

Thank You for Sharing: Developing Students' Social Skills to Improve Peer Writing Conferences

Teaching students how to talk about their writing and responses to other students' writing may be key in improving their writing skills. Franklin suggests several activities that can help.

After listening to the cooperative learning trainer discuss the importance of developing social skills in the classroom, I began to realize why peer-conferencing sessions in the required English II and English IV classes were not going as I had hoped. I needed to help students identify appropriate behaviors used in everyday social skills and used in effective peer conferences. By discussing peer conferencing in terms of social skills, I would not only help students improve discussions about writing but also teach them how to collaborate with others. Simply, effective social skills are essential if students are expected to discuss writing. I knew that in an urban school of 1,800, the students in my class did not know a soul, and they would rarely introduce themselves to a person they did not know. If they could not initiate a conversation with someone they did not know, how could I expect them to share and comment on each other's writing?

I wanted student conferences to look like a conversation. As a graduate student in a writing center, I began tutoring sessions by introducing myself to the person and getting to know him or her. For five or ten minutes we talked without discussing the paper. That brief time was essential in building rapport and trust.

These same warm-up conversations occur when I meet with a peer. In any kind of social interaction with a peer, we exchange pleasantries and share updates on family events and upcoming activities. After this chat, we usually get down to busi-

ness. As teachers, the time we get to talk with peers, our friends, is an important, almost sacred, time because there is never enough of it. Why not allow students the opportunity to chat with friends—the same courtesy I appreciated in meetings with peers? Why did I fight “off-task” talk? Through talk, students can improve their conversational skills, which in turn would help their peer-conferencing skills. Many students go to school purely for socialization. Incorporating socialization helped students see that I valued all types of talk. If student writing conferences are conversations between people with mutual respect, writing can grow. Or, at least, that is the assumption I worked from. Giving students opportunities to talk about their writing ideas would enable them to internalize their thoughts and ideas. I wanted them to talk about writing, to collaborate to provide feedback that moved beyond a focus on sentence-level errors.

What Is It Called and Why Does It Matter?

The term I use to describe the process of grouping students to discuss writing influences students' views about writing conferences. Shifts in terminology reveal slight changes of philosophy about what it means to share writing in a classroom. At first, when I put students together to share their writing, I asked students to *peer edit*. *Peer editing* involves an editing checklist, a worksheet for students to follow. When I noticed that students did not catch

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each other's mistakes, I was irritated that they did not help each other. Eventually, I realized that it was not the job of students to catch mistakes. I wanted them to talk about what they wrote, not search for sentence-level errors. They needed to *respond* to writing, so I called this experience *peer response*. Still, this term did not capture the experience I wanted students to have. *Peer response* connotes a "have-to," a requirement to respond and, thus, evaluate each other's writing. After reading to study what other teachers tried and considering my own experiences with sharing writing (Atwell; Elbow), I settled on the phrase *peer conference*. A peer conference is a

meeting that may or may not include evaluative feedback. Students recognized that the terms teachers use reflect different purposes:

Peer editing, review, and correcting are basically just going over errors in a paper without actually discussing the paper. In peer conferencing, you read the paper and really analyze and discuss it in order to make it better.—Kathleen

When I think of peer conferencing, I think of more of a conversation between the two people discussing the piece. Editing or correcting is more like looking for wrong mechanical errors like spelling and grammar rather than the piece and meaning and purpose as a whole.—Jayme

The terminology I use to describe experiences with writing reveals my philosophy of what I hope will happen when I put students together to share writing. The term *conference* denotes a conversation about writing. Conversations became the core of our writing community.

Defining Social Skills

Effective social skills help peer conferencing to work. Paul Caldarella and Kenneth Merrell outline "five dimensions of social skills": peer relational skills, self-management skills, academic skills, compliance skills, and assertion skills. Christine D. Bremer and John Smith describe "general social

skills" aligned with the five dimensions. Many of the peer relational skills and assertion skills Bremer and Smith outline read like a checklist of effective peer conferences:

- Use appropriate loudness and tone of voice.
- Encourage everyone to participate.
- Learn and use peoples' names.
- Look at the person who is speaking.
- Make eye contact with others when speaking.
- Check one's own understanding and ask questions.
- Describe one's own feelings when appropriate.
- Build on others' comments and ideas.
- Support others, both verbally and nonverbally.
- Participate appropriately in small talk.
- Keep remarks to an appropriate length.
- Ask for direction or assistance.

