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Individual Student-Teacher Conferences: Guiding Content Revision with Sixth Graders

Lynn Riley Neil

Donald Graves and Donald Murray say that all writers, from young children to professionals, must learn the developmental steps of revision: adding, cutting and reordering material (Walshe 116). Most of my experience in teaching revision skills has been with college students during teacher-student conferences and in the classroom, but recent observations in elementary school writing classes have enabled me to assess children's abilities to learn revision skills. My observation focused on this question: Do individual student-teacher conferences encourage young children to revise?

Researchers agree that the writing conference is an effective way to individualize instruction (Turbill 34; Carnicelli 105; Graves 97-148), and they also agree that a conference should address just one problem. In early conferences teachers should begin by attempting to receive the student's message, looking at his or her content. After making specific positive comments, teachers should draw the student out with skillful questioning, probing for the student's ideas, careful to leave the ownership of the piece with the student (Turbill 35).

Carnicelli stresses that the writing conference must not become a one-to-one lecture or produce one-way information, either written or spoken. Its strength is that it is a conversation between the teacher and the student (101). The teacher in the writing conference is the student's advocate, Graves reminds, not adversary (97). According to Turbill, the conference should focus on the written piece rather than just being a casual visit (34).

The conference setting is important and should reinforce the fact that the writing belongs to the child. Graves likes to sit beside the child so that he can

see the paper without removing it from the child's hands (98). Turbill specifies that the teacher should leave the pencil in the student's hand so he or she can make changes (35). Implementing these suggestions can take patience if the student is slow, but they signify the student's ownership of the paper. Murray agrees that the student should do the work; the teacher should be available to help (151).

A Conference Situation

During May I visited a writing workshop in a Utah elementary school where the students were working on their second piece of writing, just learning how to revise and edit under the tutelage of district supervisor Janice Allen.

The desks were in horizontal rows. One wide aisle bisected the room front to back. The teacher sat at a round table in a front corner where she worked with individual students. Materials were available: wide-lined paper and pencils for writing; colored pencils, crayons, white construction paper, and a stapler for publication. The writing workshop lasted from the end of recess at 11:15 to lunch at 12:30. The students bounced in from recess, loud and excited. Their readiness for lunch was evident by 12:10 as they brought their work to a rapid close, visited with friends, and wandered around the classroom. During the workshop the students were generally expected to stay at their desks unless conferencing.

I was one of two extra teachers present to help with student conferences. Each student was to complete a draft, discuss it with a partner, and then bring it to one of the teachers for a content conference. Some students had already worked on three drafts, others on only one. The papers narrated an event, showing not telling. Following Rebekah Caplan's recommendation that students "show what they mean" (Myers and Gray 226), the teachers and children had discussed "showing writing" during the previous two class periods.

When the student writers brought their papers to the conference tables and sat beside me, I asked them to read the paper aloud. After the reading, I responded to several things I liked (phrases, sentences, or effective devices such as direct quotes), using the student's words from the paper. Then I asked two to three questions about content. After the student answered, I asked if that information would help the reader if it were in the paper.

I did not touch the papers. I jotted down the content questions on note paper, numbering them, and before the students left the conference, asked where they would put the answers to the questions in the paper if they wanted to add that material. I encouraged them to insert the question number in their drafts before sending them off with my list of questions (no

more than two or three). I usually mentioned I would enjoy seeing what they did to their papers.

Four Individual Students

My conversation with **Brent** was typical of the conferences. He wrote the longest paper I saw, a bed-to-bed style about an overnight stay at his cousin's and a trip to the mall. Brent's writing indicated his problem with sentence boundaries, but we worked only on content as subsequent conferences were to deal with polishing. I affirmed his effective dialogue and the inclusion of interesting specifics: his father answered "in a grumpy way" and "I was so sad I felt like squeezing a Canadian frog's head off." In an effort to help him find focus, I asked him to tell me the main thing he wanted to say in his story. He said he didn't know, "just everything we did." I mentioned that he told about two special things that happened: when he and his cousin went to the pet store to find a dog and when they spent their "five bucks" at the toy store.

"Yeah," he admitted.

I asked him to turn to the pet store part. "I really liked the way you told me how you were mad at the clerk for selling the dog you liked. 'Frog face' you called him."

I asked him what the dog looked like: how big he was, what his color was, and how he acted. After his verbal description of the dog, I asked him if he thought the reader would find that very interesting. He put a number in the paper where he would answer my question.

