

let's talk

One-on-One, Peer and Small-
Group Writing Conferences

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INTRODUCTION

Why Talk?

It was the end of the school year and when I walked in to visit Jan Disanti's class, the students knew why I was there: to talk about writing.

"How are you guys doing? How is your writing going?"

VaShaun told me he was writing about how important his grandmother was in his life, but when I sat down next to him, he paged all the way back to a story he had first worked on at the beginning of the school year (Figure 1).

"You know what I want to talk to you about", he said. "The goat."

"You still have more to say about the goat?" I asked.

"You know I do."

VaShaun loves to tell stories, but he is rarely interested in writing his stories down. For months now, he had been telling and retelling his story of slapping a charging goat in a petting zoo. Every time he reached the punch line: "And then I reached back and *slapped* that goat upside the head!" the class would roar with laughter and ask him to tell the story again. Sometimes they would challenge him in a friendly way: "Wait a minute, VaShaun. Did you *really* slap the goat?" VaShaun did not enter Jan's writing class as a willing participant. He resisted writing, even though he received so much attention for his stories.

VaShaun gained confidence as a writer in Jan's class because of talk. The talk began with VaShaun telling the story, continued as his peers responded positively and culminated with encouraging words from his teachers. The energy to write began with talk, the first draft resulted from talk and the revisions continued because of talk.

"Ba" said the goats as I walk
in the pen, I got so scar
 When I got in all the goats ran
 to the corner. I found a baby goat
 and I started to play with it it was black
 with brown spots. He was so cool. He was
 interesting and small. Then a Big Billy goat
 Bolted by me
 X He started to cry. I did not know
 why. The dad started to run at me
 I was not moving ~~any~~ ~~str~~ ~~ab~~ ~~too~~
 him. Then wame!! He has hit me
 It felt like two tones card in me
 I was K.O. I was a wick dem.
 But no goat gets away with hitting
 me. So I wack up and was liging me
 to a potey for goatse. PE-U that
 stank" I said. And I did the same
 to it except the head dat
 X I was like a bull full of mad
 I dart to him. He was so happy with
 him self he did not see me. I got to
 him he was doing a little dance. So
 I Slaped him so hard he lookt
 as if a yak hit him. He started to
 run away cry ing. And he never
 hit me again.

Figure 1 VaShaun's writing draft

When VaShaun called me over, he wanted to hear me laugh one more time when I read the piece, but he also wanted some advice.

"Can you help me make my writing better?" he asked.

I spent a moment reading over his latest draft.

What Do We Talk About?

When I first began conferring, I didn't know what to say. I never ran out of ideas for leading the talk in the reading workshop and I never worried about what to listen for when I sat in on literature circles over the years. But a writing conference is different. While it is true that students can technically be "wrong" about something offered up in a literature circle, there are respectful ways to ask for clarification. We can ask students to go back to the text, to re-read, to listen to others' ideas or to restate their ideas in a different way. But since the text in a writing conference is generated by a student, issues of ownership arise that do not come up during reading conferences.

An initial question I often ask a student of any age is quite simple: "What is your piece about?" or "What are you writing about today?" This works as an entry point for getting to know your writers because they get a chance to talk and clarify before you offer advice. Recently, I asked Neveah, a Foundation student, to tell me about her picture.

"Hi, Neveah! What are you writing about today?"

"When I woke up and saw the moon."

Neveah's picture was a bit hard to decipher. It looked like a series of horizontal, oval-shaped scribbles. I asked her to tell me about the picture in a bit more detail. I pointed to the oval shapes in the middle of the page.

"Tell me about this part."

"It's my bed."

"Where are you? Where is the Moon?"

Neveah quickly picked up a pencil to finish drawing herself (a long, vertical oval atop the horizontal ovals) and then chose a yellow crayon to draw a circle to represent the moon. All I did was ask for clarification by asking her about her story first. I didn't say, "Don't scribble" and I didn't guess at what her story was about based on the picture. I merely followed her lead. This was the end of the conference because she had met the goal (set forth in the mini-lesson) of making sure that when we write, everything on the page has to make sense.

In an intermediate classroom, after reading Year 4 student Annika's

↳ **Tip:** Read student work in advance. This will allow you to consider some teaching points before conferences. You will already have some indication before you begin the conference about strengths and needs. Reading in advance is particularly helpful when students are writing longer pieces.

↳ **Tip:** Ask students to explain in writing *why* they want you to read their pieces. Let them "own" the conference topic. As you read, you will not only read for a specific purpose, you will know what to ask the student and find a teaching point more quickly.

↳ **Tip:** Hold your conferences in the middle of the classroom rather than on the edge of the room at a separate table. As students return to their seats to write after the conference, keep the more reluctant writers close by so that you can check in with them frequently, in between conferences. I typically do not meet at a separate table at all during conferences. I just pull up a chair or kneel by students' desks while we talk.

↳ **Tip:** Think of all interactions with an individual as a conference. While you walk around the room and help everyone get started, chat informally but specifically with your students, noticing how they are doing while they plan, draft, revise and edit their pieces.

