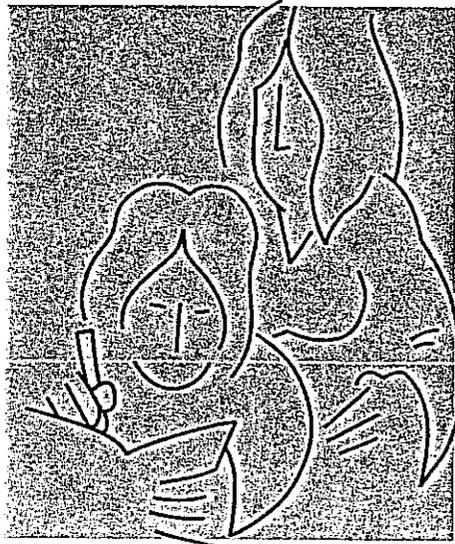


Teacher Conferencing

Let's Talk

*Danese Collins,
Delaware
Writing Project*



Mrs. Collins: How's it going, Sarah?

Sarah: My writing, or the divorce?

Mrs. Collins: Are you writing about the divorce?

Sarah: Well, I want to write a book to help other kids going through divorce, but I don't know where to start. It's pretty complicated. I understand how Dad feels, but I also understand how Mom feels. I love them both, so it's really hard for me to figure out where it all started.

Mrs. Collins: Are you thinking about starting your paper where the divorce started?

Sarah: Well, yes, that would be the beginning, wouldn't it?

Mrs. Collins: Do you want me to know about the divorce, or do you want me to know how you feel about the divorce?

Sarah: What I want is for you, plus all the kids in this class, plus any kids who might have to go through divorce, to know how I feel, and that if they have to go through it they can, because I've been there and I can help them.

Mrs. Collins: Sarah, you really do have a lot to say about what is going on right now. Do you know some of the things you want to tell them?

Sarah: Yes, I already know all of that.

Mrs. Collins: Well, Sarah, do you think you could begin by saying some of what you just told me and then adding on those other things you want to say?

Sarah: Yeah! Thanks, Mrs. Collins, that was a big help.

Mrs. Collins: Thank you, Sarah. You have helped me understand how you are feeling, and that's very important to me.

When I walked away from Sarah, I felt satisfied that she had a clear idea of where she was going next with her piece, and confident I had learned more about her. I also felt good because I knew Sarah and I would talk soon about the fact that all writing does not necessarily have to be presented in a sequential order. A topic for a mini-lesson had already evolved. Certainly, the conversation Sarah and I had just completed fit well within the parameters set by Spandel and Stiggins (1996, p. 281), when they described a writing conference as:



... any one-on-one discussion between student and teacher (or between the student and any other trusted listener or writing coach). It tends to make the student writer feel special, and this, more than what is said, is the special contribution that the conference makes to writing instruction. The purpose of a conference is to help the student regroup, solve writing problems, plan for next steps, and, sometimes, see his or her writing from a slightly different perspective. A student should come away from a conference with an idea of where to go next or, at the very least, a clear sense of a useful writing question to answer.

More and more, I appreciate the power of writing conferences. Whether a conference takes place at the beginning, when ideas are being generated, or near the end of the process, when students are editing and moving their piece towards conventional writing, the conference has the potential to play a dynamic role. At any point in the writing process, the purposes of the conference are the same: to help young writers express themselves more clearly and to support them in developing their identities as writers.

Carol Avery (1993) asserts that most conferences result when the student needs help, when he or she is "stuck" in some way or another. The questions asked, and the responses given, permit the teacher/listener to gain important insights and knowledge about the writer and his or her piece of work. Lucy Calkins (1994) says the attentive listening of the teacher creates a magnetic force between the writer and the listener. If we think back to the conversation between Sarah and me, it becomes evident that the easy conversational flow allowed me to gain some important insights and knowledge about Sarah in only a few minutes. As I walked away, I was much more knowledgeable about her history, and I knew Sarah felt confident and ready to begin her writing.

Nancie Atwell (1998) tells about attending a writing conference in which the speaker informed the audience that conferencing was really about revising. She was quick to refute such a notion by saying that a conference is not

continued on page 4 . . .

