about how your writing is going." or as specific as, "Tell me about what kinds of crafting techniques you are trying in your writing." When we ask a specific question like that, it's usually because we are following the whole-class unit of study through the processes of individual writers, or because we are following an agenda particular to that writer. Sometimes we ask students to tell us about how something has been going that we worked on with them in our last conference.

As with any opening inquiry, our goal at the beginning of a conference is to get the student talking. This is why I preface almost every question with the three words, “Tell me about . . .” At the least, this sends the message that I want more than a one-word answer. Think about the difference between, “Tell me about how your writing is going” and “How’s your writing going?” The second can and usually will be answered with one word: “fine” or “horrible” or “OK.” And, of course, even if you ask the first one, some will still answer with, “It’s going fine.” Then you have to say again, “Well, tell me a little about it.” And you wait—don’t keep asking questions. You have to try to wait those students out because you really need to get them talking. Contained in their talk will be the information you need in order to know what to teach them.

In my writing workshop this past summer with third and fourth graders, the observing teachers noticed that after the first week, I often didn’t have to ask a question to start the conference; the children would just start telling me about their writing when I pulled alongside them. The students had seen and heard enough conferences all around them to know that’s what I expected them to do, and they went about their writing with this consciousness that made them ready to explain that work whenever I came their way. In this way, the structure of conferring in the room, the every-day anticipation of it, invites children to be metacognitive (thinking about their writing processes), even when we aren’t conferring with them. Because they have to engage in conferences so often, they come to live with this sense of needing to explain their work. This helps them to think about it in such powerful ways, even when we’re not right there asking them about it.

Now, some students will just want to hand us something to read. We ask them to tell us about how their writing is going, and they hand us their notebooks. We need to hand these back and say to the students, “Tell me about this first.” We may look at them later in the conference, but students are opting out of their responsibility to help us know how things are going if they just want us to “read and find out.” We could probably find something to teach by just looking at their writing, but they’ve taken themselves out of that transaction—and they are a very important part of it. You see, one of the best ways to help students develop a writing process that works for them (one of our teaching goals) is to help them become articulate about their processes. We really have to force the issue in getting students to talk to us *about* their writing.

Some students will just say very, very little in a conference. There's not a single answer to "How do I get them to talk?" As we've already mentioned, there are some things we can do to help—such as asking more open-ended questions, waiting longer for their responses, and insisting that they talk about their writing rather than having us read their writing. But we are still going to have reluctant talkers that we just have to deal with on an individual basis. We need to try to understand why they're not talking, and then decide how to handle the conferences with them based on that. Here are some things to think about with the "no-talkers."

- Some are shy at first and will warm up to talking to us as they get more comfortable with us. We may have to do more of the talking at first to get them comfortable, and we want to be sure to work with *anything* they give us in the way of talk by letting them know how valuable every word they say is to us.
- Some normally talkative students just have no experience with this kind of talk with a teacher and are very uneasy about what we really expect from them in this interaction. They too will get more comfortable with time as they have conferences with us and listen in on our conferences with other students. But at first, we have to handle them as we would the very shy students.
- Some students who normally talk easily in conferences may have days when they say very little because they are just having a bad day or because something they are writing about is upsetting to them. If either of these is the case, we can give the student room to talk about that—about what's bothering him or her—instead of talking about writing at first. We need to recognize and value this very human side of writing. Often talking about something that's bothering students will help them deal with the issue and get redirected in their work as writers.
- Many times when students are really struggling with something in writing, they will throw up their hands and say, "I don't know," in response to everything. In this case, we want to get them to tell us about what they don't know, about the struggle itself. We let them know that it's OK if their response to "Tell me about how your writing is going" is rambling, inarticulate, and uncertain. We can help them work that out *if* they will just talk about it.

- Occasionally, we will have students who are just butting heads with us, as they will on many things, testing us to see if we are going to “make” them do this. If we really believe this is the case, then we will have to handle it just as we would if a student chose not to do something else that was required of him or her in our classroom. In a writing workshop, working with the teacher in conferences is not one of the options students have. It is a requirement.

