

# Conversations with Student Writers

by Carl Anderson, Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, Columbia University

Since I launched my first writing workshop twelve years ago, I have thought of writing conferences as conversations. The word *conversation* suggests so many things about the way I believe we should talk with students about their writing: It suggests the kind of personal, intimate talk I have with friends and colleagues—the tone I want my conferences with students to have. It also suggests that, even though in conferences we are teachers talking with students, we are also writers talking to writers. In *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Don Murray (1985) explains,

“[Conferences] are not mini-lectures but the working talk of fellow writers sharing their experience with the writing process.”

When, as a staff developer, I talk about conferences as conversations, many teachers ask me, “What are these conversations about?” I tell them they’ve asked a crucial question about conferring, if not the crucial question. Our conferences go well if we—and our students—know why we’re having the conversations.

The point of a writing conference is to help students become better writers. By “better writers” I mean writers who can use the strategies, techniques, and ways of thinking about writing that we teach them in today’s conferences on their own later when they work on future pieces. In *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Lucy Calkins (1994) says that our challenge in conferences is to stay focused on the students with whom we’re conferring and on their growth as writers.

If we can keep only one thing in mind—and I fail at this half the time—it is that we are teaching the writer and not the writing. Our decisions must be guided by what might help the writer rather than what might improve this particular piece of writing. This is not as obvious as it sounds. For example,

I’ve watched some teachers get mesmerized by what their students are writing about and have long conversations with Tamika about her pet snake or with Andy about his coin collection. While these “content conferences” are important in that they empower students to realize they have experiences and interests worth writing about,

they don’t usually help students to become better writers. I’ve watched other teachers who can’t resist the urge to fix everything that maybe wrong with their students’ drafts. If we take control over a student’s writing and make sure that the draft has our perfect lead or our brilliant dialogue, all we’ve done is given a demonstration of our expertise as writers. We shouldn’t confuse this with helping students develop their own expertise.

When we finish a conference, we should be able to name what it is we did to help a student become a better writer. We want to be able to say, “I taught Madeline a strategy for figuring out the spelling of an unfamiliar word,” or, “I helped Doran learn how to write a lead for a feature article.” Strategies and techniques such as these are ones that students can use in their current pieces, as well as in pieces they write ten or twenty years from now.

## Conferences Have a Predictable Structure

When I’ve watched teachers who are good at conferring, I’ve noticed that there is a structure to their conversations. Because these teachers know in general how they want their conversations with students to go — as do their students, once they’ve been in several of them — the talk flows easily and naturally, and both the teachers and students hold up their end of it.

The conference conversation generally has two parts, both of which grow from the underlying purpose of helping students become better writers. In the first part, we talk with students about the work they’re doing as writers. By “work,” I mean what students are doing as they write in their writer’s notebooks or compose drafts. Are they planning how their pieces will unfold? Working on an ending? Revising? Editing? As we talk with students, our job is to assess what they are doing as writers. By listening carefully to their words and reading their writing, we gather information about who students are as writers. With this information in mind, we decide what to teach them.

In the second part of the writing conference conversation, we talk with students about how to be better writers. In this part, we teach students to improve on the writing work they’re doing.

## **We Confer with Lines of Thinking in Mind**

In a conversation, we usually focus on one subject for a while, perhaps seven for the entire conversation. That is, we get on a particular line of thinking about a topic. As we confer with students, we get on a line of thinking about one kind of writing work—a line of thinking that sets the direction for the rest of the conference. In our first conference of the day, for example, we might talk with a student about how to develop the main character in the short story she is writing. In the next, we might show a student how he can make time transitions in his memoir. Once we reach the end of a particular line of thinking in a conference—when we've finished teaching—we resist the urge to pursue another, and we end the conference. This is important if we're going to keep conferences reasonably short.

## **In Conferences, Teachers and Students Have Different Roles**

Teachers and students have particular roles in the writing conference conversation, and when all concerned understand these roles, the conferences go well. In the first part of a conference, when we talk with students about the writing work they are doing, teachers and students have several responsibilities:

- At the beginning, it's our job to invite students to set an agenda for the conference. We ask them an open-ended question such as, "How's it going?" or "What are you doing as a writer today?" It's then the student's job to describe the writing work that he or she is doing
- Once the agenda for the conference is set, it's our role to ask questions about the student's writing work, and to look at the student's writing. It's the student's role to respond to the teacher's questions, and to share his or her writing.

Next it's our job to decide what to teach the student. In the second part of a conference, when we teach students how to do better work as writers, the responsibilities of teacher and student can be described in these ways:

- We begin by giving students feedback about their writing work. We point out what we've noticed about their work and tell them what we're going to teach.

- Next we teach, sometimes by giving a concise explanation and other times by referring to model pieces of literature. It's the student's role to ask questions to clarify and deepen understanding.
- In some conferences, we ask students to "have-a-go" with what we've just taught. That is, we nudge them to talk out how they can use a particular strategy in their writing.
- Finally, we link the conference to students' independent writing by letting them know that we expect them to try what we've taught once the conference is over. We might say, "I'll check back with you in ten minutes to see how you're doing," or "Would you show what you've done later in the period?" It's the student's job to commit to trying out what we've taught.

## **We Show That We Care**

With all the pressure we feel today as teachers to raise test scores and to get our students to meet standards, it's too easy to forget to communicate how much we care about them. We enter into many conversations, after all, because we care about the person with whom we're talking. It's easy to focus so intently on the work students are doing as writers that we see only the work and not the young writers who are doing it. In the end, the success of a conference often rests on the extent to which students sense that we are interested in them as writers—and as individuals.

We can show students we care about them by how we talk with them about their writing work. When we ask, "How's it going?" at the beginning of conferences, students can hear in our tone of voice and see by the expression on our faces that we really are interested in how their writing is going. As conferences unfold, we listen intently to everything students tell us about what they're doing because we're genuinely curious to learn more about their work.

By truly listening as we confer, we let students know that the work they're doing as writers matters. It's the way we listen, more than anything else, that will nudge our students to look at us with a smile instead of a frown when we kneel down next to them and ask, "How's it going?" It's the way we listen that can inspire students to stretch themselves as writers. It's the way we listen that can change students' writing lives.