Writing with the Student: A Personalized Approach to Teaching Writing

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Abstract

A high school writing teacher explains why and how he replaced his traditional "scribble in the margin" grading with individual teacher-student writing conferences. Student feedback is included, as well as his own reflections on the experience.

Although writing teachers may put significant time and effort into the feedback they give their students, research suggests that what we write in the margins may not be as beneficial as we hope (Bardine, Bardine, & Deegan, 2000). This can be frustrating as we realize how important it is that students learn from recognizing and finding out how to correct their errors and weaknesses. But comments they refuse to read won't help them.

Like any good assessment, feedback on student writing must be well planned and thoroughly considered (Spandel, 2006). Students deserve more than lines drawn through errors, a few hasty remarks, and a grade they may not understand.

Benefits of Writing Conferences

Students who submit their writing deserve to be greeted by a teacher who is knowledgeable and experienced in the craft of writing who can provide actual feedback; they deserve to be "greeted by a whole person, a caring person" (Bullough & Baughman, 1997, p.24). Effective writing conferences have the potential to provide personalized, caring guidance that enables students to employ the writing process, dialogue with a more experienced writer, and eventually revise and refine their work as skilled practitioners do.

Becoming Writers. I want my students to become writers—to struggle with the decisions that writers make and work through the often unpredictable and recursive writing process. The writing conference, a one-on-one conversation between teacher and student, allows students to move away from the letter grade focus and concentrate on improving as practitioners (Bardine et al., 2000). During the writing conference, students can demonstrate their understanding of composition not only through the words they write, but also by discussing nuances of writing in a non-threatening way to improve their capabilities. Not only do they write in order to learn, they speak in order to learn, as they openly discuss their work with other students and with the teacher (Langer, 2011).

Dialoguing. Writing conferences provide an opportunity for students to flesh out their ideas with teacher reinforcement as they
learn and develop; dialoguing also provides
the teacher with valuable insights into the
writing development of the student. Hodges
(1997) indicated that students rarely take the
initiative to disabuse the misunderstandings
of written feedback, suggesting that it does
not demonstrate to students that we are
available to help. The opportunity to
conference with students allows them to see
that I am invested in their development as
writers; equally as important, conferencing
gives students a chance to ask questions
about their own writing. When students have
the opportunity to speak about their writing,
to ask questions to clarify principles, or to
confirm whether they are applying a process
properly, then a new world of learning opens.
Students can step away from being passive
learners to adopt an aggressive inquiry
approach to taking control of their own
knowledge.

Revising and refining. An obvious benefit of
writing conferences is that they can open
doors for revision (Bardine et al., 2000). In
my classes the revision process has typically
begun before the conference, so the student is
able to refresh to the teacher as the more
experienced writer for guidance in writing
growth.

I encourage my students to produce three
separate drafts that will be peer reviewed
prior to submitting the final draft.
Conferencing with me after three drafts
allows them to take an already strong piece of
writing and give it even more dedicated
consideration. Professional author and poet
Ralph Fletcher (2015) commented on
Twitter, “[Students] think revision is a way to
fix a ‘broken’ piece of writing. In fact, it’s a
way to honor something with real potential.”
Providing an opportunity for students to
refine a piece of writing with more precision
and meaning allows them to be authentic
writers who work through the processes as
experienced professionals do. By giving
students the chance to speak with us after
strategically drafting multiple times, we can
help them create prose they can be proud of.
I give them immediate opportunities to show
me what they have learned in our writing
conference.

Bob Fecho and Sergio Botzakis (2007) wrote
of the importance of “agreeing that learning is
under construction and evolving rather than
reified and static” (p. 550), which seems to
include recognizing that it is recursive for
both for the teacher and the student. There
will always be new insights to discover and
share, new opportunities to learn, and new
ways to grow. I apply the concept of the
recursive writing process directly to my
students’ writing ability. I constantly tell my
students that writing is rarely finished, but
that deadlines are required, recalling the
words of French poet Paul Valery: “[Writing]
is never finished, only abandoned” (as cited in
Murray, 1995, p. 226). Even after three drafts
have been completed and reviewed by peers,
conferencing allows the students an
additional chance to receive feedback, but
this time from an experienced teacher.

Nature of Writing Conferences
In my efforts to be more considerate of my
students’ time, and more effective in
providing stronger feedback, I initiated
student conferences instead of jotting
comments that might not be read or
internalized. I looked forward to talking to
my students about their writing, but was also
reticent. I hesitated to inform other faculty of
what I was doing, as I thought they might
consider it an inappropriate use of
instructional time; I heard of few others who
did writing conferences during my early
years of teaching.

