

Beyond Checklists and Rubrics: Engaging Students in Authentic Conversations about Their Writing

Dawson describes several methods for helping students solicit and give each other meaningful feedback on their writing. Specific strategies for decreasing students' anxieties and increasing their depth of commentary are included.

Please take out your rough drafts and turn to the person next to you. I want to give you a chance to share your writing with a partner." Ellen, the English teacher I was observing, smiled at her restless group of ninth-grade students. She held up a stack of papers. "As you read your partner's paper, be sure to answer each question on this peer response checklist. Then you can take your own sheet home to help you revise."

The sounds of chairs scraping and notebooks opening filled the room. I watched as most partnerships got right to work, silently reading through drafts and responding to each question on Ellen's checklist. Some students wrote only cursory comments, writing "good job" or "needs more detail," while others wrote out longer answers in complete sentences. When students began talking, most focused on explaining what they had written on the checklist.

As I observed Ellen's lesson unfold, I found myself in familiar territory. When I began teaching high school, I created files of rubrics for different writing assignments, each with corresponding peer-response worksheets or checklists. I had visions of students engaged in meaningful conversations, improving their writing and expanding their sense of audience beyond me, their teacher. I knew Ellen shared these hopes for her students. Yet, as I watched Ellen's students, and as I reflected on my early practice, I was struck by the lack of authentic discussion about writing. The talk I did overhear was heavily influenced by the checklist, with comments focused on the *teacher's* questions and purposes rather than the students' questions. Were these the sorts of au-

thentic conversations we teachers had desired? Did these interactions resemble those of "real world" writers? Did they help students reconsider their writing or enter purposefully into the writing of their peers?

I struggle to think of when, as a writer, I have asked someone to fill out a checklist about my writing, especially when I am immersed in drafting and revision processes. When I write for my own purposes, and when I write for real audiences, I need more complex interactions to occur. As I wrote this article, for example, I sat down regularly with writing groups and partners who pushed me to consider my audience, asked me to clarify my purpose, and helped me to see how my writing decisions shaped their experiences with my text. Our interactions were dialogic in nature, grounded in inquiry, and filled with observations, questions, clarifications, and responses. Much of the feedback I received was oral, with written comments on my drafts serving to focus talk, rather than replace it. I was an active participant in conversations, asking frequent follow-up questions and jotting notes on my drafts to help me revise.

Unfortunately, research has shown that authentic discussions such as the ones I shared with my writing groups are not the norm in secondary English classrooms (Nystrand). Instead, recitation practices dominate, with the teacher asking the questions and students trying to come up with the "correct" responses. By contrast, authentic discussion requires students to solve problems and explore complex questions where there are no clearly defined right or wrong answers. As such, authentic discussions are inquiry-based, where students and

teachers collaboratively delve into complex ideas, building on each other's contributions as they explore real-life problems and processes (Hillocks; McCann et al.; Nystrand; Wilhelm).

Authentic discussions about writing are the sorts of conversations that professional or experienced writers might have, where writers explore purpose, effect, clarity, and interpretation. These discussions help students develop "writing skills and strategies because students are able to work at progressively higher levels with the guidance and support of teachers and the collaboration of peers. The processes internalized during such guided or collaborative work provide for new levels of development in written communication" (McCann et al. 125). If writing were just composed of discrete skills and behaviors, then it might be sufficient to focus instruction on transferring these from teacher to students in a recitation or fill-in-the-blank format. But if being a writer involves shaping writing identities, building practices, and exploring "ways of being in the world" (Gee viii), then we must change how we conceptualize and structure student talk in writing instruction.

To foster authentic student discussions about writing, we must be strategic in how we prepare students to interact around their writing. The challenge is not necessarily to find new classroom activities. Rather, the challenge is in how to enact even familiar strategies so that we deliberately teach students to engage in authentic writing conversations.

I recently taught a poetry writing workshop as part of an undergraduate English methods course, a required course in a teacher preparation sequence. I drew heavily on writing strategies I had used when teaching high school writing workshops. Together we read a wide variety of poetry, explored selected poems as mentor texts, experimented with different techniques, and wrote and revised our own poetry. Prior to our work together, most of the students said they had little experience writing and revising their work according to their purposes and intentions. Like Ellen's students, they also said they had little experience engaging in authentic writing conversations, much less using these interactions to shape their writing. Thus, learning to talk about writing in ways that fostered writing growth became an explicit goal of our lessons. Below I share strategies I used, as well as moments from our jour-

ney together, where students practiced giving voice to their writing, providing and using feedback anchored in each other's texts, and inquiring into each other's practices.

