

The Power of Purposeful Talk in the Primary-Grade Writing Conference

Four illustrative writing conferences from one veteran teacher's first-grade classroom showcase how teacher talk greatly shapes the nature of work children are able to accomplish.

It was a typical October afternoon in Maggie Malone's (all names used are pseudonyms) first-grade classroom. The hustle and bustle of the lunch period had ended, and she and her students moved into one of their favorite times of the day—writer's workshop (Calkins, 2003). Moments earlier, Ms. Malone had finished a whole-group mini-lesson at the carpet and dismissed students to their writing spots. After answering a few wayward questions and scanning the room to assure herself that all students transitioned into independent writing time successfully, Ms. Malone called a few children over to her back table to meet with them about their writing.

Similar to a number of primary-grade settings across the United States (Cutler & Graham, 2008), brief conversations—or conferences (Calkins, Hartman, & White, 2005) as they are often referred to—in which teachers meet one-on-one with students to share, discuss, revise, edit, or evaluate a piece of student writing or an idea for writing are an important and widely used pedagogical tool in Ms. Malone's classroom. Here, such conferences provide a space for participants to recognize and articulate individual strengths and goals, as well as to try out new writing strategies in order to move toward greater independence as writers. Moreover, they function as a type of formative assessment that aids the teacher in her understanding of where students are in relation to the mini-lessons they have undergone and what steps are needed to nudge their writing to the next level.

Despite possessing a wealth of knowledge on writing pedagogy, an exemplar writing practice,

and over a decade of experience conferring with primary-grade writers, Ms. Malone still found writing conferences to be “the most challenging part of her instruction.” While she agreed that spending time in individual conversations tailored to students' unique writing needs was an instructional opportunity full of promise, she often wondered if her engagement with her students “in the moment” was as productive to their growth as writers as it could be. In other words, the principle concern for Ms. Malone and others like her is, What is the impact of talk on learning? In *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*, Johnston (2004) recognized that it was through talk that children learned how to become strategic thinkers and literacy learners, and that what teachers said and how they said it shaped the opportunities for student learning that were possible during instruction. Even so, when making determinations about how to teach writing in their classrooms, the ways in which teachers deliver content, or the talk itself, tend to receive less attention (Alexander, 2006; Cazden, 2001; Christie, 2002; Johnston, 2004). According to Alexander (2006), for classroom talk to be productive, educators “must know where the talk is going, and do what is required to lead it there” (p. 49). In other words, successfully scaffolding children's thinking during a writing conference from present to desired understanding requires that teachers purposefully structure their talk in relation to those overarching goals they and their students are trying to achieve.

In this article, after a brief introduction to relevant research/theory and an orientation to the larger

context in which observed conferences occurred, I share four writing conference interactions between veteran writing teacher Maggie Malone and several of her first-grade students. Each illustrative case showcases how teacher talk, and especially teacher talk in regard to overall conference purpose, greatly shaped the nature of work she and her students accomplished within each conference interaction. It is important to note, however, that in offering these examples and equating them to four possible writing conference types that might be drawn on by teachers toward particular purposes, I do not wish to imply that these are the only legitimate ways in which to confer with young writers. Responding to writers in the moment requires a far greater level of flexibility and messiness than can be adequately captured here. Instead, I offer these example conferences as *telling cases* (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) that, along with the recommended questions for reflection found at the end of this piece, function to assist teachers to better name, reflect on, and evaluate their own conference talk and the opportunities it might afford their students.

Purposeful Instruction through Purposeful Talk: A Theoretical Framework

Elementary-grade writing conferences as portrayed in much of the professional literature (e.g., Anderson, 2000; Calkins, Hartman, & White, 2005; Graves, 1983; Ray, 2001) stand in stark contrast to traditional school culture's characterization of teachers as architects and regulators of classroom talk (Jackson, 1990). For instance, in traditional writing instruction, teachers transmit knowledge as they lecture on tenets of "good" writing and evaluate final written products against such criteria (Hawkins & Razali, 2012). On the contrary, in a writing conference, teachers facilitate student learning through co-discovering the writing process with their students. The role of the elementary writing teacher, as specified by Graves (1983), is to "Follow the child, let the child talk, let the child understand that what the child knows is primary" (p. 101). Likewise, within a writing conference, students are no longer passive beings waiting for their teachers

to impart knowledge. Instead, they must take ownership of their own ideas, advocate for their own learning, express their own desires, and converse with their teachers as partners.