"What did you buy at the toy store," I asked, unable to read his writing.

"It was just a regular Match Box truck."

"Oh, a little one?"

"No. About eight inches long." He demonstrated with his hands, as if measuring a fish he had caught. "A semi-truck. An oil truck. It had a stripe along the tanker and a thing opened up on the top."

I nodded. "Now I can see it. Could you show that in your paper?"

After focusing on the two major happenings, I asked him if the other parts of the paper had extra stuff that the reader did not need. "I don't know," he answered. "I don't think so." So off he went to add to his paper, ignoring my question about cutting.

Ron wrote three paragraphs about the Christmas he and his sister were surprised with new bicycles. His second paragraph confused me. I asked him to tell me what happened: where he and his dad had gone Christmas Eve,

which vehicle they had driven, where the bikes were hidden. He told the story coherently. I suggested that he read through that paragraph (with its mixed up word order and missing information) and then try to say it on paper the same way he had just told me.

I asked him to turn to the part of the story where he first saw his new Huffy. I asked him what a Huffy ProThunder 200 was. "Are the tires big?" He answered with a little more description. I asked him how he felt when he realized that he had received a bicycle. He seemed hesitant, as if he hadn't thought about his feelings. I realized that what I thought as the main point of the story (the fact that his parents weren't fooled by his saying he didn't want a bike) was not *his* main point. He left to make some additions to the story.

Sarah came to the conference with her friend Ellen. They had already read each other's papers. Both of them seemed pleased to be doing their work well and quickly. Sarah's English skills were good; she wrote easily, but superficially, about the day she bought a Newfoundland puppy in Miles City. I told Sarah that I could picture sitting there with her and her mother watching the dog on the Kal-Kan commercial and that I liked knowing the brand name. She was happy to tell me about Newfoundland dogs when I asked about them. She talked about their size and color. I told her I was interested in the story because she told it well, but I had a lot of questions about what happened when she and her dad finally arrived in Miles City and saw the puppies. The final paragraph of her first draft was abrupt:

There were five puppies. My dad and I liked the black one best so we got her.

I asked her how the puppies all looked and acted, how she and her father had chosen her dog, and what it looked like. She decided that she had ended the story at the most important moment and that she had "told" instead of "showed." I reminded both girls that I was interested in seeing what they did to their stories.

Theresa came in by herself, a plain-featured child who seemed a bit large for her age. Her shyness created a sense of aloneness about her. While reading her paper to me, she orally added several transitional phrases. She was not aware of having done so, but I assured her that the transition words helped the reader follow what happened. After commending several elements of her draft, I asked her for some specific details about her evening at the coliseum. As Theresa answered my questions about her story, she relaxed her arms on the table, pushed her paper toward me so I could read it more easily, and looked directly at me, smiling. After our ten minutes together, she moved quickly back to her desk and at the bottom of her paper wrote a full paragraph in answer to each of my questions, carefully inserting the number of each question in the spot where she wanted the information.

Thirty minutes later, she came back to show me her story and ask if her paragraphing were appropriate. She was still working on her third draft when lunch was called.

Conclusions

Supervisor Janice Allen felt that there were at least two factors that worked against quality revision. First, the timing was not good. This class had not begun to write in the workshop setting until the middle of April, a bit too close to the end of the year with its feeling of closure. In addition, the writing class took place during the daytime crossroads between recess and noon, with its rushed feeling. All but one student demonstrated that they still considered multiple drafts a bit of punishment. Another factor was the teacher's attitude toward writing. She had not yet experienced enough success to fully accept the philosophy of process-writing. She communicated a deadline feeling to the students, encouraging them to finish their final drafts by "today or tomorrow at the latest."

The four students described above illustrate the range of revision responses to student-teacher conferences. Brent ignored my reader-questions, recopying his story without change. And in spite of our rich conversation, he did not even catch errors as he recopied. Graves, in discussing the difficulty in cutting that writers have, suggests that the "Tell me in one sentence what this is about" approach can help cutting down a wordy passage (Walshe 111). I should have tried that more specific approach with Brent. For him, "getting it down on paper" was the end of writing, not the beginning. Our conference was pleasant for him, but he did not connect it to his writing. Perhaps a series of conferences with the same instructor would have effected more change than our brief contact, however enjoyable. Part of Ron's revision was actually editing: he added an apostrophe in a contraction although he missed the spelling (haden't); he changed a three-word phrase for a two-word phrase. The most effective change he made was adding his feelings, "I was surprised," and a description of his new bike.

