Workshop 6
Providing Feedback on Student Writing

"The most important time to respond to student writing is when it has just begun. You want to work with writers at the front end of their writing because you can help them develop a focus, decide what they're really trying to say, and think again about their point of view or their language. It's really hard to learn from an autopsy of finished work."

—Lucy McCormick Calkins, Ph.D., Columbia University, New York

Introduction

At the end of a symphony performance, applause gives the musicians feedback, signaling audience appreciation and gratitude for the evening's entertainment. In the writing classroom, feedback—given at many stages in the processes of writing—offers apprentice writers a response to their performances as well, indicating ways in which their work was successful for readers and areas that would benefit from further development.

When we write something that we intend to share with others—whether it is as personal as a note to a friend or as formal as an article for publication in a professional journal—we enter into a relationship with our intended readers. If we wish to be understood and have our ideas appreciated and responded to, we must keep those readers in mind by considering their needs, questions, and positions as we shape our ideas and craft our language.

Beginning writers often need to learn such audience awareness. Without it, they are likely to produce what composition theorist Linda Flower calls *writer-based prose*: writing that is clear to the writer, but which may present confusions or leave gaps in understanding for readers. If students are to produce *reader-based prose,* they must be receptive to receiving generous and constructive feedback that shows them how others respond to their writing.

When teachers respond to student writing, they can use one of two forms: *assessment* or *evaluation*. Although these terms are often used as synonyms, distinguishing between them can be helpful as you plan feedback. Assessment means looking at what students can do in order to determine what they need to learn to do next. That is, assessment, whether of individual students or an entire group, is done in order to inform instruction. Typically assessment is holistic, often recorded simply as "credit" or "no credit." Conferencing and peer review are feedback modes used for assessment. Evaluation occurs after a concept or skill has been taught and practiced and is typically a scaled response, indicating the level of achievement or degree of competence a student has attained. Rubrics and portfolios can be used as tools for either assessment or evaluation. Grades and high-stakes testing are feedback modes used for evaluation.

Video Overview

This video presents a number of different modes of feedback and demonstrates ways to implement them in classrooms. These demonstrations underscore the importance of establishing a respectful community where all members are trusted to contribute. Techniques such as writing surveys (asking, for example, what kind of feedback the writer prefers), individual student conferences, and commenting positively and constructively help these communities grow. Teachers also demonstrate innovative ways of using rubrics to help students clearly see where they need to rethink and revise their writing.

Expectations for peer review groups are also discussed and modeled in classroom situations. The group shows how they encourage specificity when students comment on each other's work. Their actions are echoed in a session of the writer's workshop, led by Judith Ortiz Cofer, where the renowned author and teacher shares some of the techniques she uses to guide peer responses to student work.

The teachers also share some techniques they use to assess student writing portfolios, explaining why they feel this method is so successful in helping writers grow. A discussion of ways to help students prepare for high-stakes testing concludes this session, along with advice the veteran teachers have for others just starting on the path to proficient writing.

Key Points

- The effective writing classroom is built on a culture of trust between teacher and students as well as between and among the students themselves. Demonstrating clear expectations through the use of rubrics and other explicit directions helps encourage a trustful atmosphere.

- Feedback is often most useful when provided during the processes of writing, rather than after a piece is completed.

- While helping students identify what they do well as writers develops the confidence they need to continue to improve, teachers also need to provide concrete suggestions for ways the students can continue to develop their abilities.

- Students can (and should) be trained to provide feedback—through group response techniques, peer conferencing, and the development and use of rubrics.

- The collection, shaping, and assessing of a student portfolio of writing can be very beneficial to young writers, helping them chart their growth over a period of time.

- High-stakes assessment tests are forms of feedback teachers and students deal with most effectively through authentic instruction and learning opportunities combined with on-going test preparation.