Researchers examining writing conference talk, however, claim that writing conference interactions are often not student-centered and process-oriented conversations between a writer and a reader. Instead, when enacting conferences with elementary students, teachers tend to assume the customary role of "primary-knower" (Berry, 1981) and interact with students utilizing chiefly closed, known-answer questions and directives (e.g., Daiute, Campbell, Griffin, Reddy, & Tivnan, 1994; McKeaney, 2009; Morse, 1994; Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989). For example, Daiute et al. (1994) observed that teachers dominated talk during conferences, speaking an average of almost four times more than students. Furthermore, McKeaney (2009) found that conference talk was highly directive, and that conference interactions between teachers and students were predominantly structured in such a manner as to position teachers in a traditional authoritative role in which they both asked and held answers to questions.

Research presents an image of conference talk in the elementary grades, then, as a simple repackaging of typical—and perhaps antiquated—teacher-student talk patterns (Cazden, 2001), unwavering regardless of situation and antithetical to the innovative, student-centered process approach imagined by their advocates. Nevertheless, I maintain that this dichotomy is too simplistic in its characterization of ideal versus poor conferring practice. Much of the literature on writing conferences in which frequent use of traditional classroom talk and conventional teacher/student roles were observed explicitly involved students revising and editing otherwise completed texts. Consequently, it is possible that when conducting writing conferences during final phases of the writing process, elementary teachers might appropriately and purposefully don a more authoritative role, yet elect to structure talk in an entirely different manner during earlier phases, based on the work they wish to accomplish with their students.

To illustrate this point, I draw on the work of Bakhtin. During writing conferences, educators construct and select particular *speech genres* based, ideally, on the goals they wish to accomplish with their students. Bakhtin (1986) defined speech genres as “relatively stable thematic, compositional, and stylistic types of utterances” (p. 64) born from those functions and conditions of specific speech communication. Put another way, within our native language and culture, speech genres exist for organizing the manner in which we interact with others toward particular communication goals. The choice rests, then, not in whether teachers draw on speech genres during writing conference interactions, but instead, in which particular speech genre they choose to construct learning within a given moment.

Writing Instruction in Maggie Malone’s Classroom

Maggie Malone, an elementary teacher of 16 years in a small suburban school in the Midwestern United States, was chosen for her strong reputation as an educator and extensive experience with writing workshop methods and conferring. Her shelves brim with mentor texts, and her walls display anchor charts crafted during writing mini-lessons. The environment she creates for her young writers is one in which workshop advocates such as Lucy Calkins or Donald Graves would be proud.

Students in Ms. Malone’s classroom participate daily in an afternoon writing period lasting anywhere from 45 to 60 minutes. The writing instruction occurring during this period is largely based on workshop philosophies and practices; the current curriculum draws mostly from Calkins’s *Units of Study for Primary Writing* (2003). As such, each writing session begins with a 10- to 15-minute mini-lesson highlighting a skill or process students could apply to their own writing. This mini-lesson is followed by a 30-minute period of individual writing that ends with a short share in which students read their writing aloud to a partner or to the group. Writing conferences in this classroom occur daily during independent writing time, with Ms. Malone conferring alongside four to six students each day. This approach to writing instruction was comfortable

for Ms. Malone, as she had utilized such methods for over a decade. Furthermore, her students were immersed in this approach across grade levels throughout their primary years.

Using a variety of resources—video recordings of each writing period, additional video and audio recordings of all teacher–student writing conferences, teacher interviews, fieldnotes, classroom artifacts, and the collection of student work samples—I chronicled the conferring practices of Ms. Malone and 23 of her first-grade students across a four-week period in October and November. Students were participating in a unit on crafting personal narratives and underwent daily mini-lessons, often aligned to a particular writing process stage (planning, drafting, revising, editing, publishing), in which mentor narrative texts were shared. While mini-lessons tended to showcase a rigid process (beginning with lessons on planning and ending with those exploring methods of editing and publication), students generally engaged in a more fluid and recursive process during their independent writing time. As such, students planned, drafted, revised, and edited several personal narratives on self-selected topics at their own pace, eventually taking one personal narrative through to publication. (For full analysis procedures and a detailed account of how conference genres—a term I’ve derived in connection to Bakhtin’s speech genres—operated in this classroom, see Hawkins, 2015.)

Writing Conferences: Purposes, Forms, and Possibilities for Learning

Below, I present four writing conferences from Ms. Malone’s classroom. Each conference was purposefully selected from a larger sampling of 56 writing conferences in order to illustrate one of four conference types observed in Ms. Malone’s classroom. I offer these conference types as potential categorizations that might be drawn on by teachers toward particular purposes (or goals). Moreover, these conference types, along with the recommended questions for reflection found at the end of this piece, serve to assist teachers to better name, reflect on, and evaluate their own conference talk and the

Table 1. Potential primary-grade writing conference types (Conferencing as . . .)

