

Workshop 7: Responding to Writing: Peer to Peer

Jack Wilde's Reflections

Conference protocol

The first thing that we're going to do in the conference, is to have it—have the focus be on what's working, what's effective, because that makes it safe. It makes them know that the first thing they're going to meet—and it still happens in the conferences we're doing two or three months later—the first thing that's going to transpire is they're going to be told what's working. They're going to get positive feedback. And so that's the first step in the protocol we work on.

The second step then is asking questions. And, again, as much as possible we try to put the sort of problems in the piece in the form of a question because then they don't feel trapped. If a student can just make a statement, I—you know, "I don't get it." They don't quite know what can they do with that. But if somebody says, "Well, how did this character get from this part in the swimming pool back to the bathhouse?" That allows the writer, the creator, some room to talk about it without feeling like, well, I'm trapped; I'm stupid, I can't do it. They've got wiggle room.

And the third step is for the writer to ask questions, because it may be that a responder hasn't asked the question or commented on a part of the piece that's important to the writer. So that's—those are the steps that we learn, and we take a while to learn them.

Using literature to teach conferencing techniques and conference group rules

I do teach them to be good listeners in the sense that we conference the books I read aloud to them at my read-aloud time. So I'm reading aloud to them every day, and we start out by then talking about what was effective. And they can't just give a global, "Well, it was a good chapter." So that forces them to sort of hone their listening skills, and then for them to ask questions of the book I'm reading aloud to them. So we've practiced there. And when we start working on our conferencing techniques, we'll typically start by practicing as a whole class. So, again, we're clear about what's acceptable and what's a non-acceptable

response. And so, again, to be part of that discussion, you've got to listen well.

And then the third way that I think we get at that is, when we're in the small conference groups of four or five students, you don't have a choice not to speak. You've got to speak, because if you're silent, we don't know what that silence means, the piece was so good you're awestruck, or it was so poor that you can't think of anything to say. We can't interpret that. You've got to speak. So I think those are ways in which we try to increase their listening ability.

I'll also say that because—especially because the first pieces are about themselves and their own lives—most kids want to know about each other's lives. So I think there also is a greater likelihood that they're going to listen and listen carefully, because they're sharing parts of who they are.

Grouping students for peer conferencing

When I create the conference groups, the first thing I want to do is have gender parity. So, depending upon my class, I'll try to have two boys and two girls or two and three, if that's possible, and typically that's possible. My classroom is heterogeneously grouped, and I want the conference groups heterogeneously grouped, because, in part, I want them to see that they have different strengths. And very often my best conferencers aren't my best writers. They tend to be the kids who have made it on their ear. They've been good at asking questions, because they're not reading the material, so they've made it on their ability to listen and ask these questions to get the information they need. So here is a child being honored in a writing setting maybe not for his or her ability to write directly, but their ability to talk about somebody else's writing.

Importance of teachers as part of the writing community

That was an authentic first-draft piece of writing that I shared with my kids, and I think it's important, number one, to let them know I'm in the same pool with them. Okay? We're doing the same thing. I may be older. I may be a little bit more experienced, but we go through a lot of the same issues with first drafts. We make a lot of the same first-draft mistakes. And I want them to know that I know it, not just from the outside as a teacher, as somebody who's telling them what they ought to do, but I know it from the inside. I live it every time I write. I have to go through the same process.

So I guess another part of the message I'm trying to give them in sharing my own writing is, it doesn't get, it doesn't change, in a way. It may get a little bit

easier—in some ways it doesn't, it actually gets harder. And so I'm wrestling with the same issues you're wrestling with, that I'm asking you to wrestle with in writing for me, in writing in my classroom.

