CONFERENCING: Writing as a Collaborative Activity

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"What are you thinking of writing about?" I asked her.

"Well," she replied, "I've reread my journals and I suddenly realized that I no longer believe some of what I used to believe. I went back to the first article we read, the one where I disagreed with the author's argument, and reading it last night I could see that I didn't disagree any more. And I wondered about what had made me change my mind about ideas like 'writing finding its own meaning,' 'reading and writing are social activities,' and 'thoughts are created in the process of writing.'"

"Have you any idea what made you change your mind?" one of the others prompted.

"I guess both the reading and writing experiences we've been having for the last couple of weeks have had their effect. I was encouraged to try free writing, and I discovered I didn't need to have everything worked out before I started putting words on paper. I found that the writing sometimes went in unexpected directions; it was saying something new, something that was my own and not just borrowed from the research literature."

"What was your reaction when you realized that?"

"It suddenly made me think about the writing I've been doing with my students. I could see where I have been focusing on the products, having them plan what they were going to write first so that their writing would be better organized. What I haven't appreciated is the fact that we all need to be able to set aside constraints and just write to see what might come out."

"What is the one insight you would want to share with other teachers?" someone asked.

"I'm not sure yet," she answered, "I think I have to write about what I think I've learned then I'll be able to stand back and decide what I think was most important."

"How do you think you'll proceed?"

"I planned on rereading my journals, seeing what I could find in each, and then noting the *ah-ha's* on cards. I thought that would help me find out what I've learned; sort of like summing up the free writes."

"Are you able to start, then?"

"Yes," she said.

A hypothetical group conference, but not unlike many which have occurred this past year among my graduate students, all of whom are teachers. We've been exploring the many ways in which conferencing can assist our writing. We've conferenced through written responses to journals and free writings. We've conferenced as a way of taking a running start at a piece. We've shared works in progress. And we've discussed final drafts. We've discov-ered many ways in which to support one another through the difficult business of writing.

The most important thing we have learned is that writing is an intensely social activity. Contrary to popular belief, we have discovered writing is not something one struggles to do alone. Instead, we have found that it is more than helpful to have others assist with the massive amount of decisionmaking involved in writing anything. That's where conferencing comes in. There are many different kinds of conferences discussed in the research literature: informal conferences, teacher/student conferences, peer conferences, sharing meetings, the teacherless writing

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class. And while the guidelines for conducting these various sorts of conferences may appear contradictory, all of them have a role to play in helping writers extend their control over the writing process.

What are these different kinds of conferences like? Graves[1] offers useful suggestions for teacher/student conferences in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*. Teacher/student conferences can occur at any time during the working of a piece — before anything has been put on paper, while a work is in progress, and as it draws to completion. The purpose of the teacher/student conference is to sustain writers, to help them maintain a focus on the meaning of the piece. Only secondarily is the teacher/student conference concerned with the conventions or correctness of the writing and then only as the piece becomes ready for publication.

The teacher's role in these conferences is to *listen*, particularly with an ear for what the writers seem to want to convey. In fact, Graves insists, writers must talk first. They must be given an opportunity to explain where they are in the writing process and to let their audience (in this case the teacher) know what help they are looking for. To encourage writers to talk, Graves suggests some

helpful opening questions: What ideas have you been considering? How have you come this far? Can you sum up what you're trying to do in a sentence or two? To help focus or expand a piece, he offers some general questions which could be asked of almost any piece: What's the main thing you're trying to say? It all starts . . . how? Do you think the stuff you're telling me now is important, should it go in? Tell me again just what happened? The essential characteristic of teacher/student conferences is that they are *brief*; each intervention is no more than a moment or two, only long enough to give writers a chance to request assistance or for teachers to reassure themselves that the writers are progressing.