Verbal Rehearsal	Transcription Activity	Criterion-Specific Collaboration	Find-and-Fix Correction
A verbal rehearsal conference affords students an open space to discuss, try out, and orally rehearse new text or ideas for text with an interested and supportive listener prior to committing words to the written page.	A transcription activity conference affords students an opportunity to draft written text under the close guidance of a knowledgeable other that more closely approximates conventional norms for word- and sentence-level construction.	A criterion-specific collaboration conference affords students a collaborative space to generate and revise content toward explicit criterion expectations with a knowledgeable, and sometimes critical, listener.	A find-and-fix correction conference affords students an opportunity to achieve better word- and sentence-level transcription so that it more closely approximates conventional norms for word- and sentence-level construction under the close guidance of a knowledgeable other in the course of editing previously written text.

opportunities it might afford their students. Table 1 provides a summary of each conference type.

Conferencing as Verbal Rehearsal: An Illustrative Case

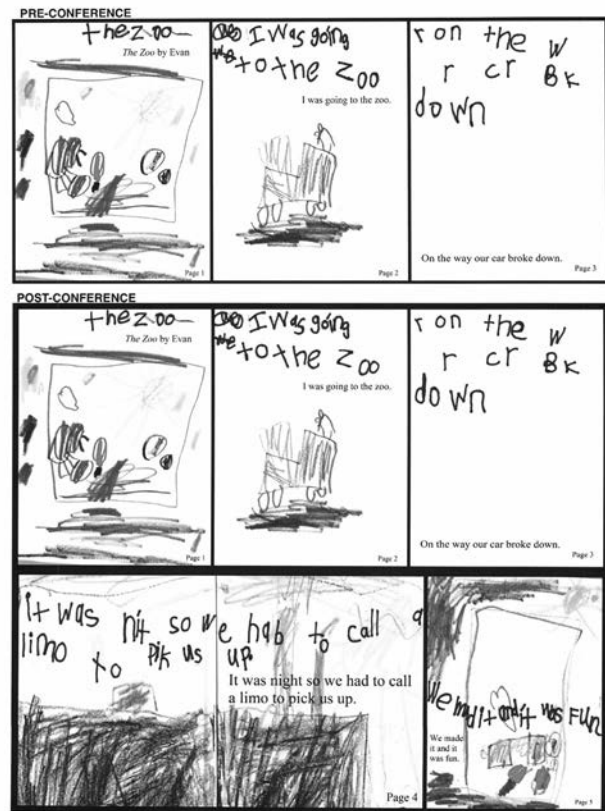
Ms. Malone was at her back table conferring with Rejane when movement caught her eye. Looking up, she glimpsed Evan once again chasing after a wayward crayon on the floor. She asked him to join her at the table with his writing, and, upon seeing what little he had accomplished that afternoon on his personal narrative titled *The Zoo*, decided to hold an impromptu conference. Ms. Malone described Evan as a reluctant writer who struggled with both letter formation and transcribing text in conventional ways. Whereas at this point in the unit many students were wrapping up their first stories or already beginning a second, Evan had completed only two one-sentence pages beyond his title page (see Fig. 1).

Despite her worry for Evan’s lack of progress on his piece thus far, Ms. Malone did not lead with this concern. Instead, through use of a broad authentic question, she opened the conversational floor for Evan to talk about his writing or process from his perspective (line 001).

001 Teacher: Okay Evan, how’s it going today?

Inviting writers to respond to their own writing prior to offering feedback or evaluation aligns well with Ms. Malone’s stance of teachers as

Figure 1. Evan’s pre- and post-conference work sample: “The Zoo”



facilitators within a writing conference—a role in which the adult participant is expected to act less as a “teacher” and more a mirror for children to “see their intent, their needs, their problems” (Murray, 1979, as cited in Lerner, 2005, p. 201). Evan took up Ms. Malone’s invitation, reading his text aloud (line

002) and then sharing his intention to move on to the next page of his story (line 004).

002 Evan: Umm . . . ONE DAY I WAS GOING TO THE ZOO. ON THE WAY OUR CAR BROKE DOWN . . .

003 Teacher: Oh, no! On the way.

004 Evan: Yeah. I was going to the next page after.

In this brief initial exchange, Ms. Malone deduced two important conclusions that helped determine the form and function of the talk to follow. First, Evan was finished—at least in his mind—with the two pages of text he had shared aloud. Second, Evan needed some assistance “growing” his story across the remainder of the pages in his booklet, given that he had added no additional words or pictures to his text in the preceding twenty minutes of the independent writing period. In order to support Evan to further grow his story, Ms. Malone drew on what I have termed a *verbal rehearsal conference* as her guide. A verbal rehearsal conference functions, in essence, to provide writers an open space to discuss, try out, and orally rehearse new text or ideas for text with an interested and supportive listener prior to committing that work to the written page—an especially important task for young developing writers who, in general, show a tendency to spend little time on planning and for whom the chore of transcribing text itself can be daunting (McCutchen, 2006).

