

Peer Conferences: Strategies and Consequences

by Jack Wilde

“The only other personal experience story he has written was ‘The Best Christmas of Them All,’ which he wrote in fourth grade. In third grade he got into writing fiction, and he has never stopped liking that. He would like to thank his writing group for all the help they gave to make his story come to life.”

— Excerpt from an “About the Author” piece by a fifth-grader named John, who has written in the third person about himself.

At the end of the long process of creating his story, John had the opportunity to reflect as he wrote the “About the Author” section for his book. It was in the context of looking back over his writing and what informed that writing that John thanked his group for helping him make his story all that it could be. What was it that they gave him, and, just as importantly, what was it that he was able to receive?

To write effectively, students must develop a writer’s ear for language, learning how to tell when writing is effective. For many of us, it’s easier to recognize what works in the writing of others, since there is less ego involved. What this means is that students can learn more about parts of the craft of writing by responding to the writing of others than by handling response to their own writing. In their responses, students must evaluate what they have experienced in listening to the piece and translate that into language that their peer can receive.

Responders can give a writer information about what is working and not working in a piece of writing. I say “can” because not all responses do in fact give that information. Much unpracticed conferring gives feedback about how the receiver felt about the piece: “Wow, that was great,” or “I don’t get it.” Knowing how a responder felt about a piece is informative, but it is of limited value. The writer can feel that the piece is working or not, but can’t really point to why or how that was the case. The work of the responder, especially with emergent writers, is to be both honest and specific in pointing out what is and is not working in the writing. That is where the helpful information lies; that is how we can help the writer go back to the piece of writing and make it all it can be.

Learning to Conference Effectively

Effective peer conferring is a learned skill and requires a lot of practice. Few of us have the innate ability to conference effectively from the outset. Most of us naturally give a global response: sharing how we feel about the piece rather than stating specifically what works and what doesn’t work. And this is particularly true of elementary school children. Why? Because this is the kind of response they see modeled around them by parents and teachers: “Great movie,” “You’ve got to read this book,” and “Don’t bother watching the show.”

In addition, there is the general assumption among elementary children that the reader knows what the writer knows — that somehow the reader will be able to decipher a cryptic phrase because he or she knows what the writer is thinking. Likewise, young readers assume that the writer will know the reasoning behind their response of “That’s great,” even when they can’t articulate it themselves.

Providing specific, content-rich response is not beyond the ability of elementary students. We know this because of the ways they push others to provide specific information they need to

perform a task, and the questions they ask when things don't work out as planned ("What did I do wrong here?"). What they need is experience and practice.

One of the best experiences I've found is to have them conference the books I read aloud to them at snack time. While the author obviously isn't present and therefore isn't going to use the information generated, it is an opportunity to work on identifying specifics within a shared text in a conference setting. At the same time, the exercise is safe because we're not talking about peer writing, where to misspeak could cause hurt feelings.

We begin by establishing that professional writers seek the input of their peers. I do this by reading to students the acknowledgments at the beginning of several books. I ask the students why the writers are thanking the people named — what have they done? In discussion we get around to the idea that those people read the works and gave the writers feedback, which is what we want students to do in their writing workshop.

Then we acknowledge students' own apprenticeship. The way we learn how to do anything effectively is to master a set of skills and to receive feedback on the employment of those skills. For example, in order to play baseball, we first must learn how to throw a ball. As we get better, we learn to control how far and how fast the ball goes. Along the way, we receive feedback — from coaches and peers, and from oneself. The same is true of learning how to write. In order to improve our writing skills, we must be able to accept and incorporate feedback from readers.

Next I pose the framing question: "What works for you in what I read today?" I make clear that a global response doesn't answer the question and will elicit follow-up questions from their peers. We spend a week discussing students' responses as a class. Some children need peers to model possible responses and to show that the task is doable. This oral exercise gives classmates who are less sure of what to talk about some examples of legitimate responses. All students come to see that any response is acceptable as long as it is specific, deals in some way with the text itself and is not simply a generalized sense of text (for example, "I like stories that begin with action"), and can be understood by teacher and peers.