... continued from page 2
 about one particular point of the writing process, but rather it is about a whole range, and is appropriate for a variety of purposes depending upon the needs of the student and teacher. Calkins agrees, stating that she arbitrarily divides conferences into categories that are primarily based on the purpose of the conference:

- Content (focuses on content, subject, or topic)
- Design (focuses on genre or format)
- Process (focuses on what writers do when they write)
- Evaluation (focuses on child's analysis and evaluation of a writing piece)
- Editorial (focuses on editing and the conventions of print)

Not every writer will require a conference in each of these areas. The lines of separation are not always obvious, either; sometimes, several obstacles can be overcome within one session. For example, by opening Sarah's conference with a general question, rather than one aimed directly at her writing, we were able to proceed through both the content and design conferences. When we concluded, she knew how to begin her piece and had ideas for what she wanted to include. She also had a clear vision about form, knowing that she wanted to design a small book to help other children who might be experiencing a similar problem. Fortunately for Sarah, we conferred when she needed it, and she could continue writing until she became "stuck" again. Had I made Sarah wait for a



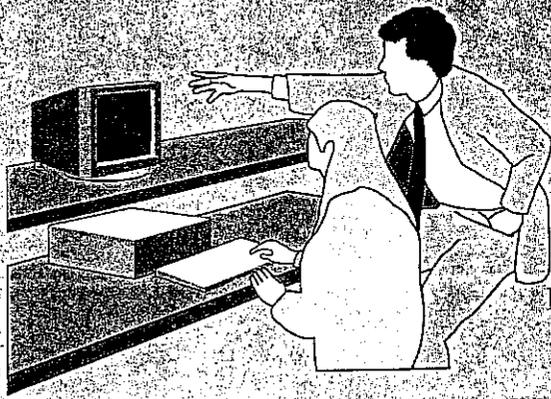
conference until she completed her whole draft, she may have changed topics out of frustration or she may have written a very boring story with too many details.

This was not Sarah's first writing for the school year. She had previously penned many pieces and we had had many short conferences. Spandel and Stiggins (1997) recommend short conferences, noting that some of the most effective conferences occur on the run. Short conferences also enable the teacher to reach more children. By staggering conferences and questions throughout the writing process, the student is able to concentrate on the one task or question at hand, rather than trying to

By staggering conferences and questions throughout the writing process, the student is able to concentrate on the one task or question at hand, rather than trying to remember a multitude of questions and responses that may become confusing.

Electronic Resources for Teaching Writing

Compiled by
Patricia A. Crawford,
University of Central Florida



National Council of Teachers of English
<http://www.ncte.org/>

Breadloaf
<http://www.breadloaf.middlebury.edu/resources/comp.html>

Kidpub
<http://www.kidpub.org/kidpub>

Ms. Smith's English Page
<http://home.earthlink.net/~jesmith/>

Write Environment
<http://www.writeenvironment.com/linksto.html>

remember a multitude of questions and responses that may become confusing.

One of the goals of conferencing is to help writers begin to internalize the type of questioning that takes place so that they can ultimately confer with themselves. By asking certain questions repetitively, the teacher acts as a model and helps the student see a pattern of what type of questions to ask himself or herself. Through self-conferencing, the writer takes another step toward independence, and toward retaining ownership over the writing. In Sarah's case, she was able to do this and dive into her writing after getting initial support from the teacher.

At our final conference, I decided to approach things a bit differently. Sarah's paper seemed to be in good shape, containing only one spelling error. I asked her if there was anything in particular she would like us to look at together. Her immediate response was for us to look at the word

"embarrassed." She felt sure she had misspelled it. It, indeed, was the misspelled word. We next looked at her piece together and celebrated each of the difficult words she had risked spelling. We also celebrated her fine sense of when to use capitalization, as well as her excellent use of punctuation marks.

Next, we talked about layout. Sarah asked if she could use a bookmaking program on our computer. She was moving the following week, and it was extremely important to her that she make two copies of the book before leaving. She wanted to leave one copy in our school library and the other one in our classroom library. Eventually, she made five copies, extending her intended audience to Mom, Dad, and Oprah. When her work was completed, she shared it with her classmates. We celebrated the wonderful job she had done sharing her feelings and inviting others to know that it is okay to have them.

Teacher conferencing provides a wonderful opportunity for both the writer and the teacher. Although it may sound trite, conferencing truly does provide the wind beneath the wings of countless writing students who are able to soar to heights we teachers never dared. Why? Because we take great pleasure in celebrating their successes as we provide those thoughtful, purposeful conversations called teacher conferencing.

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Exploring Writing Through Children's Literature

Bibliography of Children's Books

Compiled by
Patricia A. Crawford,
University of Central Florida

Teachers can help young authors to make the reading-writing connection by exploring the writing process in the pages of children's literature. Each of the following books addresses some aspect of the writing process, or features characters who value the power and joy of writing. Literature provides a place for children to gain new insights as to what it means to be an author.

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