Before the period was over, Sarah and Ellen had brought their completed papers back to show me. I was surprised to see them so soon; I thought they might have worked on another draft or two, but the teacher had asked that everyone finish up quickly because "tomorrow is Friday." The writing teachers in Turbill's elementary schools in Australia say they have learned that for good revision to take place, students must realize that they have unlimited time to write and that the piece can be as long as they need it to be (88). The girls obviously felt rushed, having rewritten their stories in ink and stapled them on white construction-paper covers, complete with art flourish. They added only the information I had specifically asked about.

Sarah's revision consisted of deleting one phrase about the usual cost of Newfoundland puppies ("which was way out of our reach") and changing the final paragraph:

There were five puppies. There were three silver ones and two black ones. They all weighed about 25 lbs. a piece. When the owners let them out the first one to run up to me was the black one. She had big fuzzy paws and a white spot between her two front legs. I told my dad I liked her best and that I wanted her. My dad said, "I like her best too." So we got her.

Sarah shows the scene to the reader by adding specific detail and incorporating action and dialogue.

Ron and Sarah are both just learning to revise and seem most comfortable adding material. Perhaps this tendency demonstrates a natural progression. Unfortunately, most of the students wrote their final drafts after just the one content-conference. These children may need to write several papers building toward fluency and confidence before they can pay attention to polishing.

Even though she is an average student, Theresa expressed more interest in improving her story than any other child. She demonstrated ownership of her story (prodding me for advice, delaying closure on it, experimenting with language and organization), which Donald Graves likens to owning a place:

When people own a place, they look after it... It's that way with writing. From the first day of school we must leave control of the writing with the child—the choice of topic and the writing it self. (Walshe 9)

What struck the chord in Theresa to stimulate her interaction with her text? I am not sure. Perhaps she wanted to please me, the teacher. Perhaps my interest in the events of her story, established by the specific questions I asked, elevated the importance of the story in her own eyes. Perhaps she has a natural desire to work hard for quality. Whatever the cause, the result was that Theresa changed some words to clarify meaning, added action and detail, and organized her piece through paragraphing (see appendix). If she received self-satisfaction or external approval for her revision efforts, perhaps she will continue to practice the skills of adding, substituting, and organizing, and will learn the value of prudent cutting.

Some good things are already happening in this classroom. Several of the students, Sarah and Ellen, for example, expressed pride in publishing their stories. At least one, Theresa, caught the idea of writing as a process: she kept herself open to discovering what the reader needed to know throughout three drafts. The teacher gave the students a sense of owning their writing by allowing them to choose their topics. And most of the students responded to my emphasis on content before error-search.

I am learning, just as the teacher and students are learning. I believe that the elementary teachers who have experienced process-conference writing will give leadership in the writing programs in their schools and that their students will continue to develop writing fluency. I'm betting on Theresa.

APPENDIX

When I went to the collosium

by Theresa

One sunny day, about 5 pm, Stephanie called me and asked me if I wanted to go to the ^{coliseum} ~~rodeo~~ with her. I said yes ^{and} so we went. When we got there, the rodeo hadn't started yet ^{and} so we went ^{to} ~~get~~ ^{got} something to eat. ^{DA} By the time we were through with dinner, the rodeo had started. The air was ^{filled with cigarett smoke} ~~smokey~~ and it burned our eyes. We decided to ^{go} ~~sit~~ down. We climbed up ^{to the top of} the bleachers ^{it wasn't as smokey} ~~sat at the~~ ^{up there} ~~very top~~. Stephanie ^{We} had some candy ^{and} we threw it at people below us. Stephanie threw her chewed gum and it landed on someone's hat. ^A Then we went over to the auction. ² We got some cole and a candy bar. It was late so we decided to go back to the rodeo. When we got back they were still bull riding but we had to leave because her dad had to go to work.

- ① We each got a hamburger at a little stand they had. Her mom was working there so we got it free. It was a long line though. It took us 10 minutes just to get up to the window. But it was worth it because the hamburgers were good.
- ② The auction was in the other arena so it wasn't to far. They were auctioning off livestock and tack. It was crowded but we made it over to the candy stand.

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