The answer to “How do I get this child to talk” is always found in the story of that child. We have to find out that story and then work from there.

Now, for many students, talking won’t be a problem at all. No sirree. They will talk all day if we sit there and listen! But we can’t, of course, so we have to become comfortable saying to these students, “Excuse me. Let me stop you for just a moment. I want to go back to what you said a minute ago . . .” Once we have heard something in the student’s talk that gives us a teaching direction we want to follow, we have to interrupt and go in that direction. It’s hard at first to get comfortable doing this. We think that if the student keeps talking, we will find something better to teach—and we probably would find something better. But what makes a conference a powerful teaching interaction is not finding the best thing in the world to teach this student; it’s in teaching in *direct response* to something the student has told us or shown us about his or her work as a writer. So as soon as we see a way to go with the teaching, we head in that direction. That’s the decision-making part of the conference. We’ll open it up next.

Decide

When you watch a really good teacher confer, you can’t observe the decision-making part of the conference. You can sometimes see it in the teacher’s eyes when you know she is making a decision, but you can’t see the decision itself. Basically, the teacher has to get the student talking about his or her writing, has to listen very closely to what the student is saying, and, alongside that, has to think, “*What do I know about writing* that I could say in response to *this* that would teach *this writer* something?” We are making a curriculum decision here, a “what-does-this-student-need-to-know” decision. Now, there are two key parts (highlighted above) to that decision-making question. You see, a writing conference is a meeting of a teacher’s knowledge base

about writing with a student's work as a writer. Those two have to come together to help us make our decision about what we will teach. We should help that student either think about something or do something that he or she could not do if we weren't sitting there.

When we sit down next to a student, we bring with us what I call a "fistful" of knowledge about writing that we draw from to teach this writer. And in a conference, we can't teach what we don't know. We can teach what we don't know in a lesson we plan for next Friday because we can read up on it and get to know it. But in a conference, all we've got to go on is what's already in our fist because we have to do it right there on the spot. When we first start teaching writing, we have only a few things in our fist; it's a very small fist, so we teach the same things over and over, all around the room. And we must know that that's OK! It's still very powerful teaching because we have explained it to each child in the context of his or her work. I tell my students who are going to be teachers soon not to let their small fists stop them from conferring. If we know only two things about, say, crafting writing, then we teach those two things to everybody—as if our lives depended on it—until we can learn two more things.

I'm being a little flippant here, but only a very little. The truth is, we have to decide what thing about writing we want to teach a student from the fistful of things we know. And we won't know as much now as we will three years from now or fifteen years from now. But we will start anyway, and we will develop our fists as we go. To help writers who are at many different places, we will need fistfuls of knowledge about all the kinds of things they will be engaged in while in our writing workshops—things such as:

- living the life of a writer, keeping a writing notebook, and choosing writing projects to pursue;
- planning for published pieces of writing: collecting and developing ideas; being aware of genre, structure, purpose, audience, and so on;
- drafting pieces of writing;
- revising writing and crafting writing for an audience;
- getting and giving responses to writing;
- editing, proofreading, and knowing conventions of grammar and usage;
- publishing.

How big is your fist in each of these areas? What do you already know about these different aspects of a writer's work that you can use in your teaching? The knowledge in our fists can come from our own writing experiences, from the experiences of our students, from texts that we have read as writers (for craft especially), from books that we have read about how to write, or from authors we have heard speak about their processes. Our conferring will get better and better as we make the size of our teaching fists bigger. Developing our knowledge base gives us a much broader selection of curriculum we can offer students who will have a wide range of needs.

