

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 barbeques 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.

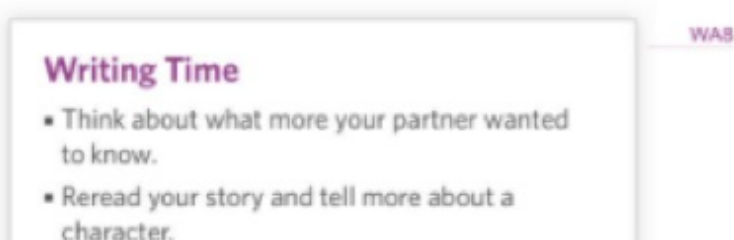
Peer Conferences

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:

WRITING TIME

3 Tell More

Display the “Writing Time” chart (☺ WAB) and explain the following directions:



Writing Time

- Think about what more your partner wanted to know.
- Reread your story and tell more about a character.

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):

SHARING TIME

3 Share Stories in Pairs



Give the students a few moments to look at their stories and think about what they will say to their partners about them. Then have partners turn to face each other and share their stories. As they share, walk around the room and observe how well they are able to tell their stories, take turns, speak clearly, and listen to each other.

When most pairs have finished sharing, signal for the students' attention and have a few volunteers share their stories with the class.

Facilitate a discussion of the stories by asking questions such as:

- Q *What did you hear [Romeo] say he wants to do when he gets bigger?*
- Q *What did [Romeo] draw to show us [he wants to make a birthday cake by himself]?*

REFLECTING

4 Reflect on Sharing with a Partner

Ask:



- Q *What did you like about sharing your story with your partner today? Turn to your partner.*

Give partners a few moments to discuss the question; then signal for the students' attention and have a few volunteers share with the class.

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:

4 Reflect on Feedback

Gather the class and briefly discuss:

- Q *What was helpful about the way your partner talked to you today?*
- Q *What problems, if any, did you have during pair conferences? What will you do to avoid those problems next time?*

Share any problems you noticed and discuss what the students will do to avoid those problems next time. Ask:

- Q *What is one thing your partner told you about your piece?*

Remind the students that authors pay close attention to their readers' feedback about what is unclear or confusing in their writing. Although authors might not follow every suggestion they receive, the feedback helps them improve their work until it is the best piece of writing possible.

Explain that during Writing Time today, each student will revise her draft based on her self-assessment and the feedback she received from her partner. Encourage the students to finalize their drafts today so that they can begin proofreading and publishing them tomorrow.

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):

4 Exchange Introductions and Give Feedback

After 15–20 minutes of writing, call for the students' attention. Explain that partners will exchange introductions and read them. Then they will give feedback about each other's introductions using the three questions on the "Writing Time" chart (WA7). Ask and briefly discuss:

Q *If you feel like your partner's introduction is incomplete, what might you say or do to be helpful to your partner?*

Students might say:

"I could tell her that knowing how to [jump double Dutch] is very fun and challenging and that she could put that in her introduction to make someone want to try it."

"I might say, 'From reading your introduction, I'm not sure what the directions are for. Maybe you could add a sentence to make the purpose of the directions clearer.'"

"I could say, 'Your introduction tells me what the directions are for. I would also like to learn something interesting about your topic.'"



Have partners read each other's introductions and give each other feedback using the questions on the "Writing Time" chart (WA7). After allowing ample time for partners to share, signal for the students' attention.

5 Revise Introductions

Ask and have the students reflect on the following question:

Q *How will you revise your introduction based on your partner's feedback?*

Explain that the students will use their partners' feedback to revise their introductions, if necessary. Then have the students resume writing for 10–15 more minutes.

Signal to let the students know when Writing Time is over.

WA7

Writing Time

- Does the introduction tell the reader what the directions are about?
- Does the introduction provide interesting information about the topic?
- Does the introduction prepare the reader to read the directions?

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

During this six-week unit, the students immerse themselves in nonfiction texts about animals. Then partners select an animal to research together. Each pair of students writes, revises, and publishes an informational report about the animal. The students learn research skills such as taking notes, categorizing information by subtopic, and conducting effective Internet searches. They learn about features of expository text, such as illustrations, captions, and tables of contents. Partners write an introduction to their report that captures the reader’s interest. They use facts, details, and definitions to add substance to their writing; transitional words and phrases to link ideas; and conclusions that bring a report to a close. The students practice relevant skills and conventions, such as correcting run-on sentences and fragments. Partners share resources fairly, make decisions together, and take responsibility for their own part of the work.

Week 3, Day 2 (p. 397):

SHARING AND REFLECTING

5 Reflect on Taking Responsibility During the Information Search

Ask and briefly discuss questions such as:

- Q *Who added a research question to your list? Tell us about it.*
- Q *What did you and your partner do today to act responsibly as you looked for resources?*
- Q *What problems did you have? What can you do tomorrow to avoid those problems? Why will it be important for you to try to avoid those problems?*

Explain that the students will continue to research their animals over the next couple of weeks. Distribute a folder to each pair of students and have partners write their names on it. Explain that they will keep all of the papers related to their informational report in this folder. Have them place their sheet of research questions and any other loose papers in their folder. Have partners decide who will keep the folder until the next lesson.

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.