Calkins,[2] in *Lessons From a Child*, describes three functions for these formal teacher/student conferences. They are intended to help writers develop the specific content of a piece, to help them reflect on the writing process and the specific strategies they use for writing, and for helping them learn to judge their own efforts. It is interesting that these latter two functions were an outgrowth of the research process. Questions about the writing process itself

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were asked by Calkins so that she could come to some understanding of what the children were experiencing. However, it wasn't long before the children started asking process questions of one another: How's it coming? What are you going to do next? What difficulty are you having? What new problems have you run into? What help would you like? Similarly, with the children's ability to make reasonable judgements about the quality of their work, Calkins was interested in the children's perception of what made a piece of writing "good." Her evaluative questions soon became a part of the children's repertoire. Someone might announce "I like it" of something just completed only to be asked by one of the others "What do you like about it?" Calkins recognized that these questions were important for helping the children assess their work more critically and such discussion enabled them to develop criteria for judging writing.

Peer conferences are another kind of conference described in the research literature. Calkins distinguishes two types of peer conferences: formal "sharing meetings" and informal ones which are going on all the time. The major difference between the two seems to be that the sharing meetings are group sessions set up by the teacher while informal peer conferences are student initiated one-to-one interactions. She describes how it was not unusual for students to help one another with topic selection and to sustain one another as they wrote by offering advice about spelling and punctuation, volunteering suggestions for revision, and just being an interested audience. As Calkins comments, "These interactions were interwoven throughout the evolution of a piece, sustaining and extending its life-force." What becomes apparent from Calkins' description of these informal peer conferences is the importance of creating a classroom climate in which it is legitimate for children to share freely. For these informal conferences to be useful it is essential that children actually be able to talk to one another without fear of being censured; that means permitting real chit-chat. They have to be allowed to make aside comments, or ask someone for their reaction to a bit of writing, or to talk to themselves, as well as be permitted to move around the room. Also interesting is Calkins' observation that what went on in the informal peer interactions was a reflection of the teacher/student and researcher/student conferences. In other words, the students were incorporating the sharing and writing strategies offered during the more formal adult/child exchanges into their writing repertoire and using them to help one another as writers.

Calkins also describes the "sharing meetings" in which students presented works-in-progress as well as completed drafts at whole class sessions. She outlines a structure which evolved for these sessions:

> Writers would begin by explaining where they were in the writing process, and what help they needed.
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> Usually, but not always, the writer then would read the piece — or the pertinent section of the piece — out loud.
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> The writer would call on listeners. Usually listeners would begin by retelling what they'd heard . . . sometimes they'd begin by responding to or appreciating the content of the piece.
>
> Questions or suggestions would then be offered, not about everything, but about the concern raised by the writer. Sometimes other things would come up as well, but not always.[3]

These "sharing" meetings are very much like the "teacherless class" described by Elbow[4] in his *Writing Without Teachers*. While Elbow doesn't refer to the sharing sessions as conferencing, that is what he is describing. He contends that an essential ingredient of becoming a writer involves learning what effect one's words have on others. He argues that it isn't until we can anticipate how readers are likely to respond to what we've written that we can make decisions about where to go with a piece and how to get there. He believes that learning to sense one's audience results from having real readers respond to our writing. Hence the writing group. In his teacherless writing

class each member of the group (anywhere from six to 10 participants) has a responsibility to be a writer and an opportunity to present his or her writing for the reactions of the others.

In his description of the writing group, Elbow deals with the responsibilities of both readers and writers. First of all readers have a responsibility to read (or listen) well. That is, they have to give both time and attention to each piece as it is presented whether they think it "good" or not. Elbow argues, "If we expect our writing to receive attention from others, we have an obligation to give their writing our time and attention." Second, readers are required to share what the words made them experience. They may summarize what they have understood of the piece, they can tell how the words made them feel or what images were evoked as they listened or read, they may use metaphors to help the writer "see" what effect the writing had. What readers can't do is tell the writer what to do to "fix" the writing up. (This latter isn't strictly true. Elbow does suggest there is no value in censoring advice. If readers have something to suggest they shouldn't waste time not saying it; however, the advice, in and of itself, is of little use except as a vehicle for leading readers back to their perceptions of the writing.) Third, Elbow argues, readers have a responsibility to be writers. Everyone in the conference group must be in a position of vulnerability. No one can be exempt from having to write and of having to share their writing.