During a verbal rehearsal conference, the teacher adopts both an active and a passive role: conversing with students to build a shared understanding of their focus, listening to their ideas and parroting them back, encouraging elaboration through the use of authentic questioning, and periodically reformulating their oral expressions to better approximate the written word and support future text transcription. Furthermore, students take on an active speaking role, for it is their knowledge that must be tapped in order to move the writing forward. We see something akin to this occurring between Evan and Ms. Malone in lines 005–012 as she guided him through a retelling of the subsequent

“itsy-bitsy steps” in his story in order to generate content for the next page of his text.

005 Teacher: ON THE WAY OUR CAR BROKE DOWN. Then what happened?

006 Evan: We . . . we had to call someone to pick us up.

007 Teacher: So you had to call someone to pick you up.

008 Evan: Yeah. It was kind of a long time, because the zoo was . . . like we broke down right where the zoo is.

009 Teacher: Did you even make it to the zoo?

010 Evan: We did. But . . .

011 Teacher: You did make it.

012 Evan: Yeah. But it was past an hour. And we had to call some . . . a limo to pick us up because it was too dark.

Here, Evan showed active engagement in his conference, both through his sheer volume of words and the elaborated nature of many of his turns of talk. Moreover, Ms. Malone did not add her own thinking or push Evan in any particular direction at this point. Nor do we see her evaluate the correctness of his ideas. Instead, she acted as a sounding board, revoicing his words and encouraging him to say more. Even her closed question (a form of teacher questioning that traditionally seeks succinct, specific responses such as a yes or no answer) in line 009 functioned as an authentic one that an interested listener might ask and moved the conversation forward.

Throughout this exchange, Evan and Ms. Malone’s words were contingent upon what occurred in the previous turn of talk, aiding participants to reach a joint understanding of the text they were attempting to generate together. It was only once this joint understanding was reached that we see Ms. Malone (line 013) steer Evan back to his writing with a suggestion for a sentence that he might wish to include on the next page of his text.

013 Teacher: Okay, so could you say, it was night so we had to call a limo to pick us up?

014 Evan: [Student enthusiastically nods yes.]

True to the nature of a verbal rehearsal conference, this suggestion took the form of an authentic question to the writer and incorporated a reformulation of the writer's own words. And while Ms. Malone might have pressed Evan to generate his own sentence prior to offering him one of her own, Evan showed agreement with and appreciation for this scaffold in his enthusiastic nod (line 014).

Evan and Ms. Malone's writing conference could have ended after this suggestion was made, perhaps with Ms. Malone restating her suggestion and explicitly drawing attention to the generative process for text creation they had undergone. Such an interaction would meet Ms. Malone's general goals for conferring, as it would nudge the student forward toward the accomplishment of his current intention (to move to the next page in his story), improve his written text (through the addition of an "itsy-bitsy step"), and offer the possibility of improving his future process. Many of Ms. Malone's observed verbal rehearsal conferences concluded in this manner, especially those involving idea generation during the initial planning stages of a new story or a student more capable of conventional text transcription. However, on this occasion, Ms. Malone chose to continue her work with Evan in order to help him draft in writing the words they had generated during the verbal rehearsal. As we will see, this new purpose invoked a distinctively different pattern of talk for these two participants from that which preceded it.

Conferencing as Transcription Activity: An Illustrative Case

Upon determining the content of his ensuing page, Ms. Malone abruptly switched the focus of her conference with Evan from idea generation to the written transcription of content. With this change, Ms. Malone shifted from a verbal rehearsal conference to drawing on what I have labeled a *transcription activity conference*. Unlike older students, many primary-aged children, like Evan, do not yet have a firm grasp on the basic conventions of writing (McCutchen, 2006). Moreover, deficiencies in basic transcription skills have been shown to adversely

affect writing production and quality (Graham, McKeown, Kiuahara, & Harris, 2012). For instance, Evan struggled with how to alphabetically represent written words (beyond the list of high-frequency words available to him on the classroom word wall) in ways a reader, including himself, could later interpret. Writing, therefore, was a painfully slow process for Evan; his ideas often were lost in the lengthy time it took to transcribe them. The transcription activity conference, then, provides students an opportunity to draft written text—under the close guidance of a knowledgeable other—that more closely approximates conventional norms (in terms of letter formation, spelling, capitalization, spacing, and punctuation) for word- and sentence-level construction. Within its bounds, teachers most often led students to transcribe sentences word by word, pausing when mistakes were made or when students were unable to comply independently, and assisted writers by means of facilitating strategic routines for problem solving, stimulating recall, or providing additional information.

Take, for example, the talk in lines 015–025, which followed Evan and Ms. Malone's earlier described interaction.

