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Writing Conferences for Effective Instruction

Author Biography

Sarah Myroup will be entering into her final undergraduate year at Longwood University this fall. She is a Liberal Studies major with a concentration in Elementary Education and a minor in Communication Studies. After receiving her undergraduate degree, she hopes to pursue a masters in Reading, Literacy, and Learning at the same university. Myroup's recent credits include presenting at the 2019 conference hosted by the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar.

Abstract

This article presents an argument on behalf of writing conferences to provide individualized and personal instruction to foster the growth of students as writers. Writing conferences are an approach that centers around the students' thoughts and goals for their written pieces and allows the teacher to more deeply understand and assist each writer. To host writing conferences in the most effective way possible, it is recommended that teachers make feedback to each student personal and specific to the piece, that they ask questions to guide conversation, but also that they allow the conference to be structured around and driven by the student. These three recommendations will be discussed in greater depth as the article progresses.

Introduction

The writing process is an incredibly individualized experience, and it is vital that writing instruction support this personal nature. Writing instruction needs to meet the students at their current skill levels and craft strategies and discussions to fit what they need rather than just a checklist of criteria. Students need to learn not from teacher corrections on a paper or screen but from having a dialogue with their teacher (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Each student must be understood as a writer on their own individual merits (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001) and have instruction that supports their strengths and fosters areas for growth.

Effective writing instruction can do more than create skilled writers. It can build students' confidence in their own abilities, foster a love for learning and writing, and create an environment where students feel as if their ideas and opinions are heard and respected. Utilizing a process that produces the aforementioned results through writing instruction may seem daunting or even impossible, but with a properly designed and implemented writing conference, a teacher can make all the difference.

Writing Conferences

Writing conferences provide an individualized approach to building student writing skills that focus primarily on the student as a writer and the piece in relation to student-determined goals. Prior to the official writing conferences, teachers should provide mini-lessons to their class to help them focus on different topics such as grammatical concepts or traits of writing (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Students come to the workshop prepared with a draft, ideas for what they would like to work on, and goals for the piece. Students are encouraged to speak candidly about their writing, which makes them "responsible for their own learning." (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. 3). Having individual conferences with students allows writers of all levels to excel from where they are rather than feeling as if they are in competition with their classmates (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001).

Writing conferences require a significant amount of time and can be challenging in larger classes, but they are well worth the effort. Especially when used within a full Writer's Workshop (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001), it is important to recognize that writing is the most time-consuming part, and one must plan for this. They require the majority of a class period, but when students are not conferencing, they are writing. This provides students with ample time to devote to their pieces and practice different strategies, and each conference only requires five to ten minutes per student (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). If a teacher is concerned about timing or large class sizes, they can follow a number of strategies to keep

conferences short and effective. To aid in ensuring brevity, a teacher should only focus on one major concept or strategy with each conference (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). If it works best for their classroom, they can also split the writing conferences and writing time across multiple days, shortening each daily writing periods but allowing for more time to address other topics each day.

In order to have an effective writing conference, the student and their work should be at the center of discussion. This conference should be led by students and structured around what they want to accomplish. A teacher provides structure for conversation but does not control it (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). These conferences require that a teacher gets to know each of their individual students as writers, which can ultimately lead to improved writing instruction and more confident student writers. To have a writing conference that most effectively improves student writing beyond just one assignment, it is key that teachers follow three recommendations: make feedback to the student specific to the work, ask questions to guide the conversation forward, and ensure that conversation is primarily based around and driven by the student's voice.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: Make Feedback Personal and Specific

When evaluating student writing, telling a student that they did a “good job” or that their paper was “well-written” is a nice compliment but is something that will soon be forgotten and have no lasting impact on what they write. When one is able to directly identify what a student is doing well in their writing and articulate these elements to the writer, the benefit is remarkable. First and foremost, being given specific and authentic positive feedback can boost student confidence in their writing abilities (Hale, 2018). Building student confidence in their writing skills is essential as it can make all the difference in determining their attitude toward writing. When a student can see their strengths, they will be more positive about future writing assignments and the discussion of those. When provided with evidence of their capabilities, students are able to better understand their strengths, and this affirmation can ultimately make them feel much more capable and motivated to continue writing (Hale, 2018). This discussion of strengths also uses the student's words as “a vehicle for reinforcing and teaching desired writing practices” (Hale, 2018, p. 655).