Writers, on the other hand, have to *listen*. Listen to what the readers have to say in order to find out how they have reacted. What writers mustn't do is respond. They mustn't be drawn into arguing about the reactions, mustn't become defensive about their writing, apologize for it, or attempt to justify it. These reactions only serve to censor what the readers will be willing to share. Writers have to accept that the readers' reactions are legitimate. They have to hear them out, then decide what can be done. Writers have to write. They have to write whether they feel like it or not. And they have to share, whether they think that what they have written is good or not.

Here, then, we have two rather different views on conferencing. Graves argues that the conference should be used to help the writer talk about his or her piece. Elbow, however, is insistent that the conference is a time for the writer to listen. Graves is describing teacher-initiated, one-to-one interactions; Elbow believes that writer-initiated sharing should occur in a group context.

Both, as my graduate students and I discovered, have merit. Listening to authors is important — so is having authors listen to readers. The distinction between Graves' and Elbow's sense of what constitutes a writing conference stems from their different focuses. Graves is writing from an instructional point of view and is concerned with teachers learning to help students. In his view, teach-

ers must learn to listen to writers before rushing in and telling. Elbow, however, is writing from a writer's perspective and wants to make sure writers have an opportunity to discover what effect their words have on readers. Consequently, much is to be gained by having writers doing the listening.

Clearly, then, there are two ways in which conferences can assist writers. One is by letting them discover what effect their writing has on readers as a means of helping them decide what to do with it. The other is by providing opportunities, both with individuals and in groups, for talking about their intentions and the difficulties they are having realizing them so that they can focus on what might not be working and consider alternatives. Both types of conferences have one goal in common: to ensure that writers retain ownership of their texts.

How did the graduate students and I apply what we learned from Graves, Calkins, Elbow and others? First, we discovered the value of conferencing even before putting pen to paper. We discovered that the opportunity to bounce around our ideas as they were just beginning to

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take shape in our heads helped us to get underway. As illustrated by the hypothetical conference with which I began this paper, those starting conferences were often conducted in groups where each member had an opportunity to air his or her ideas. In these sessions writers talked, first laying out their ideas then responding to queries from the others. While these initial sharing sessions were often undertaken at my invitation, on a couple of occasions students initiated such conferences themselves.

We also learned to conference with pieces in progress. We found it helpful to have someone else's reactions when faced with decisions — should the writing go this way or that? We found that another writer's opinion at such a juncture saved us struggle and time. It's true that on occasion we did find ourselves being led down some garden paths, nevertheless the overall support was invaluable. We also found that talking out such points was advantageous. In neither of these instances was it necessary that readers actually have the piece in their hands. In fact, we found it easier to listen to writers discuss the options they were considering or what seemed to be problematic and react to what they had to say.

We used conferences at the end of drafts. In this case we tried a number of tactics. We tried reading quickly while the writer was present — making no written comments but just receiving the piece, then responding to it. That worked well if a piece was short, but if the writing was more than a couple of pages long we found it easier to read it beforehand, jotting a few comments on a separate piece of paper. We also tried giving written synopses of what it was we thought the writer was saying. One of our most useful strategies was to present the writing accompanied by specific questions to which feedback was requested. This left the writer firmly in control of the conference. The invitation extended by the writer was explicit: you can read for these aspects of the piece but don't comment on the rest, I can't handle it yet. Then, as readers, we learned to make judgements about that contract. We learned to answer the writer's questions, but then, depending on how fragile we thought the writer actually was, we might react to other aspects of the writing as well. We learned the hard way that a good deal of trust must be established before such license could be taken.

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We learned to conference by having authors talk first, letting them sum up what the piece was about in a sentence or two or by having them explain briefly what they were trying to accomplish with it. We found that we could then direct our reactions to the writer's specific intentions. We were also able to react to one another's reactions. Authors learned from the dialoguing and often were able to come to a decision about what they might do next.