Learning Objectives

After participating in this session, you will be able to:

- Identify effective feedback modes for your classroom,

- Describe ways in which you can incorporate conferencing, rubrics, peer review, and portfolios into your writing instruction,

- Identify and use various feedback tools for both assessment and evaluation, depending on your curriculum and the needs of your students, and

- Understand the place of high-stakes testing in education today and implement effective strategies to prepare students to do well without allowing such preparation to dominate your curriculum.

The Classrooms in This Video

- Charles Ellenbogen, 11th and 12th grade. Baltimore City College High School, Baltimore, Maryland

- Robyn Jackson, Ph.D. 11th grade. Gaithersburg High School, Gaithersburg, Maryland

- Susie Lebryk-Chao, 12th grade. Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, Alexandria, Virginia

- Lori Mayo, 9th grade. Far Rockaway High School, Queens, New York

- Kelly Quintero, 12th grade. Huntington High School, Long Island, New York

Featured Voices in the Conversation

- Kylene Beers •   Lucy Calkins •   Judith Ortiz Cofer •   Maxine Hong Kingston • Ruthanne Lum McCunn • Christopher Myers•   Amy Tan

Background Reading

The National Council of Teachers of English. "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement." This statement is included in the Appendix of this guide.

Optional: For additional resources, visit the *Developing Writers* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/work-shops/writedevelop. Select Workshop 6 and Additional Resources.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready (30 minutes)

Discuss
Discuss the following questions:

- What kinds of feedback to student writing have you used in your classroom? What has worked well?

- What kinds of feedback have you heard about, but not tried? What would you like to know about it?

- How do you prepare your students for whatever high-stakes tests they experience? Are you satisfied with the results of your preparation? Why or why not?

> **Facilitator:** Use the questions below to spark discussion before viewing the workshop program. Participants may write answers to the questions in their workshop journals, as time permits. You may use all of the questions or select only a few.

Reflect in Workshop Journals
Respond to the following questions in your workshop journal:

- What kinds of feedback are most useful and effective for you as a writer?

- What makes it (them) helpful?

- What doesn't work and why?

- How do these insights apply to your instructional strategies in a writing classroom?

Watch the Workshop Video (60 minutes)

Watch and Discuss
Questions to think about and discuss as you watch the video:

Pause at the title card "Peer Review." This follows a segment from the writer's workshop led by Judith Ortiz Cofer.

- In the video, Lucy Calkins mentions that teachers should remember that they are not teaching how to improve a certain text, but teaching strategies that students can use in multiple texts. How might her comment impact the way you respond to student writing?

- Young writers are often stung by sharp criticism. What are some ways in which you can celebrate what they have done while offering criticism that will help them grow?

- Talk about rubrics. What makes a good rubric? How many and what kinds have you used? Who created them? Do you find them helpful in evaluating student progress? Do your student writers find them helpful?

> **Facilitator:** If you are watching on videocassette, you may pause at the segments indicated below to give participants opportunities to discuss, reflect, and interact with the program. If needed, rewind and replay segments of the program so that viewers can thoughtfully examine all pertinent information. If you are watching a real-time broadcast, ask participants to consider the questions as they view the program and discuss them later.
>
> You may select any or all of the questions below to discuss, as time permits and according to the interests of your participants. Encourage participants to respond to the questions they didn't have time to discuss as a group in their journals or on Channel-Talk.

- In the past, how have you handled conferences with individual students? Did your students find them useful? Did you? If you weren't satisfied with the results, how might you change your procedures to make them a more profitable experience for both teacher and student?

Workshop Session (On-Site), cont'd.

- What feedback technique(s) did you see in this video that you would like to try in your classroom? Why?

- What questions or concerns come to mind as you watch the video?

View program until the end.

- How do you help your students to provide one another with useful feedback?

- What have you found to be the most profitable benefits of using peer feedback techniques in your classroom?

- Talk about the peer review session held in Kelly Quintero's classroom, in which her students responded to a "name" essay written by one of the young writers there. How did Ms. Quintero prepare the students for the activity? How might she build on the principles of this activity and what students learned to plan future classroom experiences?