So part of our decision about what to teach is made based on what we know, and part of our decision about what to teach comes from our thinking about the student with whom we are conferring. A conference is individualized instruction, and we never want to lose the individual in the decision-making process. If there are two or three things we can think of to teach in a conference, we might ask questions like these to help us make a decision and stay focused on the student:

- **What would help most at this time?** For example, suppose a student is working on fiction for the first time. He tells us about a conference he had with a peer, and we hear in what he says that he needs a better strategy for getting help from a peer. We also hear that he is struggling to develop his plot and needs help with that. *At this time*, we should probably decide to give him a strategy for developing plot and let the other help he needs with peer response come later. The peer issue will be there in the future of his writing, whereas the fiction help is much more immediate.
- **What would bring quick success?** We might want to ask this question if a student has really been struggling a lot as a writer and needs something to go well. To put it simply, we might teach the thing we feel will be easiest for the student because we believe she *needs* success right now.
- **What would be a stretch, a risk, or a challenge?** We may feel that it's time for a student to be really stretched as a writer, and so we choose to teach her the thing we think would challenge her the most. This is the "step-up-to-the-plate" teaching that helps students really outgrow themselves.
- **What is not likely to come up in whole-class instruction?** If we are deciding what we need to teach a student, and one of the things we

think of will probably never come up in any whole-class teaching, we might decide to teach it to this student for just that reason. “I can see that this student needs to know about this and he’s not going to get it anywhere else,” we think. Sometimes this is something everyone else basically “has”—as with convention teaching—but sometimes it’s very specific to that writer, so specific that no one else is likely to need it.

- **Is this something I need to reteach or extend?** As we are making our teaching decision, we might listen as the student talks for evidence that past teaching may still need work or extension. If we can see that a student still needs to develop some understandings in an area that we’ve already worked on, it might make sense to go back to that, rather than moving on to something new.

- **What is the balance of curriculum I have offered this student?** There is a danger in offering some students the same kinds of curriculum over and over. The struggling writer gets nineteen conferences that teach him about convention and one that helps him write more interesting things in the notebook. The gifted writer has bunches of conferences where we confirm her growing sense of self as a writer and hardly any that stretch her knowledge of technique in writing. We want to offer every student a good balance of teaching that helps him or her grow in all areas as writers.

- **What kind of teaching would this student like me to offer?** If a student says to us, “What I really need help with right now is . . .” then we should honor that with some teaching. This may show that the student has a good sense of self and that he knows where some redirection in his writing life and process is needed. And don’t worry. Sitting down next to a writer who can tell us what kind of help he needs is not the same thing as having a writer constantly raise his hand for help. The one has been carrying on without our help until we come to him; the other is paralyzed without it and sits there waiting for us. The one sees our help for what it is—teaching support for his writing; the other depends on us to keep him going.

So any one or any number of these questions can help us decide, from all we know, what one thing to teach a student in this conference. Sometimes

this seems almost overwhelming. We think, “And I’m supposed to think all this through in a two- to seven-minute conference?” Yes, we are. We won’t do it very well at first, remember that. But we give ourselves time and experience to become proficient at conferring. One thing I tell my students who will soon be teachers is, when you are trying to make your decision in a conference about what to teach, it’s OK to stop a student’s talking and ask, “Would you give me just a minute to think?” before you begin your teaching. As a matter of fact, if we do this, it will help us listen to that child better because we’re not distracted. We know we will take a pause to make our decision. Children are pretty amazed when they sit there and watch us thinking about what they have been saying. Imagine how significant that is—for a teacher to be sitting there thinking hard about only you and what he or she will say to you. It’s an amazing part of the interaction. At times, I have even had to ask students if I could get back to them tomorrow because I needed to think a little bit more about what they were saying and how to teach them.

So we can take some thinking time before we teach, but believe it or not, knowing what to teach in a conference really does become easier and easier over time. Talk to anyone who’s been conferring for a while, and they’ll tell you that. Our history of having conferences will help us know better how to make decisions based on student needs, and, of course, letting our fists (knowledge base) get bigger helps too. Remember that as I was explaining this, I was explaining in detail a thought process. By definition, that’s going to be complex because all thought is complex. But we are very used to thinking, and the more experience we get with this *kind* of thinking, the easier it will be for us to have good conferences.