Bringing in All Voices: Building Student Confidence through Quaker Shares

Because my goal is to develop *talk* about writing, I try to get students to read excerpts of their writing aloud as soon as possible. I want them to practice listening to the sounds of their own words, as well as the words of their peers.

Speaking aloud in class can be intimidating for some students, however. A colleague of mine recently shared an interaction she had with one of her students, who told her that he had always been considered the "quiet" student in his classes. For him, to speak in class meant breaking a silence and changing a public identity he had created (and that his peers expected of him). This represented a powerful obstacle to building talk about his writing.

Even for students who are comfortable talking in class, it can feel risky to read aloud a piece of unpolished (or even polished) writing. Megan summed it up: "I was not exactly eager to read my poem out loud for fear of ridicule or complete humiliation." Kim concurred, describing reading her poetry aloud as "TERRIFYING! I specifically chose one of my shortest poems . . . because I just wanted it to be over." These comments demonstrate that before we can build authentic conversations about writing, we must first help students overcome their fears of speaking aloud and sharing.

A Quaker Share can help students begin to break their silences and overcome these fears. Within a Quaker Share, students simply read aloud a few of their own words, hearing what their voices sound like in the space of our classroom; different students read from their work as they wish until the Quaker Share ends. When we first begin this practice, I tell students that there will be no verbal response to their writing, and I even ask them not to

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applaud or congratulate. I want to help students know exactly what to expect: that their writing will occupy a few moments of "air time," and then we will hear from someone else. In this way, I hope to help limit students' fears about peer reactions (*What if no one claps, or if there is an awkward pause?*).

Before we begin the Quaker Share, I give the students time to select at least a line or two that they can share with the group; even just a few words will do. When we begin, we do not raise hands (where I would be directing the flow of sharing), but rather practice listening for a space in which to share. I want our group to begin to respond to cues from each other,

rather than maintain a constant focus on me. At the end, I often ask students to write or talk about their experiences.

Kim, who had found reading aloud to be "terrifying," reflected, "I did, however, love listening to everyone's work. Also, it helped to know that everyone was more or less nervous. I liked how we went whenever we felt like going. . . . I hate going in a circle because then you don't get a choice. I volunteer when I have a sudden boost of confidence."

It is my hope that helping students practice reading aloud in low-stakes settings such as Quaker Shares will increase their confidence for entering more conversations about their writing.

Praising Specific Writing Moves: Grounding Writing Discussions in Texts

It is a natural move after a Quaker Share to help students begin to give each other feedback. Receiving peer feedback raises additional student concerns, however, as Adam shared: "Reading in front of the class was a little nerve racking, and it doesn't help when everyone in the class are such good writers." For Adam, celebrating his peers' work was easy, but he was worried that his work did not stack up. We must help students practice identifying specific praiseworthy elements of every student's writing, helping all writers see strengths in their work.

Once again, I like to start with reading drafts aloud to reinforce the idea that we share continuously as we write, not just when we have "finished"

pieces. I ask for a volunteer to read, and I ask class members to listen carefully and write down words and phrases they like in their notebooks. I may model this on the overhead the first time, to help illustrate the concept, and I often ask my volunteer to read the short excerpt twice to help us accurately record the words. The writer then takes control of the discussion, calling on peers who read their favorite excerpts back to the writer.

I am always happily surprised, when I create the space and time for it, by how many initially reluctant students share their writing with the whole class. I remember one high school class in particular and how powerful it was when students who rarely raised their hands suddenly volunteered to read their work aloud. There is a security in knowing exactly the kind of feedback you will receive. I could almost see students wondering, *Which parts of my writing will everyone like the best?* After reading his work aloud, Adam commented, "Even though I was nervous, it really felt pretty good afterward to get the poem out and see that people appreciated it."