015 Teacher: Okay, it . . .

016 Evan: /I/T/ . . . I. T. [Student writes IT on paper.]

017 Teacher: IT was . . .

018 Evan: [Student writes WAS on paper.]

019 Teacher: IT WAS night . . .

020 Evan: /N/. [Student writes N on paper.]

021 Teacher: Okay, put your fingers up. What do you hear next?

022 Evan: /N//IGHT/ . . . T. [Student writes T on paper.]

023 Teacher: Put your fingers up. /N//III//T/ . . . What goes in the middle?

024 Evan: [Student adds I on paper between the N and T.]

025 Teacher: There you go. IT WAS NIGHT so . . .

Here, Ms. Malone directly guided Evan through each word of their previously generated sentence, first giving him the word, then providing a space for him to transcribe the word onto his paper.

When Evan's attempts met Ms. Malone's standard for correct transcription for him at this point in the year (as they did in lines 016 and 018), she repeated what had been written and prompted for the next word in the sentence. This continued until one of Evan's attempts failed, in this case with the word *night*. In line 020, we see Evan offer up only a first-letter representation of *night*. Ms. Malone deemed this representation unacceptable in line 021 with her directive for him to put his fingers up and her display question (a form of inauthentic question seeking information the teacher already possesses) asking him what he hears next. Upon receiving this prompt from his teacher, Evan added a final letter representation to his paper in line 022, which Ms. Malone once again deemed unacceptable. While Ms. Malone did not expect a conventional representation of the *-ight* chunk, in line 023 she pushed Evan to isolate and include the audible middle sound with her directive to once again put his fingers up, whereupon she prompted him for the long /I/ sound and asked a display question referencing the missing vowel. Ms. Malone followed Evan's correct response in line 024 with validation of his answer in line 025 and a quick shift to the next word. This pattern of talk between Ms. Malone and Evan continued through the completion of his sentence, with similar assistance to that of the transcription of NIGHT occurring for the words HAD, CALL, LIMO, and PICK.

Evan's verbal participation during the transcription portion of his conference was exceedingly low. Seeing as Ms. Malone was far more versed than Evan in English conventions for transcribing written text, she shifted her role from facilitator to that of a keeper of knowledge who, over the course of the conference, imparted her wisdom and led her student to correct answers. As such, instead of authentic questions and the positioning of Evan as primary-knower, Ms. Malone's talk consisted heavily of display questions, directives, prompts, and didactic statements—all common forms used in

traditional teacher telling (Cazden, 2001). Evan's responses were also characteristically succinct in nature and often overtly evaluated for their correctness. I would argue, however, that Ms. Malone drew on this more traditional pattern of teacher–student interaction not only for the purpose of teacher telling, but also to model a transcription strategy Evan might use in order to work more independently in the future (first stretching an unknown word across his fingers to isolate the sounds he hears, then going back and re-reading his sentence to determine what his next word should be).

Upon conclusion of his conference with Ms. Malone, and when once again left to work on his own, Evan quickly printed “WE MADE IT AND IT WAS FUN” to a previously blank page (see Fig. 1). Note that these words were reminiscent of those spoken earlier with Ms. Malone.

Conferencing as Criterion-Specific Collaboration: An Illustrative Case

Ms. Malone met with Anthony after she had asked him back to her table that particular afternoon as part of a small group of students in need of assistance in “setting the scene” for their texts. After a brief lesson on how to set the scene, Ms. Malone transitioned from group work to one-on-one writing conferences with the following:

000 Teacher: Alright. So I want you all to take a look at your beginning right now. Re-read it to yourself, and I'm gonna kind of lean in and help you with your ideas for adding to your beginning.

Accordingly, Ms. Malone planned to focus her conferring work on generating ideas for text that better set the scene for students' personal narratives. In Ms. Malone's classroom, such a focus on idea generation would normally trigger one of two conference types. The first, a verbal rehearsal conference (as we saw with Evan) within which Ms. Malone could encourage her students to openly talk through their ideas for beginnings, urge them to say more when warranted, and offer reformulations of their words as suggestions for inclusion in their texts. The second, a *criterion-specific*

collaboration conference within which Ms. Malone and her students—utilizing talk structures similar to those found in a verbal rehearsal (e.g., authentic initiating and follow-up questions, revoicings, suggestions)—could develop a shared explicit understanding of why a particular beginning was not working and what might be done to improve upon it. I offer Anthony’s conference with Ms. Malone as an illustration of the latter.

Anthony (a writer who, like Evan, struggled with transcribing words using conventional spelling) had already finished re-reading his text when Ms. Malone turned to him (see Fig. 2). Leaning closer, she invited Anthony to read aloud his title page and story beginning (lines 001–004).

