The Power of Conferring and Collaborating with Peers

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: Writing

I will never forget listening in on a peer conference with second grader Cruz and his writing partner more than two decades ago. Cruz had just finished reading his piece about wanting to become a firefighter when he grew up. His writing partner shared several things he liked about Cruz's story. When Cruz asked his partner if there was anything more he wanted to know, his partner suggested that he write about how the local volunteer firefighters (our community is too small to warrant a paid force) hold many barbecues and other events to raise money. Cruz jumped right up to add this information as he took seriously the revision ideas of his writing partner.

Peer Conferences

I did not know then what I have learned since from *Being a Writer* about supporting students to hold powerful peer conferences, but I did understand the power in having students read their pieces to a peer. Partners were expected to share parts they liked and ask questions that might lead to a more complete or interesting piece. Years later, I would have the support of *Being a Writer* to make peer conferring very explicit and clear for children. The question in the grade 2 *Teacher's Manual* (pg. 183)—"What more does your partner want to know about a character in your story?"—as well as the statement in the Writing Time chart on the same page, clearly guide emerging writers in how to hold peer conferences and revise based on their partners' thinking:

Teachers often complain that they cannot find the time to confer with their students as often as they would like. For helpful information on teacher-student writing conferences, see Beth Winschuh's blog series on conferring. Peer conferences can more than triple the amount of conferring time in lessons. However, to be effective, students need to learn how to confer in ways that support as well as instruct one another in order to grow as writers. *Being a Writer* supports students in becoming powerful writing partners.

As early as unit one in the kindergarten program, children begin to learn to confer in very small steps. Here is an example from the grade K *Being a Writer Teacher's Manual* (p. 56):
These basic steps start the process of learning to truly listen to a partner as they read their writing. Next steps during the kindergarten year involve teaching these young learners the prompts “I found out...” and “I want to know...” which focus the conversation and build relationship skills. During subsequent years in *Being a Writer*, students are guided in intentionally staged steps to develop the ability to listen carefully to one another and help others develop their writing. Take a look at this lesson from the Personal Narrative Unit in the grade 3 *Being a Writer Teacher’s Manual* (p. 187), to see next steps in this development:

And finally, see how this develops into guidance for sixth graders to give very specific feedback to their partners in the grade 6 *Being a Writer Teacher’s Manual* (p. 599–601):
Collaboration

Many years after I taught Cruz and his fellow second-graders, I worked with middle-school writers. After completing the *Being a Writer* lesson for the day with sixth graders or finishing a basic writer’s workshop task with seventh/eighth graders, the students were allowed to free write in any manner that they chose. Zaylah and Emma were two seventh-grade students who worked hard to complete quick writes, rough drafts, or revisions and edits in the assigned genre so that they could get to their free-writing time. One project these two brilliant writers concocted was a letter writing simulation. In these pieces, they pretended they were cousins separated by the Atlantic Ocean during World War II. In the numerous letters they wrote back and forth for weeks, factual history of World War II was incorporated along with the emotions real cousins might have been going through at the time. Zaylah wrote with British vernacular while Emma’s voice was that of a person raised in the United States. The writers interspersed the sad and
frightening emotions that must have been felt at the time with funny stories about "Uncle Ed" and his problems. These were amazing pieces of writing that led these two to become writing partners for the following two years. Often during quiet writing time, one of them would say, "Mrs. D., I need to confer with Zaylah [or Emma]." I would suggest that I had time to confer with them and they would kindly refuse, saying that I could not help the way their writing partner could. Once, when I asked why they preferred each other, they said, "You don't give us as good of ideas and you are not critical enough!"

*Being a Writer* doesn't just provide support for peer conferences. Collaboration is also taught explicitly so that students can learn and benefit from actually writing a piece with a partner. Writing together not only contributes to the writing growth of both partners, but also helps students learn the valuable skill of completing projects together. Zaylah and Emma seemed to come to this collaboration naturally, but other children will need more direct instruction. Starting in grade 3, students engage in writing an expository nonfiction report with a partner (*grade 3 Being a Writer Teacher's Manual*, p. 339). This work begins with learning to share materials fairly and progresses to learning to solve problems as they navigate a shared piece of writing.

![Expository Nonfiction](image)

Week 3, Day 2 (p. 397):
While some teachers may worry that the questions and reflections included in the lesson instruction will lead to arguments, guidance in learning to deal with problems during a partner project is provided and is invaluable if disagreements do arise. Children come to enjoy working with a partner, and the collaboration skills they develop will serve them well throughout their lives.

*Being a Writer*'s guidance and instruction around conferring and collaborating works just as well in the remote learning world we have had to shift to during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students can meet in the break-out rooms of the online classroom both to confer and to collaborate. Teachers can easily pop in and out to check on this work.

Writing partnerships can enhance our instruction in powerful ways, both in conferring and collaborating. If you are enticed by the thought of empowering students to not only confer about their writing with a partner but also complete writing projects with one, take a look at the support *Being a Writer* offers in both areas.