This activity allows students not only to practice reading their raw work aloud but also to hear *specifically* which of their language decisions impress their audience. They practice grounding their talk in the written text, which allows them to begin revision discussions by building on strengths. This activity also demonstrates the way we move fluidly between our talking and our writing. As readers/listeners, we *write* peer language in our notebooks so that we can have more specific *conversations* with them about their writing. As writers we carefully *take notes* about what our readers/listeners appreciated and why, and we consider how to build on these strengths in later revisions. After engaging in this practice as a full class, I move students into writing partnerships, allowing all students to receive even more in-depth feedback.

Exploring Interpretations and Possibilities: Adopting an Inquiry Stance

To grow as writers, students need to move beyond recognizing strengths. They also need to engage in conversations about their purposes and intentions as writers, and they need to explore their readers' interpretations and questions. To achieve this, I want to cultivate an inquiry stance, in which stu-

dents practice approaching a text with questions and observations, rather than with judgments or grades. I emphasize an inquiry stance to help students extend their use of specific observations, always grounding their feedback and questions in the text and in discussion with the writer.

Because this approach to writing discussion does not include the safety net of a peer-response checklist or a rubric, modeling is critical. As Jill noted, "In the beginning stages of our group revisions, I felt that I made very little progress. When looking at my group members' poems I was unsure of what to look for, what to question and what to suggest. When Christine modeled a group revision for the class I was able to see how it was done and I was more helpful to my group members. I couldn't believe the difference in revision after having seen this modeled for us."

I most often begin modeling these conversations by using a rough draft of my own writing. (I use student models in later minilessons.) I resist the temptation to revise this piece beforehand, as I want to be dissatisfied with it. I want to *need* students' help in making it better. I admit I felt vulnerable the first several times I did this. At the time I was working with high school students, many of whom I knew to be good writers. I worried: *I'm the teacher. What will they think when they see errors and lack of focus in my writing?* Yet these insecurities reinforced the need to share my writing. If I, as their teacher, had these concerns, what must the reluctant writers feel? How can I expect them to engage in a practice if I refuse to do it myself? Sharing my writing with the class also allows me to position myself as a fellow writer, as someone who struggles with the same things they do.

I put my writing on the overhead projector. As I read it aloud, I ask the students to jot down both what they like about the writing as well as *questions* they have for me—perhaps about decisions I made, or about my purpose, or about what I am trying to say in a certain spot. As students begin providing feedback, I make notes on my copy, underlining what they like and recording their questions. I want them to see me making use of their feedback. I draw out their inquiry, asking frequent follow-up questions. I then ask them to share their interpretation of what I am saying, and I compare it with my intentions. We discuss specific segments

in depth, determining how certain writing choices may have created confusion or altered my intended focus. I ask about parts that trouble me, not being satisfied until I get specific feedback. Once again, after modeling with the full class, students work with partners to have similar conversations around their individual drafts.

After one or two full-class modeling sessions, I move students into three- or four-person writing groups, allowing them to explore multiple viewpoints and work with lengthier pieces of writing. As students work in these small groups, I weave in additional full-class modeling lessons, using volunteered student texts to continue to illustrate ways of engaging writers in authentic conversations about their texts.

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Overcoming Challenges: Helping Students Build Authentic Discussion about Writing

Developing authentic talk about writing is a complex process, as it involves bringing together students with different talents, perspectives, and personalities. Many challenges arise along the way, which require different responses from the teacher. I find it helps to be explicit with students, to emphasize the importance of learning how to effectively discuss our writing in order to grow as writers.

Helping Writers Avoid Defensiveness and Listen to Feedback

Some students resist an inquiry stance when sharing their work, instead trying to defend their writing decisions or overly explain themselves. If they continue in this pattern, they miss opportunities to explore readers' reactions and gain productive feedback to support meaningful revisions. Thus, in the midst of learning to write and discuss, students also need to learn to listen. To help students practice listening to peer feedback, I sometimes ask the writer to be silent while group members point out favorite parts and interpret/respond/wonder about the piece. I describe this as writers' opportunities to be a "fly on the wall" and get insider information on how others interpret their writing. Writers take notes as

group members react and respond, waiting to ask questions and offer clarification until the second half of the discussion.