001 Teacher: Can you read me your title?

002 Anthony: I GOT A REMOTE CONTROL CAR.

003 Teacher: Okay, read me your beginning here.

004 Anthony: I DROVE MY CAR. IT DID A WHEELIE.

Having already predetermined her purpose for conferring with Anthony, Ms. Malone immediately drew attention to the disconnect between his title and the first sentences of his story through a series of authentic questions (lines 005 and 007) and an explicit statement of the problem as she saw it (line 009). With these words, Ms. Malone positioned herself as a knowledgeable reader wanting to discuss a potentially confusing story opener and generate possible alternatives for revision.

005 Teacher: Okay, now I see that your title’s called I GOT A REMOTE CONTROL CAR, but who got it for you? Was it a present?

006 Anthony: Umm, no.

007 Teacher: How did you get it then?

008 Anthony: The day after my birthday, umm, I got some presents that I already had, and we returned them. We returned them to get a new toy at the store. And when we returned them, we got the car.

009 Teacher: I see, so you returned some presents that you had gotten and you were able to buy a remote control car. Okay, so maybe that’s something you could say to help set the scene. Because you said I GOT A REMOTE CONTROL CAR as your title, but then you never really told us how you got it. You just went into the itsy-bitsy steps. So instead, you would put something like what you told me. That would kind of help your reader to understand how you got the car before you tell us the part about playing with it.

Whereas within a verbal rehearsal conference all content written or suggested by students that “made sense” was accepted and praised, Ms. Malone set a higher threshold for content during a criterion-specific collaboration conference, often questioning and reworking content that did not meet expectations while sharing explicit reasons for doing so.

Figure 2. Anthony’s pre- and post-conference work sample: “I Got a Remote Control Car”



For example, in line 009, Ms. Malone offered a possible suggestion for a revised beginning that better fit reader expectations and was based on Anthony’s own words. More important, she provided him an explanation for why such a beginning was needed and disclosed ways in which his current text lacked information his reader required to better understand his story. Anthony’s conference provided him a chance, then, to openly discuss his potentially confusing beginning, critique it, build a shared understanding with his teacher of what might constitute a stronger narrative opening, and collaboratively formulate possibilities for new text. Accordingly, it was not surprising that Anthony crafted a stronger beginning for his text upon completion of his conference: “THE DAY AFTER MY BIRTHDAY I RETURNED SOME PRESENTS TO THE STORE AND GOT A REMOTE CONTROLLED CAR.”). Moreover, he independently generated a beginning that better set the scene for his reader in his personal narratives that followed (e.g., “ME AND MATT WERE RAKING LEAVES ONE DAY IN MY FRONTYARD.”).

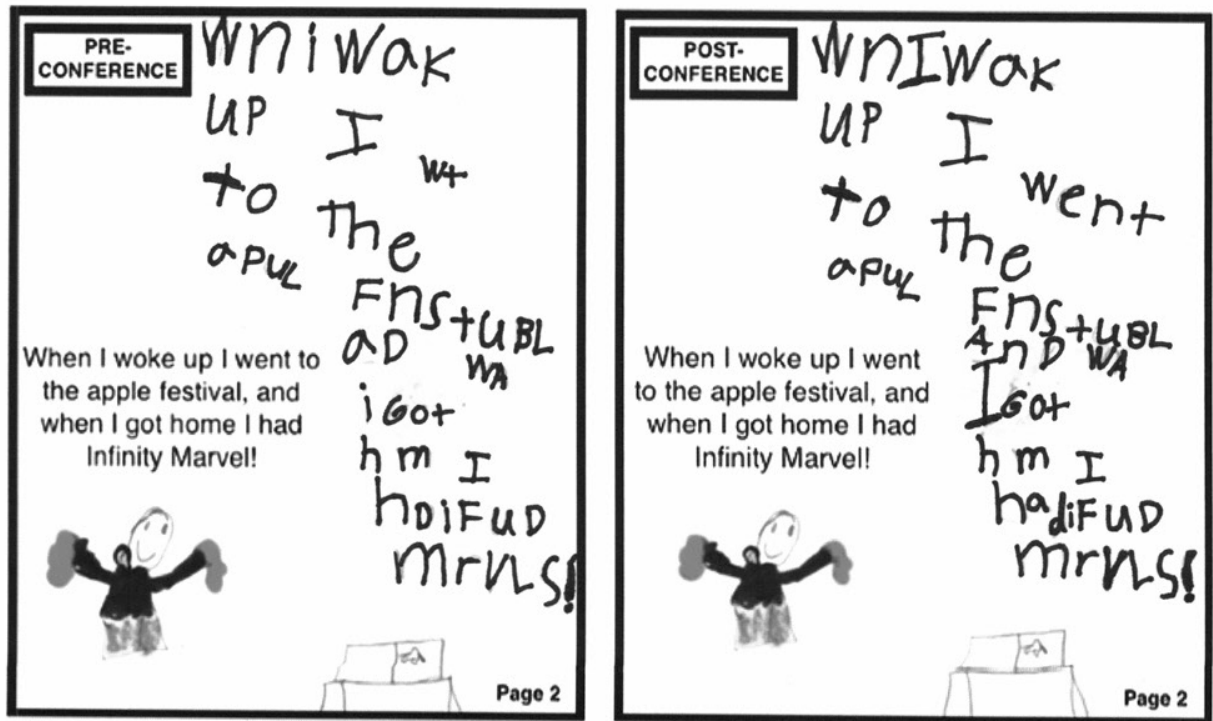
Conferencing as Find-and-Fix Correction: An Illustrative Case