The group conferencing let us share our writing process strategies both explicitly and vicariously. Sometimes we talked about how we worked. Often, however, what became apparent was that many of our writing difficulties were solved by seeing how someone else solved theirs. We were only beginning to appreciate how much could be learned from seeing other people's work in progress. This aspect of sharing had been unexpected. Yet it proved to be one of the most powerful features of the group conferencing. This vicarious learning, this inadvertent collaboration, this "living off the land" as Graves calls it, was a vital component of becoming writers. That is not to suggest that soliciting individual help from other students or from the teacher wasn't useful; or that the teacher's offer

of assistance or expression of interest wasn't supportive. A fundamental ingredient of learning to write, we discovered, was seeing how others handled writing problems.

It was only after authors let us know a piece was well under control that we helped them explore the more technical aspects of writing. We tended to focus on large organizational difficulties first. Subsequent conferences seemed to deal with specific wording of sentences, word choices, typographical errors might be pointed out, spelling and punctuation were occasionally discussed. It wasn't uncommon, for example, for someone to query a particular punctuation usage which would send us to a reference source to help with a decision. That was when we learned a great deal about how punctuation could be used. Finally, formatting and layout decisions were considered. On a number of occasions we would think a piece was done only to find that a few more small changes might be desirable. But there clearly came a point when the author called a halt. That point, we learned, was determined by the publishing intentions. If a piece was being readied for submission to a journal then finicky attention to detail was appropriate. If the piece was being set aside for the time being then further attention to detail was no longer useful.

How were our personal experiences with writing and conferencing useful for our students? We found, perhaps with some measure of surprise, that what we were learning about writing ourselves was immediately of value. We found that first graders could participate in sharing meetings and discuss their reactions to someone's writing. They quickly learned to ask both the teacher and other students for specific kinds of help and to decide which of the suggestions offered they might try. As Graves and Calkins have described, the teacher had an important role to play in initiating these kinds of interactions but it wasn't long before the children were in control themselves. More difficult, perhaps, were the junior high school students with whom some of the teachers worked. These students needed considerable encouragement before they were willing to risk writing and sharing what they wrote. But they, too, learned to assume control of the writing process.

Because writing requires social interaction, much of what we do in the guise of writing instruction is actually leading students *away* from writing proficiency, not *toward* it. Our most valuable insight was that writing and learning to be a writer involve collaboration. Discovering that writing is a social — not a solitary — activity was an important consequence of our experience with conferencing. It was through engagement with others, by talking about our ideas and problems, by listening to their reactions and suggestions, by experiencing the effect of our writing, by seeing how others were going about solving their writing problems, that we learned how writing could be done.
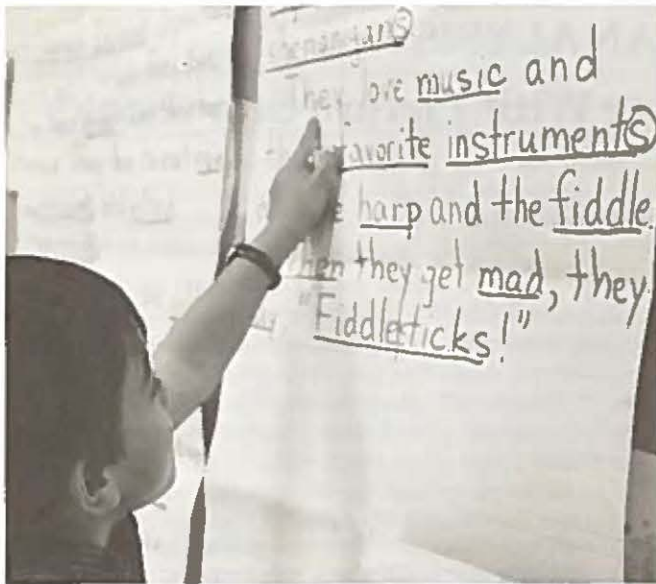
Footnotes

[1]Graves, Donald. *Writing: Teachers and Children At Work*, Exeter, New Hampshire : Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

[2]Calkins, Lucy. *Lessons From a Child*, Exeter, New Hampshire : Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 126.

[4]Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*, New York : Oxford University Press, 1973.

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