In general, I try neither to write down to them nor to speak down to them. I believe that one of the things we have to do in our classrooms is to have high expectations, not unrealistically high expectations, but to honor their abilities. And I think if we do that, we will raise them up. And they'll know if they've got a question. If there's something that doesn't make sense to them so I'm talking too far over their head, they'll ask, and then I'll try to rephrase it. But I'm not going to write down to them, nor am I going to talk down to them. And I think—what I hope that part of what that does for them—is say, you know, I can perform at that level, too. I can write. I don't have to sort of make it easy to get it done. I'm going to ask more of myself.

Teaching appropriate and meaningful responses to writing

I think one of the things that can be hard for kids in responding to each other is feeling they're going to hurt somebody else's feelings when it comes to finding problems in somebody else's writing, and so I do think that we need to talk about that, acknowledge that that's an issue, and try to solve it. Because in most cases, what, very often what students will say is, is that the other students were too kind to them in their writing and that they were quite critical of the other student's writing. And then another student will say, well, no, really, I was, you know, they were too kind to me, and I was critical. So, in general, they have trouble judging that, so we have to help them judging that.

And we also have to help them constantly keep in mind that our focus is getting that piece of writing to be better, and that's why I like that chapter in *Small Steps* where they, where those girls realize that their focus really is for that one, even if only one out of five of them is going to get to walk, they're going to support that person. And so what we're doing in the writing group is not, it's not a chance to show off and say, look, I'm smarter than you are because I can find fault here in something you did. That that focus constantly is on, how can we make this piece of writing just as good as we can? And that's when these students are thanking their writing groups for helping them make the piece of writing successful. That's what they're acknowledging, that you helped me make this piece better than it would have been had I not shared. So I think we've got to keep that in mind and we've got to make sure our students understand that this isn't a performance base when we're having these

conferences. I know how smart you are from other things that you do. Here our work is, how do we make this piece of writing just as good as it can be?

Providing writers with an ongoing and authentic audience

So in asking them to sort of become more self-aware of what's going on in the conferences, the first thing that my kids tend to say is that they look forward to it, that they enjoy sharing. And that's critical, because in a lot of cases we hear about reluctant writers. We hear about writers or students who are reluctant to write. And I think very often their reluctance is based on the fact that they don't have an authentic audience. They don't have an audience of their peers. They're just writing for a grade. And if the grades don't matter to them or if they feel they can never please the teacher, it diminishes their interest in writing. But if they know that continually they're going to have an audience of their peers, that does away with the reluctance or almost completely does away with the reluctance. So I think it's important to get that sense of how important that is for them.

Teaching students to respond to what's effective in writing

There's some talk when we start talking about what was effective in their writing. Very often what I ask them—because this is a sports-crazy town, so most of the boys and most of the girls are involved in a sport—I ask them, "What have good coaches, coaches you've considered good, how have they helped you?" And invariably the kids will, some of the kids will start to recognize that one of the ways that good coaches help them is not by yelling at them every time they do something wrong, but by letting them know them know when they do something right. Because they're not sure how to hold the bat, how to hold the hockey stick, how to do a forward roll in gymnastics, and if someone else isn't telling them, that's the way to do it, they're going to keep experimenting because they're not sure when they're right.

So once they start to acknowledge that the importance that coaches have had in helping them become better at their sport by telling them what worked, then we can say, you know, the same thing is true of writers. For us to help each other as writers, we've got to know, because very often we don't know when we've done something well, because it's the first time we've done it or it's the first time we've thought about whether it would work or not. So that's where we're going to start. And I think that helps shape the conversation.

And sometimes I do have some kids at the very beginning who, again, want to

build themselves up by tearing somebody else down. So, despite all that discussion, they're going to say, "Well, I didn't get that." That part didn't work for me. And then we've got to say, "Well, I'm sorry; that's out of bounds." The first response is going to be, what worked. Okay? So that's what the response needs to be. So do a little bit of shaping of that. But, in general, since we've spent ten days talking about the book I'm reading aloud to them, in terms of what's working in it, we've started to develop a vocabulary for talking about each other's writing in the same ways.