Camden, with his big eyes and lopsided grin, was a social child. He was someone who got along well with his classmates and teacher despite his being retained the year before. His teacher regarded Camden as a struggling writer for his age. On this particular November afternoon, Ms. Malone knelt down next to Camden’s desk to see what he was up to as a writer. Upon hearing Camden’s response (line 002) to her open question (line 001), and with a quick glance through his booklet to confirm its status, Ms. Malone determined that Camden was, in fact, finished transcribing the content for his text titled *My Birthday* (line 003) and was ready to move into the final stages of the writing process (line 005).

001 Teacher: Camden, what are you working on today, my friend?

002 Camden: I just finished this here. [Student points to text.]

Figure 3. Camden’s pre- and post-conference work sample: *My Birthday*



003 Teacher: Hmm, it looks like you might be done with this one. Okay, read your story to me. Now remember, when writers re-read, they point to the words and they ask themselves, Does it look right? Does it sound right? Does it make sense?

004 Camden: WHEN I WOKE UP I WENT TO THE APPLE FESTIVAL AND WHEN I GOT HOME I HAD INFINITY MARVEL.

005 Teacher: Okay, you know what? We need to do a little bit of work on this page to make sure that it looks right and sounds right and makes sense.

In order to help Camden think through the editing of his text, Ms. Malone drew on what I have termed a *find-and-fix correction conference*. Analogous to a transcription activity conference, a find-and-fix correction conference—a term originally coined by Ulichny and Watson-Gegeo (1989)—affords students an opportunity to better their word- and sentence-level transcription so that it more closely approximates conventional norms for English language construction under the close guidance of a knowledgeable other, only this time transcription occurs in the course of editing previously written text. This conference type involved teachers and students in a particular correction routine, or series of routines, in which teachers drew attention to often surface-level errors found in

students' texts (e.g., letter formation, misspellings, incorrect verb tense, capitalization errors, punctuation errors, poor word choice), and set up slots that students were expected to fill with correct answers.

An example of this routine can be seen in lines 006–008.

006 Teacher: Whenever writers write the word I, they write it like this. [Teacher writes an “I” on whiteboard.] They do not write it like this. [Teacher writes an “i” on whiteboard.] Now I’m noticing your word I looks like this. [Teacher points to lowercase i.] So can you make it look like this, please. [Teacher points to uppercase I.]

007 Camden: [Student changes lowercase i to capital I on his paper.]

008 Teacher: There you go. Alright, let’s re-read it again. Point to each word, Camden.

Here, Ms. Malone drew Camden’s attention to a capitalization error in his text, provided a correction to the error (along with a brief explanation of her correction), and gave a directive for Camden to make the suggested fix (line 006). Camden complied, erasing his lowercase i and replacing it with an uppercase letter (line 007). Ms. Malone then acknowledged his efforts (line 008) before directing him to re-read his text in order to locate the next error that caused his text to not “look right, sound right, or make sense.”

INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

The writing process involves teaching students to write in a variety of genres, encouraging creativity, and incorporating writing conventions. This process can be used in all areas of the curriculum and provides an excellent way to connect instruction with state writing standards. This strategy guide from ReadWriteThink.org explains the writing process and offers practical methods for applying it in your classroom to help students become proficient writers. <http://bit.ly/1TfOr61>

Some additional resources on Writing Workshop:

- Helping Writers Choose and Focus on a Topic: <http://bit.ly/1NTwwjx>
- Teaching Audience Through Interactive Writing: <http://bit.ly/23n6ruj>
- Prompting Revision through Modeling and Written Conversations: <http://bit.ly/24odjhl>

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Table 2. Questions for teacher reflection with summary of potential primary-grade conference types by form and function

Questions for Teacher Reflection	Associated Forms and Functions of Each Conference Type	Primary-Grade Conference Types (Conferencing as . . .)		
		Verbal Rehearsal	Transcription Activity	Criterion-Specific Collaboration
What is my intention in this conference? What appears to be the child's intent?	Conference Function	Content Generation	Content Transcription-Drafting	Content Transcription-Editing/Correction
What work are the student and I able to perform in this conference, and how does this work align with my intended goals for this conference? With my intended goals for conferring in general?				
How has this conference improved the student's current piece of writing? What potential does it have for also improving the writer?	Conference Form	Authentic questions Revoicing of student talk	Display questions Teacher directives	Authentic questions Revoicing of student talk Display questions Teacher directives
How do I interact with the student during the conference?				
What types of questions are being asked and to what ends?				

