

The Effects of Writer's Workshop

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Introduction

Reluctant writers are easy to spot. By simple, quick observations, teachers can note students who enjoy writing and students who are struggling. Interest in writing can be observed merely through student behavior. Looking at student focus, wondering eyes, and posture are relevant considerations relating to student engagement (Cruz, 2008). During writer's workshop, the goal is to not only focus on improving the current writing students are producing, but also teach students to become better overall writer's, transferring skills learned to future writing (Anderson, 2000).

The components of writer's workshop include an introduction, mini-lesson, independent writing time, conferencing, and author share out. The complete design of writer's workshop is fundamental to the success of student writing; however, teacher-student writing conferences is where magic happens. Lucy Calkins refers to conferences as "the heart of teaching writing" (Jasmine, Weiner, 2007, p. 132). To maximize the amount of individual writing and conferencing time, the introduction and mini-lesson should be no more than 15 minutes. Through conducting an interview, with Bellevue Public Schools instructional coach, Jacqui Carnes, she stated that by keeping the mini lesson concise, writers are able to work independently for approximately 40 minutes, leaving about 5 minutes for students to share writing (J. Carnes, personal communication, December 18, 2017).

What are Writing Conferences?

According to Anderson (2000), "Writing conferences aren't the icing on the cake; they are the cake" (p.3). A writing conference is a brief, 5-7 minute, one-on-one conversation between a teacher and a student. Conferences have a point, a predictable structure, create thinking, teach lessons through conversation, and allow for teachers to really show students they

care (Anderson, 2000). Conferences involve the ability to listen, be present as a reader, understand the writer, follow student energy, build on strengths, and teach one skill (Fletcher, Portalupi, 2001). Writing conferences have two parts. The first part is to discuss the work the child is doing as a writer, and the second part is a conversation about how the child can become a better writer (Anderson, 2000). Throughout writing conferences, teachers and students accept special roles.

The role of the teacher during the first part of a writing conference is to invite the students to create a plan, read student writing and ask questions, decide what to zoom focus on and teach the student (Anderson, 2000). The role of the student during the first part of a writing conference is to set the agenda by describing his/her writing and respond to questions posed by the teacher to create more extensive thinking about his/her work (Anderson, 2000).

The second part of a writing conference is where the teaching takes place. The role of the teacher in the second part of the conference is to give the student critical feedback, teach, encourage a student to try a new skill and provide a link to independent work (Anderson, 2000). The student's role in the second part of the conference is to listen carefully to the feedback provided, ask clarifying questions, and attempt to implement or try the skill taught (Anderson, 2000).

Strengths of Writing Conferences

Writing conferences benefit the success students have while writing by decreasing the margin of misunderstanding, meeting individual needs of learners, building a trusting and caring relationship, and increasing student self-efficacy. Teachers may misinterpret a student's intent when reading. "When teachers read aloud student work with the child present, the writer can

observe the reader struggle or see pleasure while reading,” (Edwards & Pula, 2008, p.11). The student is able to clarify at that moment, eliminating confusion for future readers. Face to face conversations allow students to interpret, ask questions, and make decisions about how to make improvements. The writer understands and feels confident about how to refine his/her paper as a result of the previous conversation. Without face to face conversations, effective feedback can be lost through written comments causing misinterpretations and assumptions.

Through one-on-one conversations, effective feedback can be specific to the need of the particular student. Teachers preach, *fair is not always equal* which is why conferencing is crucial to the growth of students. What one child is working toward, another may have mastered months or years ago. Individualizing writing goals and finding each child's zone of proximal development is vital to ensure progress among all writers. Through conferencing, teachers can help guide students toward improvements by challenging them in a supportive environment (Cruz, 2008).

Teachers help students become better writers by getting to know children on an individual level. When teachers show interest in student's hobbies, family, and favorite things, writers feel valued and bonds are formed (Anderson, 2000). Through the simple action of listening, teachers nurture a sincere relationship between teacher and student. The relationship built encourages children and allows for successful discussions (Anderson, 2000). Showing interest in student thoughts and ideas is the first step in helping students believe they are truly writers (J. Carnes, personal communication, December 18, 2017). Individual conversations increase student involvement and provide directed attention and moral support through the process of writing (Edwards & Pula, 2008). According to Bayraktar (2013), “writing conferences improve student habits and thoughts toward learning and independence. Writing conferences

improve self-efficacy through the act of giving directed attention to a student and engaging in his/her work. Students with high self-efficacy work hard, show a growth mindset, set stimulating goals, take risks, and engage in tasks with confidence” (p. 66). Boosting student confidence will intrinsically drive and motivate the student in a positive direction.

Weaknesses of Writing Conferences

The ultimate goal for students is to gain a high sense of self-efficacy, however, reaching high self-efficacy does not happen in the blink of an eye. Students displaying low self-efficacy are often quick to give up, present frustration, and are hesitant to write and share (Bayraktar, 2013). This challenge makes conferencing with students difficult to accomplish. Challenges include monitoring on-task behaviors, the time conferencing takes out of instruction, and planning to meet with each individual student.

Teachers highly value teacher-student writing conferences, however, acknowledge that they rarely conference each day (Sperling, 1996). The implementation of writer's workshop requires time and planning. Intentional pre-planning is crucial to the success of the workshop. Teachers must plan how to teach students, keep well-organized student records and documentation, and adjust mini lessons to enhance a majority of students (Calkins, Hartman & White, 2005).

Writing conferences take place during students' independent writing time. During independent writing time, students must display independence in order to allow the teacher to conference with as many students as possible. Taking up precious class time to work one-on-one with students can be demanding as students may not be ready for that independence and choice due to lack of confidence. It takes much time and effort to build writing stamina (Anderson, 2000). Expectations must be in place and resources must be available in order for writing

conferences to be successful. In order to set those routines into place it requires time in order to practice and set the expectation.

Another area of concern while conferencing with students is the awareness of an audience. Students learn to write in order to please the reader, who in most cases is the teacher. This audience factor may be a restricting factor for emergent writers learning to write (Sperling, 1996) While devoting student independent writing time to individual conferences with students, we must require complete independence of students.

Why Are Writing Conferences Used?

The goal of a writing conference is to help students become better writers, not just improve the particular piece being worked on (Anderson, 2000). Conferences meet individual needs of students. Students are learning at many different levels, conferences are used to meet the ranging need of all students and push them in a direction appropriate to his/her Zone of Proximal Development (Cruz, 2008). The Zone of Proximal Development is when students show little interest when tasks are too easy and when they are too challenging they display such frustration.

Writing conferences are used to focus on the content and enjoyment of writing. Conferences are not used to focus on grammar and punctuation. Each conference is focused on overall improvement of writing and provides one new skill for students to try and master. Writing conferences are used because they have been shown to improve student writing and relationships.

Conclusion

Writer's workshop is designed to allow success among all students. What one child enjoys another may dread, writing is about finding a genre or style a child can relate to and

appreciate. Writer's workshop is designed to find student strengths and create pieces students own with pride. The workshop is a time for young minds to become writers and be spoken to as writers. Conferences between student and teachers is where children grow. It takes purposeful planning, time, and thorough pre-teaching and practice, but the end result is matchless. Teachers form relationships with students through one-on-one interactions. Teachers set expectations for students to reach while allowing the student to take ownership of his/her work and create a culture where students feel comfortable to share. Writing conferences have the ability to inspire and create students who find a passion for writing.

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