Confidence impacts a students' attitude toward discussion of growth areas, as well. When a student feels confident in their strengths as a writer, they are more willing to hear constructive feedback (Hale, 2018). It is essential that writing

conferences start and end with identification of student strengths so that they come into the conference and leave it with a feeling of accomplishment. More specifically, the identification should consist of concrete praise: complimenting word choice, validating a student's choice to use sensory imagery, or applauding their use of a new grammatical concept are just a few examples of strengths that can be used to bookend this discussion (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001).

On the topic of constructive feedback, it is also worth noting that these types of comments should be focused on the student's work rather than the student. A student should not be told, "You are confusing me." Rather, make comments about the piece itself, offering the alternative comment of, "This sentence may confuse readers." It creates a much more objective environment for feedback that allows students to focus on their writing as opposed to themselves. When discussion is framed in this way, a student has the chance to view their writing from a reader's perspective and may not feel as much of a need to defend themselves.

When a writing conference is approached from a "sandwich method" of placing positive feedback at the beginning and end with suggestions for improvement in the middle, it can make all the difference. Students can feel more confident in their abilities as writers, more open to constructive feedback, more willing to revise, and more motivated to start the next writing assignments.

Recommendation Two: Ask Guiding Questions

As one could likely assume, an effective writing conference includes asking questions to start discussion. However, the questions being asked must be carefully considered prior to the writing conference, and the student should not be the only one answering questions. More specifically, an educator should ask themselves questions about the individual students and their pieces prior to each conference to focus on the upcoming discussion with a better understanding and context. Only after these internal reflection questions should a teacher conference with their student, then asking questions to guide but not control student learning.

Shelley Harwayne (2001) offers three questions for a teacher to ask oneself regarding an individual student. First, they must identify who the student is as a writer (Harwayne, 2001). Second, a teacher must determine how the student feels about writing (Harwayne, 2001). Finally, they must also consider if the student takes risks in their writing (Harwayne, 2001). Then, in order to focus on the piece at hand, an educator must also consider the purpose of the writing assignment and if the student has or needs strategies to improve their writing (Harwayne, 2001). Though the bulk of writing conferences should be focused on a student's ideas, asking these questions before a conference can help an educator come into the conference more prepared for whatever each individual student may need.

Once the writing conference is in session, questions should be limited and intended to prompt student thinking, understand their ideas, or establish their goals. Questions should be framed in a way that a student can take control of the conversation. For example, a teacher can ask if a student attempted something new or if they are familiar with a topic or technique in someone else's writing they might like to try (Mitchell, 2004). Though a teacher may have ideas for how they would change the paper, it is of the utmost importance that a teacher's questions focus solely on guiding the student to make changes that more clearly display their ideas or accomplish their goals. It is vital that questions are asked out of an authentic interest in who a student is and what they hope to do with their piece (Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2013).

It was previously mentioned that only one topic should be of focus during a conference (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001), and questions can be an asset in helping the student focus specifically on that topic. However, the question then becomes: where do lower-order concerns come into play? The questions described above focus on content, but grammatical concepts and writing mechanics are vital to helping students express their ideas and the content of the piece, so they cannot simply be forgotten during these conferences. In deciding what lower-order concerns to address, one can reflect back on their answer to Harwayne's (2001) first question: who is the student as a writer? With what grammatical concepts or writing strategies does the individual student need assistance? This answer will vary from student to student, but should be a key factor in determining the questions a teacher asks during a conference, and how they can guide the student to work on these concepts and strategies to most effectively convey their ideas.