How do I respond to students' responses? Do I build on them? Probe them? Evaluate them and move on?	Conference Form	Teacher suggestions for text derived from student talk	Teacher prompts for correct answers	Teacher suggestions for text derived from student talk & teacher knowledge of text genre criteria	Teacher prompts for correct answers
		Teacher talk builds on student responses	Teacher telling/didactic statements	Teacher telling/didactic statements	Teacher telling/didactic statements
		Large amount of student talk; mostly elaborated student responses	Teacher sharing of strategies for text transcription	Teacher talk builds on, probes, and sometimes critiques student responses	Teacher sharing of strategies for text transcription
		Teacher positioned as supportive facilitator	Limited student talk; succinct student response	Student talk may be less abundant than with verbal rehearsal; elaborated and succinct student responses may be present	Limited student talk; succinct student response
How have I positioned myself in this conference?	Conference Participant Roles	Student positioned as primary-knower	Teacher positioned as primary-knower and authoritative resource	Teacher positioned as primary-knower over text genre criteria	Teacher positioned as primary-knower and authoritative resource
Who speaks and when?		Student positioned as active or passive learner	Student positioned as active or passive learner	Student positioned as primary-knower over text content, and often given final decision-making power over what changes/additions to implement in text	Student positioned as active or passive learner



Just as there is not one purpose for conferring, no one conference type is ideal in all situations.

Another example of this routine is showcased in lines 028–032, when Ms. Malone drew Camden’s attention to a spelling error in his text.

028 Teacher: Let’s look at this word. HAD. Put up a finger for each letter sound in HAD. /H/ . . .

029 Camden: /A/ /D/.

030 Teacher: Okay. Three letters, right?

031 Camden: H. A. D. [Student changes HD to HAD on his paper.]

032 Teacher: Yep.

As before, Ms. Malone highlighted an error she noticed in Camden’s text and set up a space in which he was expected to fix the error. Unlike with his capitalization error, however, Ms. Malone did not provide a direct correction for his missing middle vowel. Instead, she reminded him of a strategy that he might draw on in order to provide his own solution (lines 028 and 030). Once again, Camden made the expected correction (line 031), and Ms. Malone validated his answer (line 032).

Although the find-and-fix correction conference is in all probability the most straightforward to conduct of the four types exhibited, it is important to note that Ms. Malone only drew upon this conference structure under two circumstances: first, when students had finished drafting and revising text and, thus, were ready to move to publication; second, when students’ attempted transcriptions varied too far from accepted norms and impeded teacher or student readings of the text. As such, the find-and-fix correction conference was not Ms. Malone’s go-to conference type despite its ease of application. Furthermore, Ms. Malone utilized the find-and-fix correction structure as more than a chance to simply correct students’ texts. Instead, she wanted her

students to take what they’d learned in these conference interactions and apply it to their future work as writers. Toward this goal, Ms. Malone concluded many of her find-and-fix correction conferences as she did with Camden in line 034.

034 Teacher: Now you see what we’ve done. Do you see how we worked so carefully, pointing to the words and asking if it looked right and sounded right and made sense? What I want you to do is re-read the rest of your book and point to the words just like we practiced on this page. See if you can fix it up some more.

Here, Ms. Malone equated the correction work she and Camden had engaged in earlier to a larger strategy for editing that he might take up in order to craft a readable text for eventual publication.

Implementing Purposeful Talk in Primary-Grade Writing Classrooms

Just as there is not one purpose for conferring, no one conference type is ideal in all situations. In Evan’s, Anthony’s, and Camden’s conferences with Ms. Malone, the selected conference types (in both form and function) aligned well with the teacher’s instructional purposes for each conference and allowed the student to perform the type of work expected within the bounds of each conference type. As writing teachers interested in making the most of our one-on-one engagement with students, we must regularly examine our own writing conference enactment for such alignment. This work can be undertaken through periodic examination of a sampling of self-recorded teacher–student writing conferences. To better facilitate this, Table 2 provides as a reference a list of recommended questions for reflection, along with a list of the four potential primary-grade conference types illustrated in this article and their associated forms and functions. It is through such self-reflection and examination of conference talk that we might begin to select the conference type that is “just right” for responding to our students’ needs in the moment, for it is here—when form and function align with instructional intent—that purposeful talk can take place.

Author's Notes

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