

The Writing Conference: Breaking the Silence

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At a party I met my niece's first-grade teacher. He enthusiastically told me about the writing workshop, author's chair, etc., in his classroom.

"How are the writing conferences going?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't do that," he admitted. "Too complicated! I just let them write."

At the risk of sounding like a member of the "Writing Police," I would argue that writing conferences are an essential part of the workshop. In Australia, writer's workshop has been called the "conference approach to teaching writing." But these conferences are more difficult than they look. It's not enough to uniformly praise our students. And harsh criticism with copious red pen marks will create a mental link in students' minds between writing and pain. What to do?"

My problem," one teacher confided to me, "is that when I go into a conference I'm so hung up on what I'm going to say that I'm not really there for my kids."

Let's be blunt: writing conferences are tricky. Certain people seem to have a knack for saying just the right thing at the right time. The rest of us sort of muddle along. But leading a writing conference is a learnable skill. Here are a few guide-lines that have been helpful to me.

- **Respond first as a reader.** Be human in your response. Laugh if it's funny, show concern if it's sad. If you want to affect a student, let the student see that his or her writing has affected you.
- **Find specific things to praise in the writing.** Generic praise isn't nearly so helpful as pointing out particular things that work.
- **Keep conferences short.** The fifteen-minute conference is wonderful, but it's a luxury that most of us can't afford. Remember that you don't have to sit while a student decides what to do next. Frame one issue, discuss options, and then make an exit.
- **Get students involved.** Too often, students sit passively through writing conferences. You might try a mini-lesson in which you say, "I can help you be a problem solver in your writing. But first you need to be a problem finder."

Ask students to put an asterisk at a place in their text where the writing works well. Ask them to put a circle in the margin next to a place where the writing needs more work. Later, when you confer, go straight to the places the student has marked. This can dramatically shorten your conference!

- **Tell the student the story of your reading.** Sometimes when I just don't know what to say, I try to be a mirror and let the student know what happened to me as I read the writing. For example:

I was really hooked at the beginning, because I love sailing. I could really feel how excited you were getting ready. Later, when you all arrived at the boat, I got a little confused because there were so many people and I couldn't tell who were your friends, and which ones were your cousins

Here you are not telling the student what to fix, but you're giving an honest mirror that he or she can use when revising the piece.

- **Know your tastes.** All teachers have particular things we tend to look for in writing. Some teachers look for organization, others for voice. Still others go for rich description or strong vocabulary. It's important to know your own tendency so you can appreciate those students who may do other things well in their writing.
- **Teach the writer, not the writing.** Show students how a particular strategy can be used in all other pieces of writing.
- **Follow the student's energy.** If she is slumped over, cradling her head in her hand, that tells you something. It may be time to pick a better topic. You can't squeeze blood from a stone.
- **Learn to listen.** One teacher told her students, "Our writing conferences will be the one conversation where we won't be interrupted!" But a conversation can only take place where both parties learn to listen. Every day our students offer their humor, quirky intelligence, playfulness, and wonder. We need to try to still ourselves enough to receive it.
- **Take a reflective stance.** At the end of a conference, it's a good idea to stand back and think about what worked and what didn't. Many

times I've come out of a conference muttering to myself: I didn't stay quiet long enough for him to speak! Or: I shut that kid down by giving too many suggestions!

Remember, there's no magic formula for conferring on a piece of writing. There's just the student, the writing, and what you bring to the table. Conferring is a skill we can all get better at. When we speak of the "writing process," it's important to remember that as teachers, we are works-in-progress, too.