By asking questions along these guidelines, teachers are able to model the ever-important skill of self-questioning to students (Thompson & Mackiewicz, 2013). Though students will not have writing conferences for everything they will write through the rest of their school career, they can learn at a young age how to ask questions about their own writing and self-monitor to see if they are accomplishing their goals and clearly conveying their ideas.

Recommendation Three: Structure the Conference Around the Student

A writing conference serves to improve student writing, but that certainly does not mean that all suggestions for improvement need to come from the teacher. Rather, the student should do most of the talking within the conference. Their ideas and goals should drive the conversation forward, and the teacher's role is to ensure the student's voice and ideas are in control. Any discussion points led by the teacher should focus on finding common ground with the student, further developing goals,

or scaffolding a student to help them proceed in their individual writing process (Mitchell, 2004).

To start a writing conference, a teacher should inquire about the individual student's thoughts. A student should be asked to share their writing goals and intentions for the piece with the instructor so that they can both work to ensure all improvements align with those standards. A teacher should also ask if the student noticed that they excelled in any certain part of their writing and then build upon that with more examples that can be pulled from the piece (Hale, 2018).

Once goals and strengths are established, it is key that discussion stay structured around the student. When a student is expressing a thought, even if they seem to be discussing it in more depth than necessary, a teacher must let the student finish without interruption. Then, when finally responding, they should only build off of what the student offered them, not introducing something entirely new. If there are moments of quiet during the conference, a teacher does not necessarily have to fill the gap with more talking. Instead, they can allow the student to speak up when they are ready to fully share their ideas (Harwayne, 2001). Keeping this information in mind can greatly impact the way a student's paper is shaped during a writing conference. Students are much more likely to follow a teacher's suggestion as opposed to their own (Harwayne, 2001), so it is key that all instructor suggestions are carefully rendered so as not to distract the student from their preestablished goals.

While conducting writing conferences, a teacher will likely face situations that are less than ideal. Students can sometimes stray away from the main topic of discussion, and could benefit from guiding questions to help them refocus. Students may not want to talk, have no ideas on how to proceed, or present other unique challenges. To address situations like these, Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) recommend that teachers follow their students' energy. If a student seems unwilling to talk or offers no ideas, a teacher needs to ask the writer if they are writing about a topic that matters to them, or if they would like to change their focus (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). If the student does not feel invested in their topic, it can negatively impact the writing process and their attitudes about writing. Writing conferences give educators the opportunity to spot these cases of disengagement during the writing process and follow students' energy to help them find more passion within their pieces.

Conclusion

These recommendations are not the only things that should be considered in writing conferences, but they are foundational aspects that allow for further action to be

taken. Once teachers have writing conferences that build on strengths, guide student-led discussions, and allow focus to be on the student as a writer, a teacher can further develop the writing workshop process to fit the individual needs of students. They can incorporate mentor texts into minilessons and conferences (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). They can host small group minilessons throughout the process to better target the needs of students. Throughout the writing process, teachers can create opportunities for students to share their drafts with the class, giving them a chance to share with an audience and even pose questions to their peers to help improve their pieces (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Outside of the workshops themselves, students can also be encouraged to keep a journal where they can write down ideas for new pieces to write about, or even just thoughts and observations (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). This journal could be used for short, reflective prompts in class, as well. This journal could prove to be an excellent source of future ideas for students as they look for their next topics. In addition to these ideas, teachers can be creative with their writing assignments, such as allowing students to create a picture book. They could even take the sharing sessions (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001) a step further and have something similar to a slam poetry event and invite families to listen to students' work. This is certainly not a comprehensive list of ways one can utilize and go beyond writing conferences in the classroom, but a starting point to personalize and improve upon the process.

Writing conferences put students in charge of their own learning process (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). They are challenged to find their own strengths and articulate thoughts about their writing. This individualized approach to writing instruction creates an environment where students can feel more capable, in charge, and proud of what they write. Writing conferences should become a routine in classrooms that continually provide a positive challenge that encourages students to grow as writers.

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