- Lucy Calkins claims that asking students to respond to one another's writing helps them become better readers of their own writing. Do you agree? Explain.

- What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of using portfolios to assess student progress? In general, how would you rate your experiences in using portfolio assessment?

- What is your philosophy about preparing your students for high-stakes assessments?

- What strategies that you saw demonstrated in the video would you like to adopt for use in your own classroom? Why do you think they would work well with your students?

- What questions or concerns come to mind as you watch the video?

Going Further (30 minutes)

In groups of three to five, brainstorm a list of ways to help students prepare for the high-stakes assessment tests given in your school. Share your lists, using them as the basis for group discussion.

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Journal

Write briefly about a moment in your life when you received feedback that was either helpful or discouraging to you as a beginning writer. What lesson(s) can you apply from this experience to your own instruction?

In your journal, you may want to include answers to any remaining questions from this session that you did not have time to discuss, as well as thoughts, questions, and discoveries from the workshop itself and learning experiences that take place in your own classroom.

Reading

In preparation for the next session, read the Background Reading for Workshop 7.

Lori Mayo. "Making the Connection: Reading and Writing Together." *English Journal*. (March 2000): 74-77, available in the Appendix of this guide.

Optional: For additional resources on topics discussed in this session, visit the *Developing Writers* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/writedevelop. Select Workshop 6 and Additional Resources.

Teacher Tools

The following Teacher Tools are included in this guide for your use:

- Thoughts To Consider When Developing Rubrics
- Suggestions for Peer Response Groups
- Using Portfolios

Ongoing Activities

Channel-Talk

Send comments and questions regarding the workshop to other participants around the country with Channel-Talk. Consider sharing ideas that came up as you wrote in your journal, questions you did not have time to discuss in this session, and experiences from your classroom.

The Web Site

Go online for materials and resources to deepen your understanding and implementation of the practices shown in the workshop.

Between Sessions (On Your Own), cont'd.

The Classroom Connection

Student Activities

Try these activities with your students.

- Student Forum: Ask students to write about a moment in their lives when they received feedback that was either particularly helpful or harmful to them as young writers. They should indicate if they are willing to share this piece of writing with the class. With their approval, use their comments to talk about the ideas they have expressed in the context of the kind of feedback you usually give to student writers. Can they suggest ways in which you could reach them most effectively?

- From the General to the Specific: Brainstorm with your students to find appropriate ways of commenting on writing created by other members of their writing community. Together, create a list of some effective and more concrete responses they can substitute for phrases like these:

  - I liked that sentence/paragraph.

  - This didn't do anything for me.

  - I think this (word/sentence/paragraph) needs to be changed.

  - You just don't seem to get it.

  - This is okay.

  Remind students of this discussion when they engage in peer response activities in the future.

- Paper Load: For many writing teachers, the task of evaluating student writing is often daunting. Responding to 50 or more papers a week on many different levels can be overwhelming, especially when you comment on everything from mechanics to the flow of ideas at one time. Talk with your students to find a way to break this task into manageable parts. Organize your discussion around the many parts of the writing processes:

  - Prewriting (identify purpose, audience, and topic; form a central idea, brainstorm, and sequence; organize and begin to gather information),

  - Drafting (put your thoughts on paper; use logical structure), and

  - Rewriting (revise; rethink and rearrange; tighten up piece; cycle through these steps several time; edit and fine tune; write final draft; proofread).

  When is it most helpful for them to absorb comments about spelling or misused words, for example? When do they need to know your thoughts on organization? Together, construct a chart that represents the main thoughts of the discussion, outlining the kinds of comments you all feel are most useful at different steps in the processes of writing. Plan on a trial period for using this method to evaluate student writing. After the trial period, reflect on this process: Has it helped you? Has it helped your students?

Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner

- Make a list of ways in which parents or other family members might be productively involved in providing feedback for students in the writing classroom. How might you encourage such responses?

- How can you use student assessment and evaluation to chart your own progress in being an effective teacher?

Notes