The exercise then evolves to written responses once students have demonstrated an understanding of the task. The value of the written response is twofold: First, students tend to expound when asked to write down their responses. They tend to say more and in more detail. They are also less likely to repeat themselves, since repetition in writing is plain to see. Second, asking students to write a response requires them to think for themselves rather than restate another student's ideas.

Some students, either because they have difficulty attending to text or are afraid of making a mistake, will require extensive practice to get to the point of contributing effectively in response.

Here is an example of one student, Daniel, as he goes from writing a first response to the book I'm reading aloud, *The Moon and I*, to an entry he wrote after a number of weeks of oral and written practice.

September 1

I like how Betsy Byars always used Bubba for a mean character. I found this effective because sometimes I choose some unusual names and use them in a lot of my writing. I think that it sometimes sort of a tradition to use one name a lot. I also liked not only Bubba but how there was always only one name that would fit in part of her story.

November 16 *The Great Gilly Hopkins*

In this part of the story I liked how the author gave Gilly a determined and sometimes harsh personality. Just figuring out Gilly's personality made me want to read more

to figure out if or how Gilly would change in the end of the story. I liked how Gilly was always difficult with people who either wanted nothing to do with her or who were attempting to organize her life. Here is an example of how difficult Gilly could be when she felt like it.

Example:

“Now all the boys were after her. She began to run across the playground laughing and clutching the ball to her chest. She could hear the boys screaming behind her, but she was too fast for them. She ran in and out of the hopscotch games and right through a jump rope, all the way back to the basketball post where she shot again, missing wildly in glee.”

Especially this part of the story got me in to the action. Another way that Gilly was very difficult was the way she answered questions. Her two favorite answers were either to protest immediately or to just say “No”. This made me want to read on and find out how everyone reacted.

In these two entries we see Daniel start to develop a sense of what makes a piece of writing effective. By the middle of November, Daniel is doing a better job of citing specific examples that support his ideas. He is beginning to see that he can look at several aspects of the story to support his thinking. He could provide additional examples of what works in the text, instead of claiming that the writing works because it makes him want to continue to read. But that will come with continued practice. A lack of clarity about what makes writing effective doesn't mean we should delay students' interactions with developing authors and texts. We have to put them in these “game” situations so they continually see and experience the importance of effective response.

It is important that oral peer response be done in a group setting. Pair and triad groupings can be used, but I believe in maintaining larger group discussions for the first half of the year, at least while students are learning the new skill. I like groups of four or five: one writer and three or four responders. I also try to balance my groups for gender, mixed ability, and level of outgoingness. While such a structure cannot guarantee a variety of response, it invites it.

Conferring with peers does introduce several new dynamics: friendships, class status, and academic competition. The teacher's responsibility is to acknowledge these issues and to help students keep the focus on the writer and the writing. This is not to suggest that they can ever be completely eliminated: In reflecting on conferences, students have acknowledged all these issues coming into play – the fear of hurting someone else's feelings, competitiveness or incompatibility, and even personal issues affect student responses. Even so, these issues do not diminish the importance and power of the peer conference. Students who struggle finding language and the conceptual framework to talk about writing have the continuing opportunity to hear others do so and to experience feedback about their own piece.

Receiving Feedback

The effectiveness of a peer conference depends on the ability of the writer to receive feedback in a way that is helpful. To do so one has to be open to the information but not ruled by it – a tricky stance for both adult and child, and especially so when tied to academic work. It is difficult to be open to criticism when one feels defensive or guarded. Such feelings can arise from a lack of confidence, a heightened sense of vulnerability, or a sense of being judged unfairly in the feedback process. These feelings then affect how the information is received, often causing the writer to give too much weight to peer comments.