My students the year prior had not reached
the level of excellence I desired in various
aspects of their writing. I noted the challenges
they faced and the areas where I could
improve as their teacher so that I could make
appropriate accommodations. I recognized
that to substantially raise the level of their
writing skills, particularly their ability to
grasp the intricacies of argument and
research, student-led writing conferences
seemed to hold potential though not
necessarily promise. Much to my delight, my students appreciated the time I spent with each one individually: talking through the writing and noting their strengths and areas of improvement in a non-threatening informal conversation. They were surprised that I allowed an additional rewrite to their formal piece of writing that had been through the writing process with three drafts, submitted to peer review twice, and already once read by the teacher.

**Recognizing strengths and needs.** Early in the school year I initiated a dialogic classroom, demonstrating to my students that I sought and valued their thoughts. In doing so I began to understand the importance of having a strong sense of classroom community where we could all work and learn together as teacher and students. I also recognized the need for a compatible set of beliefs and values for writing, a shared goal to work on together, grounded in a shared outlook (Strike, 1999). Thus I was able to speak openly and honestly with my students about their writing when we conferenced.

When conferencing with my students after reading each piece, I ask first what strengths they feel their work shows. Then I listen. Listening as students explain their strengths leads, I believe, to helping them become active learners. Spandel (2006) referred to this as *perception:* the ability to reflect on a piece of writing carefully with the writer’s perspective. I can then extend their understanding by providing additional insights and affirmations. Then I can ask what areas of the writing they feel can be improved. This question is critical in their writing development because I am able to focus on a particular student’s needs in a given moment. These conferences can be teaching moments that enable me to guide the young writer in discovering areas for improvement and exploring ways to achieve it. In written feedback we tend to tell our students what they are doing wrong (Patchan, Charney, & Schumm, 2009; Spandel, 2006), but due to the time required to do even that, we may fail to provide authentic feedback, to suggest specific ways to improve, or to focus even briefly on the positive. But in conferences all these are possible.

**Providing appropriate praise.** Students must discern and express their strengths, but I must also recognize things that are going well and provide appropriate praise. Praising strengths in my students’ writing and having opportunities to inform them that they are good writers open possibilities for academic growth. I recall complimenting a particular student after a writing conference, telling her that she was a good writer. She expressed gratitude for that comment by a simple “thank you,” leading me to believe that such an exchange could not have occurred without a face-to-face interaction.

Verbally praising our students for strengths in their writing after it is completed may seem pedantic. As I held writing conferences with my students, I found that being able to smile, show spontaneous enthusiasm for their writing successes, and offer face-to-face praise for their growth encouraged their development and validated them as writers. However, praise must be sincere and contingent. Empty flattery or a one-size-fits-all “good job” will be interpreted by students as hollow and meaningless (Cleary, 1990).

Compassion certainly has a role in assessing work: Encouragement is what writers need—not a grader who only identifies incorrect grammar (Spandel, 2006). During the conference teachers can ask questions to get inside the thought process of our students, reinforce what is going well, and if needed replace misunderstandings with more accurate ideas that students can apply in real time (Culham, 2014). As we guide the young, we can infuse hope as part of their early memories—and we thus prove that we can be trusted as their teachers (Bullough & Baughman, 1997).

**Challenges of Implementation**

When working with students who have varying needs and experiences with the
writing process, it can be daunting to go home on a weekend with a stack of 90+ papers and devote 10-15 minutes to each one, scribbling comments and hoping students will be able to understand the context (and potentially even the handwriting) of such frenzied responses. With conferences, we as teachers can allow students a more personalized opportunity to understand our responses to their work.

With 87 sophomore students, I had two major concerns: (a) helping each student understand the material and (b) doing so in a timely manner. I began with a simple pattern: after asking them to identify their writing strengths and the areas for improvement, I let them direct the conversation. This subtle, non-threatening approach allowed for an open dialogue where we could learn together, along with an opportunity for them to see my sincere desire for their academic growth.

But various unknowns surfaced. What would I do with the other 33 students while I conferenced with one? How long would each conference last? And how could my students prepare to meet with me?

