

Teacher-Student Writing Conferences

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Significance of Conferences

The intent of a writing conference is to assist students as a writer, not to improve that individual piece of writing. If the student takes learns nothing that can be implemented in future writing pieces, the conference is useless (Anderson, 2000; Gair, 2015). In teacher-student writing conferences, the goal is to have students gain independence by finding opportunities for growth in their own writing and editing and revising on their own work (Robb, 2010; Leisner, 2012). According to Bayraktar, writing conferences allow one-on-one time between a teacher and a student to talk about the student writing or the writing process (2013,). Conferences are unique because they allow educators to tailor instruction to meet the individual's needs (Robb, 2010). Through writing conferences, teachers gain a better sense of the student's writing needs, strengths, and interests (Robb, 2010). Research shows writing conferences, increase writing achievement, and make students better writers (Hewett, 2006; Eikholt, 2004; Leisner, 2012). Deborah Rodenburg, Director of Elementary Curriculum for Papillion La Vista Community Schools, agrees stating "conferencing is the most significant way to impact individual writing achievement" (personal communication, January 27, 2017).

Both Bayraktar, Anderson, and Rodenburg conclude that writing conferences have a purpose, follow an anticipated structure, and allow students and teachers to collaborate through conversations (2013; 2000; 2017). In a writing conference, teachers ask questions, make suggestions, encourage, teach, and introduce new strategies and ideas to students in order to make them a stronger writer (Bayraktar, 2013; Anderson,

2000). Gair and Anderson both state that writing conferences can be conducted at any phase of the writing process: brainstorming, drafting, or editing and revising (2000, 2015). Teachers can utilize three different strategies in writing conferences to improve students' writing: teach new strategies and techniques, instruct students to better use a strategy they are already using, or assist students in reflecting about their writing. At the end of each writing conference, both the student and teacher should be able to describe what they learned or taught (Anderson, 2000).

Intertwined within the writing conference, there must be a research, teaching, and assessment component. Leisner describes that there are four key stages to writing conferences: research, decide, teach, and record (2011). According to Anderson, there are two overall parts to a writing conferences: a conversation about the work the student is doing and a conversation about how the student can be a better writer (2000). The four stages Leisner discusses falls into the two overarching categories Anderson defines.

Research

Researching requires educators to get students talking about what they need assistance with and what their current stage of writing is at (Leisner, 2012). This is known as setting the agenda, which most frequently is done by the student. Leisner note that students need to help decide on the direction of the conference, because it is what the writer needs at the moment and can implement in their current work (2012); however, sometimes the teacher has to set the agenda because it is the teacher's opportunity to teach the student what they needed to learn at that point in time

(Anderson, 2000). By having students set the agenda, it promotes “maturity and progress” (Leisner, 2012) and learn how to be problem finders instead of being passive during a conference (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). The teacher’s role in a conference is to understand from the student what work they are doing and how they are doing what they are doing (Anderson, 2000), which is basically facilitating discussion. Emphasis lies on the student. In order to utilize the time together wisely, Leisner proposes students completing a conference sheet in which they decide what they would like to discuss during the conference (2012). Of course this only works if conferences are scheduled (Bayraktar, 2013). Using this strategy helps students to reflect on their writing before attending a one-on-one conference.

Because the teacher serves mostly as a facilitator, questioning is important. In order to better set the conference agenda, Anderson advises asking open ended questions such as, “what are you doing today as a writer and what do you need help with today?” However, it is vital to not make each conference predictable by asking the same question each time (2000). Smith and Towers state that for students to be highly motivated and engaged, teachers must ask questions that allow students to reflect and extend their thoughts (2006). Questioning is to help students become an overall better writer instead of simply just improving that specific piece. Educators need to avoid prompted questions in which they answer just to please instead of answering honestly (Anderson, 2000).

Teachers should utilize mostly open-ended questions. Open ended questions reach many levels of Bloom’s taxonomy such as hypothesizing, evaluating, and

synthesizing rather than simply a one word answer that is prompted by the teacher. Extended questioning pushes students to be more articulate and sustain conversation with the teacher (Smith & Towers, 2006,).