↳ **Tip:** Spend more intentional time up front during the planning or early drafting stages so that conferences can be more efficient later. A good start will save you time. Try to avoid situations in which students will have "finished" writing multiple pages before you have had a chance to read. It is much easier to help students navigate meaning in their early drafts.

let's talk

To support Yolizma, I met with her to learn more about the kinds of details she might add in speaking first. The transcript includes my thinking in italics:

Me: Yolizma, we have been working to add all the details we can in our stories. Which story do you want to read to me? *Even though she only had two pieces at this point, I wanted Yolizma to make the choice of which story to revise.*

Yolizma: This one. "I went to the pool with my mum. I went down the slide. It was fun."

Me: Yolizma, when you wrote this story about the slide, I can picture your face. I think you were smiling, is that right? You said you were happy.

Yolizma: Yes.

Me: I have a question for you about the slide. Was it a big slide? Or a small slide? *Often, with early language learners, a question that poses opposites combined with a visual reference can help a student add details to a story. I made a quick sketch of a big slide and a small slide on a sticky note when I asked this question.*

Yolizma: Big.

Me: When you went down the slide, did you go fast or did you go slow?

Yolizma: Fast.

Me: So let's think about how we can write that to add details to our story. How could you write that?

Yolizma: (pause) I don't know.

Me: Let's think about how it might start. What are you writing about? What was big?

Yolizma: The slide.

Me: The slide was _____.

Yolizma: The slide was big.

Me: And did you go fast or slow?

Yolizma: Fast.

Me: The slide _____.

Yolizma: The slide was big.

Me: And I went_____.

Yolizma: I went fast.

Me: Can you write that? *Now that we have established the kind of details we might add (big, fast), we can translate this into language. When she started to write, Yolizma hesitated even though we had practised verbally. So, I drew a line for each of the first four words to get her started on the beginning of the sentence. I wrote "big" in the fourth blank line so that she could think forward to this word we had just learned.*

Me: So you are going to write a sentence using this word. What is this word again?

Yolizma: Big.

Me: How will you write it?

Yolizma: I was _____.

Me: Are you big? Or is the slide big?

Yolizma: The slide was big.

Me: Write the words. *At first, I overestimated Yolizma's knowledge of how to use words in sentences. The word blanks helped and she more effectively completed the next sentence about the slide being fast on her own. I did ask her if the blank lines helped her to think about the words and she said yes.*

Let the Student Take the Lead: A Conference with Azizbek

In the Stenhouse video *How Can I Support You?* (Overmeyer 2012), I work with Azizbek, a Year 5 English language learner from Ukraine who has been in the United States for only a few months. He is working on his third personal narrative. Much of Azizbek's independent work has included making a labelled story map and a few sentences to go along with these stories. My goal for Azizbek is to help him add more details.

In this story, Azizbek tells about going to buy a car with his father. He has drawn pictures of handing money to the car dealer, getting in the car and then the story map ends with a drawing of his house.

Once I establish the details of the story, I proceed to ask him some questions. I include a transcript of portions of the conference here

CHAPTER 4

One Teacher, Many Students: Author's Chair and the Public Conference

Writing workshops often end with students sharing from an author's chair. It is a time to celebrate and share with an audience of peers. While I advocate using the author's chair periodically, as a place to celebrate a piece of writing publicly, I believe there are missed opportunities when students only share and there is no interaction. Since this book is about how talk can push writers further during a workshop, I will share some ideas about how to incorporate more talk and active listening into the sharing experience.

When students share, they should be celebrated, but since they have the opportunity to be in the spotlight, why not capitalise on the opportunity to help all writers grow? The talk during author's chair can originate from the writer, from the teacher and/or from the peers who are listening in the room.

A teacher may frame the sharing in various ways:

“Before you share today, could you please share what you would like us to pay attention to?”

“Before you share, would you tell us where you are in the writing process? Are you just beginning this draft or are you nearly done?”

The teacher can also frame the listening as follows:

“Listen for a strategy this writer uses that you might use in your own writing.”

keep the purpose in mind. When I want students to celebrate their writing by sharing with their peers, for example, I often ask the listeners to say “thank you” in response to the shared piece. If I want more learning about the writing process to occur, then I incorporate one or more of the ideas listed above.

Example of a Public Conference

Sharing feedback with one writer in front of the room is not necessarily a common practice in primary school, but it is common in university-level writing classes or in adult workshops. I use the term *public conference* to mean an experience in which one writer's piece is discussed for an extended period. The role of the other writers in the room is to determine how the discussion about one person's writing can help their own.

I worked with Owen, a Year 5 student who had been developing a fictional piece about a group of coyotes, to demonstrate for students how listening to a conference might help their own writing.

I began by asking students to think about something they would love to excel in: swimming, gymnastics, playing a musical instrument, skateboarding or even a video game. Then, I asked them to picture a person who was very good at that activity. I gave the example of Missy Franklin, a Coloradoan and Olympic swimmer who had recently won several gold medals for the United States:

“Imagine that you wanted to be a great swimmer and then one day at the pool you saw Missy Franklin. And then her coach walks in and starts to give Missy advice about how to be an even better swimmer. What would you do?”

“Listen!” the students said in chorus.

“I think you would probably listen because you would want to know what someone would say to a person who was so good at what they did. Well, the same thing can happen in a writing conference. It could be that your teacher is talking to someone about their writing and you might be able to pick up some tips about writing just by listening in. Let's try it today when I confer with Owen.”