Helping Writers Envision Leading Authentic Writing Discussions

Students benefit from models of writing group interaction that are not moderated by the teacher. They see how a group of students functions together in an authentic discussion about writing, and they

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observe how students can facilitate conversations about their own writing—without a teacher intervening. I select a small group of writers whom I have observed having rich writing conversations. I ask them to sit in a visible place in the classroom and discuss a short piece of one member's writing while the rest of the class observes. Before the students start their conversation, I assign specific observation questions to the rest of the class:

- How does the writer facilitate the discussion of the writing? How does the writer keep the focus on his or her goals and purposes while asking different members for feedback?
- How does the group use questions? What are some of the questions they ask each other?
- How does the group use the text itself? Where do members make reference to specific passages? How do they direct each other to specific portions of the text?
- How does the group involve everyone's voice and thoughts?
- How does the group spend its time? How does the group find new topics for discussion so participants are using the full time provided for each writer's paper?

Depending on my goals and what I have observed as students' needs, I may have the whole class focus on one element, such as the group's use of questions. Or, I may split the class into groups and assign each group a different element to observe. Then students have a chance to discuss what they observed in small groups, and we synthesize these observations as a larger class.

Helping Writers Develop Useful Language for Discussion

Sometimes language itself limits group discussions, especially when students do not know how to communicate their ideas about each other's writing. A natural follow-up to the above lesson and to full-class modeling lessons is to record helpful language, taking note of phrases that help us have the kinds of conversations we want to have around writing. These phrases and sentence stems can be posted around the class, recorded in student writing notebooks, and built upon during our year. Here are some possible things to gather language around:

- What we like about each other's writing or how we experience it as a reader ("I like the sensory detail in this section, especially where you write XYZ." "This part really grabs my interest because . . .")
- What we wonder about each other's writing ("I wonder what else made this character act this way." "I wonder how your essay would flow if you moved this section earlier.")
- What questions we have as writers or what support we need for our writing ("I am trying to make it suspenseful here—how can I do it better?" "I want this to flow more smoothly between topics.")

Making Authentic Writing Discussions an Instructional Priority

Engaging in authentic writing discussions helps students develop writing practices that extend beyond an individual piece of writing. Anthony commented on what he learned from his peers through his writing discussions:


I didn't know so much work could go into a piece to make it better. I always thought that a poet could just write. Put words on a page and poof, just like magic, there it was: great work. I didn't realize how good peer review could be. It's one of those things where you have to take advantage of it to get it. . . . [T]o share with peers, edit, and practice the exercises definitely made my writing better in the end. If I had ended the process after my first draft, which I thought sounded good, I wouldn't have the piece that I have now.

Anthony observed that talking about his writing helped him write a better poem, a piece that

exceeded what he might have envisioned or crafted on his own. Even more important, Anthony's reflection shows he has engaged in writing practices that he can draw on in writing future pieces.

The strategies shared here may not be new to many classrooms. What I hope is useful is how to deliberately use these and other strategies to teach students how to *talk* in meaningful ways about writing, building real-world writing practices. When teaching writing, I want to enable students to discuss their purposes, questions, frustrations, and decisions *as writers*. It is this complex talk about writing that is missing from so many peer-response lessons. I want students to *want* to share their writing and to consider their classmates, parents, teachers, and community members as resources who can help them develop particular pieces of writing and grow as writers.

To reach these goals, which prepare students not only to participate in our growing classroom community of writers but also to participate in wider communities of writers, I need to be as purposeful with my instruction of talk as I am with my writing instruction. Just as merely assigning writing does not result in writing growth, merely assigning talk does not result in meaningful discussions. I ask students to engage in what may feel like risky behavior to them: to speak aloud in a classroom, to share their

writing in draft form, and to provide feedback when they may lack confidence as readers and writers. It requires intentional instructional support to prepare students to engage in these important practices. These real-life skills—the ability to open one's practice to others, to articulate one's purpose and intent, to request and use meaningful feedback to shape a text, to inquire into other writers' decisions, and to help other writers clarify their vision or intentions—prepare students to interact as writers and in their worlds, beyond the walls of our classroom. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Dawson highlights how students often feel uncomfortable discussing their writing and think that the first draft is the only draft; they do not understand how to interact with others to make improvements to their writing. In "Draft Letters: Improving Student Writing through Critical Thinking," students write letters to their potential reviewers. This gives the writers the opportunity to reflect on their chosen pieces of writing that will be shared or worked on. The activity contains sample letters, which students can examine as they compose their own letters. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=902