When teachers ask students questions, they must provide them with adequate wait time. Wait time, or pausing after asking an open-ended question, assists students to form more in-depth responses (Smith & Towers, 2006). Research suggests that teachers' wait up to 120 seconds after asking a question before asking another or making suggestions in order for students to make a thoughtful response (Leisner, 2011; Robb, 2010). Robb makes sure to note to educators to never interrupt a student and instead be a good listener (2010).

Teach

During the teaching component of the writing conference, teachers need to make sure they think about physical space and timing. According to Gair, teachers should pick a small conference space in the room that allows them to sit next to the student, rather than going to the student's personal space (2015). Sitting next to the student and moving to their personal space allows our body language to show that we are being supportive. It also helps us in keeping our conferences shorter in order to meet with more students and monitor all student behavior (Weiss, 2003).

Many experts believe that conferences should be focused to only one teaching point (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001; Leisner, 2011; Robb, 2010; Gair, 2015). Anderson refers to one teaching point as a "line of thinking." He notes that there should only be one line of thinking as well for each conference (2000). Gair suggests that conferences

should last between five to ten minutes (2015). However, Robb supports only three to four conferences in about a thirty minute writing session (2010).

Teaching the student is the most important element. Although it is important to give students compliments, it is also very important to give your honest opinion and critical feedback (Anderson, 2000; Leisner, 2012). Educators can teach one of three techniques: a technique, a strategy, or a concept, one that they can use in their current piece and in the future. It is not the goal to tell students what they specifically need to change because that teaches dependency (Anderson, 2000). Using students prior knowledge, such as reviewing a previous mini-lesson principle, can assist in developing feedback for the writer as well (Robb, 2010). Constantly bringing back previous teaching points is a great way to integrate mini lessons to conferences (D. Rodenburg, personal communication, January 27, 2017).

One source mentioned incorporating practice into the conference. In most conferences, not all, he provides students one to three minutes to try the strategy discussed in the conference. Mastering what was conversed about in the conference is not the goal. Basically, students get a chance to try instead of just listen to the teacher talk (Anderson, 2000). In order to assess students understanding about the skill, teachers can also ask the student to restate what was discussed during the conference (Leisner, 2012).

Assessment

Conferences allow teachers to individualize instruction and offer genuine and authentic assessment (Leisner, 2011). According to D. Rodenburg, conferences are

“formative feedback at its finest,” (personal communication, January 27, 2017).

Students should know and be able to see that the teacher is recording notes because this tells students they must be accountable for their writing (Leisner, 2011).

Assessment and record keeping allows teachers to keep students accountable for prior conference goals and to guide future writing mini-lessons (Leisner, 2011). Accountability is key with students, and beginning educators can sometimes slip in this area (D.

Rodenburg, personal communication, January 27, 2017).

Promoting Positive Self-Esteem

Maybe even more important than the students' individual writing is developing students' self-esteem, or their personal judgements of their own capabilities, in their writing (Gair, 2015; Bayraktar, 2013). Gair suggests that giving students emotional support is a key element to conferences (2015). Bayraktar believes that writing conferences positively influenced students' self-esteem, such as assisting students in developing a growth mindset. This includes working hard, feeling less nervous when writing, setting high and difficult goals, gaining confidence, and not giving up when challenges arise (Bayraktar, 2013). After his study, Bayraktar suggests that there is a noticeable difference in writing conferences with students of high self-esteem versus low self-esteem. For example, students with high self-esteem received more teacher praise, had longer conferences, and were more active participants in the conference. In comparison, students with low self-esteem have shorter conferences and were not very active in their conferences (2013).

In order to promote positive self-esteem, teachers need to engage in positive

feedback. Fletcher and Robb suggest giving students concrete and specific praise rather than general positive comments (2001; 2010). Bayraktar's research tells educators that students need to hear positive feedback (2015). Anderson attempts to provide feedback on strengths that he wants to build on later in the conference (2000).

Conclusions

Experts frequently discuss the need for positive feedback during conferences to promote independent and hard-working writers. The overall goal is for students to learn strategies on how to improve their writing. Research fails to discuss the need for students to take teacher feedback and incorporate it into their own writing. Anderson discusses that students do not have to incorporate teacher feedback if they do not feel it will improve their writing. The question arises how writing conferences improve student writing achievement if they do not utilize teacher feedback.

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