Teach

Once we have decided what we want to say to a child in a conference, we fall very much into our focus-lesson, direct-instruction mode. Either we explain to the student how to do something, or we help him or her understand something better. We teach all the same kinds of things we do in focus lessons: strategies, techniques, questions, relationships, and conventions (only one in a conference, of course). Also, just as in focus lessons, we try to “show and tell” in conferences as much as we can—by grabbing a book to illustrate a crafting technique, by showing an entry from our notebooks that

is an example of a collection strategy, or by writing a quick example that shows how a convention works, for example.

Often in a conference, when we teach a child something, we are teaching this child something *new*, extending his “fistful” of knowledge about writing, for example, a new way to use the notebook, or a new way to think about revision. Sometimes, though, a conference confirms something during teaching rather than extending it. If, in our research, we realize a student is doing something really smart that she may not realize is a smart thing to do, then our teaching might be to name that thing for the student and to confirm that it is smart.

For example, if Julie shows me an entry in her notebook where she has written about what her cat might say to her when he is grouchy, I might say, “Julie, you *shifted perspectives* here,” and give her a name for what she is doing. And then I would talk to her about how writers can do that—write something from a different perspective. I might try to help her think of other places where she might use this writing technique that she did without really realizing (in an articulate way) what she was doing. So the teaching in a conference can be either an extension of what the child knows, or a confirmation and naming of something that the child is already doing that is smart.

Often, after I have finished my teaching in a conference, I will ask the student to “Say back to me what I just talked to you about.” This is a better request than asking, “Do you have any questions?” or “Did that make sense?” I can get a better handle on what the student understood about the teaching by listening to the “say back,” and the student gets a chance to articulate what he or she has heard from me. I’m not hoping for an exact, detailed rendering of my teaching. I know that a lot of my teaching in conferences will make more sense after a while, when the student has had time to think about this strategy, technique, or convention and to try it out. I’m just listening for a general understanding of the content of my teaching. I try to clear up any really big misunderstandings right then, and I make notes to return to ideas in later conferences if I just feel that the student is going to need time to grow into what I’ve taught.

Make a Record

At the conclusion of a conference, I almost always say to a student, “OK, so what I’m going to write down is . . . ,” and I proceed to tell that student the summary of our conference that I’m going to write in my notes: “I’m going

to write down that we talked about how to write a fast and long entry,” for example. This summary statement is the “lesson” of the conference in a nutshell; it lets the student know what I am writing about him or her.

Records of what we teach in each conference—the tracks of our teaching—are absolutely essential. They serve so many important purposes. They help us with our own accountability because we can show others what we are teaching. They are like “lesson plans” that we make after we’ve taught the lesson. They help make our students accountable because they show what’s been explained to each one of them (and we expect them to attend to that). They help us think about our future teaching with each student, because they let us see the balance of curriculum we’ve given each individual. They help us with assessment, both for individuals and for the whole class. We can look across student records of conferences and see patterns of things we’ve been teaching students. Often, these patterns help us plan units of study. We can use them as one source of information in evaluations, as we make judgments about the quality of students’ work in the workshop.

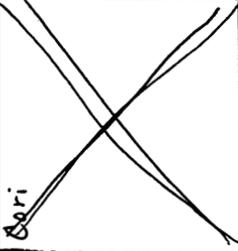
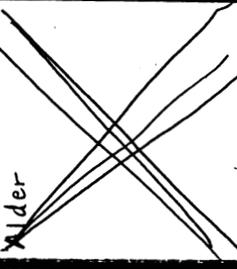
Close to an extra minute is added to each conference when we stop to record it, but it is worth the investment. Over time, we will develop a system for making conference records that is efficient. Teachers, it seems, have many different variations of these systems, because they have to find one that feels comfortable for them or they won’t use it. One thing a conference recording system needs is a way to divide records easily by individual students. We need to be able to see all of the recorded conferences we’ve had with William, for example, in one place. Our system needs to help us make the record quickly, so we devise codes and cryptic ways of noting what we’ve taught. It needs to be easy to carry around; we move a lot as we confer, and we need to be able to take it with us easily.