Giving peer responses too much weight can result in the writer either refusing to receive them

or allowing them to control the revision of the piece. The most constructive way in which to receive feedback is best described by Peter Elbow, a writer and teacher about writing. He wrote that we should simultaneously take seriously and dismiss the comments of others, allowing them slowly to seep in. By doing so writers get to experience their writing through another lens without letting that lens become their own. Receiving the comments should help one re-see what one has said but not take on this other vision as one's own, because then the piece is no longer honestly one's own. It's a delicate balance that (stet) must be maintained to keep the writing true.

There are a couple ways to pay attention to this in practice. First, I have the emergent writer hold off on reacting to the feedback. I record the peer comments as they come in, but then try to build in a delay before the student takes any action – whether that be revision or declaring themselves done. Second, I discourage any comments in the form of “Here’s how I would fix your piece” or “Take that part out and it would be better.” Such phrasing presumes that the responder has power over the revision. I have seen too many writers, including myself, accede to such statements only to have the piece become worse because it is now a conflation of two writers.

All this said, there is still the tendency of many emergent writers to feel that the writing is finished before it really is. The children declare themselves done despite feedback that would help the reader make better sense of the text: asking for more information or pointing out structural problems like confusing syntax, chronological inconsistencies, and unnecessary repetition. In this case, the teacher needs to require that revisions be made. That will get the writer to look back at not only the text but also the peer feedback about the text, mining it for those nuggets of truth that can make the piece all that it can be.

Finally, what do the responders gain by giving feedback? A writer can and will respond to feedback either through body language, spoken response, or both. The responder can tell they've hit the mark when the writer sighs, smiles, nods, or asks for clarification or amplification. Going back to John's thanking his group for their help: they also can thank him for the ways he received their comments. His reception validated their comments, which meant that they could also apply those comments or similar ones to their own writing.

Indirect Learning

So much of what we learn is not through being directly taught, but by what we acquire through observation. The same is true of teaching students to become better writers. If we put them in the position where they hear other students talk about writing, over time they will incorporate some of those ideas into their own writing practice. It is inevitable, but it doesn't happen overnight. That is why it's important to have the groups continue to meet for at least the first half of the year.

One of the most vivid examples I have of the effect of this kind of learning involved a boy who had written a story about losing his dog. He read it to his group and seemed satisfied by his work, despite some questions his peers had about what happened. Subsequent to his sharing, a peer read his story about a weekend visit with friends that involved bike riding in the woods. What the second boy did was manipulate chronology, drawing out experiences that were psychologically significant and disregarding the actual time spent. This allowed him to move both forward and backward in time to build on the experience. His peers commented on these aspects of the piece: “I liked how you spent a lot of time describing getting lost on the path in the woods, even though you were only lost for a couple of minutes.”

When the group next met a week later, the student with the dog story asked if he could read again. He did, and what he shared was a complete rewriting of the story – one not directly asked for by me or by his peers. When he finished, we all acknowledged in our comments how

successful it was. He, too, had now manipulated the chronology of the story, giving more time to present his worry about the dog and the way his mind worked through the loss. One of his classmates asked him why he had completely rewritten the story. Nick's response was, "When I heard Chase's story I knew I had to do a better job." Nick had learned through feedback on Chase's story how to make his own story better.

Valuing Peer Feedback

A final point about peer conferences is the weight that children give to peer response. A former student may have said it best when reflecting on conferences in general: "My peers have helped me greatly by giving their opinions to me. The reason it is so helpful for me is that to hear people my age tell me what sort of level I am at. For even though the teacher's advice is extremely helpful, it's not really from my point of view because they have forgotten things or learned new things that make my information sound inaccurate or strange." Not every child feels that way, but many do. It's one thing for a teacher to identify something in a child's writing that doesn't work; it's quite another for a peer – a person of equal standing – to make the same point.

Conclusion

Peer conferencing is an important component of a successful writing program. The student experiences it primarily as a way to improve a piece of writing, but we know that its real value is in improving that student's writing ability.