**Occupying the others.** Providing a worthwhile activity for my students to complete as I conducted individual conferences was perhaps my biggest concern. My students had written an inquiry-based research paper looking at the United States justice system in terms of the unjust trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960), particularly with Atticus’ assertion that all men are created equal in the United States court. Since the students had read the novel, I found it appropriate to have the class watch the movie, a valuable text to consider exploring after the novel, while I invited the students to visit with me one by one.

At other times I had my students read independently during conferences or work on assignments individually or in small groups. In 90-minute class periods I rarely (if ever) lecture the entire time. Thus I can “steal” time for conferencing with a few while the others are exploring the content of the day; this also lets me stay out of the way while the remaining students work on the day’s activity. As I strongly encourage students to read books of their choice, I have sometimes had my students read at the beginning of class periods while I talked with individual students before the whole-class instruction started. My classes have always relished the opportunity to read, and the time spent discussing their writing pays dividends.

**Timing the conferences.** The conference length varies depending on the nature of the student and the writing. I do not limit myself to a certain amount of time because some students need more instruction and thoughtful questions than others do, and some questions or ponderings may take a few minutes longer than others will. A conference designed to improve a student’s writing must not be treated like another item on the checklist.

**Gathering information.** Perhaps the most critical question I ask focuses on the student’s overall understanding by inquiring what could be done to improve this piece of writing. This allows my students to think deeply about their writing regardless of their level and to find ways to enhance it. I frequently remind my students that there is always something that can be done to improve their writing, and when the fundamentals are established, they can begin revising the nuances and intricacies of their piece.

At the completion of the conferences, I ask students to reflect on this style of feedback so that I can know if it is working as well as I have hoped. Knowing that none of my students had experienced a conference of this kind before I began conducting them, I have asked each to reflect on the experience in an anonymous typed response, hoping to elicit honest explanations. I analyzed themes from these reflections that would help me understand the students’ reactions.
Feedback with Reflection

Despite my initial misgivings, I found my students’ reactions to our writing conferences to be positive, increasing my desire to use these conferences to help them become critical thinkers, to learn where they were in their writing development, and to tailor my instruction to their needs accordingly.

Comments from students. A common theme that I found in the student feedback was that they sensed themselves forming their identity as writers. During our conversations about their writing, they were able to ask me questions that experienced writers still find challenging. They were able to put school “away” for a few moments, including expectations for my expectations, and become authentic writers. Providing an opportunity for my students to communicate as writers is perhaps the most valuable experience I could have given them. They reflected and commented thus:

- “It made me feel important because I witnessed you spending the time on my assignment, and I knew that you weren’t just grading it so you could get it out of the way.”
- “It made me feel that [you] cared about me as a student, and wanted me to improve.”
- “One thing that made this way of grading better is the time you took to sit down with me and go over it together.”
- “It’s going to be easier to revise and rewrite.”
- “If somebody looked at my paper and asked me why I got the score that I did, I would be able to tell them exactly why.”

While writer identity was a recurring theme in my conferences, I’m also starting to understand a few more items that emerged: (a) increased student understanding of teachers’ feedback and their engagement in their students’ writing process; (b) more revisions; and (c) improved understanding of genres. All of these improvements lead students to develop an authentic writing literacy. Often writing done at school is methodical, lacking authentic purpose. By focusing individually on their work, we can engage students in more authentic practices.

Reflection on changes. To make positive changes in classroom practice, we must challenge approaches that have always seemed logical (Sergiovanni, 1994). I challenged the traditional practice of grading papers with scribbled marginal notes; instead I held writing conferences that made students more accountable for their writing, gave them opportunities to ask questions, and introduced them to the decisions that experienced writers make.

Change can be daunting, particularly if it involves additional work without a promise of better results—we risk failing when we change (Guskey, 2002). I made a change that I believed could result in a better version of myself and my students. The most significant growth may be in the deeper understanding and more defined identities that result from having conferences. As teachers we are coming to understand that student-led writing conferences allow young writers to better understand teachers’ engagement in their students’ writing process and to be more responsive to teacher feedback. Conferences also influence students’ writing identities, increase their ability to revise, and help them understand writing genres. These results suggest that students may increase their capacity to think creatively, analyze their writing critically, and identify themselves as writers.

Focusing on student-led one-on-one discussions has been the most worthwhile change I have experienced as a writing teacher. I have never seen my students so enthusiastic about their writing, so humbled on receiving praise, and so happy to think of themselves as real writers. If students have the capacity to learn exponentially as they ask questions and respond openly to questions...
as asked of them, creative and critical thinking will become natural aspects of their individual writing process.

References


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