Figure 14.1 shows a sample of my current conference note system.

GETTING BETTER AT CONFERRING

When I worked for two years as a staff developer doing demonstration teaching in the New York City Public Schools, I conferred with hundreds of students at all different grade levels in all different kinds of writing workshops. And every time I had one of these conferences, I had to step away from it and explain it to the other teachers who were watching. Needless to say, I

FIGURE 14.1 Conference Notes

<p>Beri</p> 	<p>Courtney 7/12 use notebook to sister to 3 year old sister; going to try the other strategies - tried this!! - going to turn into a poem 7/15 has an anthology of weather poems - plans to work on this</p>	<p>Logan * 7/13 revising by the sounds of words - older. * 7/15 using notebook for revision</p>	<p>Brittany 7/10 - has an entry from Walmart going to try writing off words. 7/13 ready to revise some 7/14 added to draft; playing in notebook</p>	<p>Grace 7/9 - likes poetry that doesn't rhyme. 7/12 - try write-offs from entries 7/13 - working with words & phrases in entries 7/14 - trying strategies; not set the rhyme ideas up there</p>	<p>Rachel 7/4 - choose book based on animals; enjoying one in class class 7/13 needs more book entries; try writing foot & long about animals</p>	<p>Janelle 7/12 try writing a long entry short like a poem; poem entry like a long reflection - cont of that</p>	<p>Douglas 7/12 more has a notebook; list keeps; study Stern Book for Slope 7/14 poem digging</p>	<p>Mandy 7/12 try foot & long writing -</p>	<p>Cayla 7/13 write foot & long about dogs 7/15 difference between draft & entry</p>	<p>Bryan 7/13 started with rhyming words; try writing foot & long and the remainder your draft.</p>	<p>Anthony 7/12 - Not to worry about it not sounding good 7/13 Keep getting it down. I'll help with the editing 7/15 working on line breaks</p>		<p>Julie 7/12 write using simile; going to use photos of cats to write 7/14 trying from cat's perspective</p>	<p>Natalie 7/12 try fast writing to the brother 7/14 collecting lines you like from poems to make a new poem - going to try rearranging</p>	<p>Marie 7/12 - try writing off of pictures at home - did this & it worked 7/14 Keep working on Katie poems 7/18 worked on reading the shape of a piece</p>				
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became very reflective and very articulate about my conferring during those two years, and I grew and grew as a teacher in this way. I have found that now, even when I'm not demonstrating teaching to others, even when it's just me and a group of student writers working together, it helps me to step away from my conferences and act as if someone is still there wanting to know exactly what I did and why I did it.

I take time routinely to look at various conferences I am having with students and to ask myself three questions about them. One question is, "What, exactly, did I teach in that conference?" This helps me get at my teaching objectives, and it helps me remember that I need to teach *something*, that my lesson in the conference needs an objective. The second question I ask is, "Why did I decide to teach that?" This question helps me continue to be intentional about letting what I decide to teach come from what the student needs as a writer. The third question is, "How does the student seem to feel about the conference?" This helps me develop a sensitivity toward my students' feelings about this very personal kind of teaching. I want to leave students with an energy for their work after a conference, and I watch for the signs of that in my teaching.

If you can work with two or three supportive colleagues to study your conferring in this way, it really helps. Visit in each other's classrooms, if you can; observe conferences and then talk them through together. If you can't, get together to share your conference records and your reflections on what kinds of things you are teaching and why. In addition to adding to your knowledge base for teaching, studying your own teaching is one of the best things you can do to get better at it. You might also read Carl Anderson's book, *How's It Going? (2000)*, which is very specifically about conferring, with a study group of other teachers interested in conferring. Conferring is very challenging, and you will probably struggle with it for quite some time before you begin to feel at ease. But most really good things in teaching—as in all of life—are like that, aren't they?

References

- Anderson, Carl. 2000. *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Calkins, Lucy McCormick. 1994. *The Art of Teaching*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.