Assisting students with developing social skills can easily be embedded in the process of learning how to share and talk about writing.

Training students to develop their skills in responding to writing helps the teacher and the students. Teachers may not be able to adequately respond to all students' writing in the drafting stages. By training students to respond well to each other's writing, teachers can focus their efforts on students who may need more help. In turn, students have an audience other than the teacher. Jay Simmons found that "developing writers need the support of their peers at least as much as they need the dictates of teachers" (56). Through his research in peer counseling, he "was reminded . . . that anything heard from a peer will be more effective than that which comes from a teacher" (59). Students need not depend only on teacher feedback. They experience an audience of peers and receive more feedback than one teacher could provide.

Developing Norms and Expectations for Sharing Writing

In the cooperative learning training I referenced earlier, the trainer noted that a lack of social skills is the number-one reason for losing a job. Developing

social skills in the classroom will help the class with writing conferences and will also help students develop social skills that they will use beyond their school years.

To connect peer conferencing with the development of social skills, I asked the students to rank on a card five social skills that were most important to them during a peer conference (see fig. 1). On a similar card, I also asked them to indicate behaviors they deemed inappropriate during a peer conference. After they wrote, students shared with a partner, and I asked them to write down any ideas they received from listening to a partner share. Finally, we shared as a whole group.

I also asked students to share their previous experiences with peer conferences. Using their past experiences and the behaviors they considered inappropriate, I performed a role-play with some of the students to illustrate how conferences could work well (or not at all). I role-played the part of an ineffective responder. I painted my fingernails while they spoke; talked about my weekend plans instead of talking about their writing; combed my hair; and spoke to someone else while they spoke to me. I grabbed papers from students' hands, looked at them briefly, and said "Good job. Looks good. What are you doing this weekend?" I had watched many conferences where students responded with "Great job. I really liked it." That kind of "global praise" (Simmons) did not help writers rethink or resee their writing and prepare for future revisions.

Role-playing ineffective conferences usually elicited laughter and knowing glances among students. They had experienced conferences like these and often found that time spent sharing writing was a waste. The time spent discussing ineffective writing conferences was more beneficial than discussing effective writing conferences because improving on

FIGURE 1. Brainstorming Social Skills for Peer Conferences

List five social skills that are most important when you peer conference your writing.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Rank in order, with one being the most important.

a bad example is an easier goal than trying to meet the expectations of a perfect example.

After reminiscing and viewing ineffective conferences, we used the students' list of characteristics to guide the creation of a chart (see fig. 2). I used a concept analysis tool called "Looks Like/Sounds Like," a simple chart, to begin the process of outlining expectations and norms for effective peer conferences. Using a projector, overhead, or poster paper, I charted students' responses. For example, if a student writes that he or she wants a responder to "pay attention," I respond with, "What does it look like to pay attention?" and "What does someone who is paying attention say? What does it sound like to pay attention?" Students might respond that paying attention looks like eye contact and a head nod. Paying attention may sound like a person providing a specific response: "I like the part where you wrote" These questions forced students to consider concrete examples and to visualize specific traits of the peer conference. Students kept their own chart at the same time. We would return to the chart to review or add what we learned about how to make writing conferences work better, focusing on what we *wanted* to see and experience when we shared what we wrote. This activity outlined our expectations for talking about writing and set the tone for future conversations about our writing.

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FIGURE 2. Looks Like/Sounds Like Concept Analysis Tool

Traits of Effective Writing Conferences	Looks Like	Sounds Like
Listening	Head nod	Asking questions "What happened . . . ?"
Paying Attention	Eye Contact	
Encouragement		"I liked the part where . . ."

This concept analysis tool was adapted from workshop materials presented by Pam Hankins.

“Thank You”

Once we had developed our list of norms and expectations, we began writing. Students have more experience with a critical audience than any other. Teachers and fellow students spend most of their time evaluating and judging their writing. For many, especially in middle school and high school, evaluative feedback may be the only kind of response they have received concerning their writing. To help students recognize the types of experiences they have had with response and audience, I shared with them Peter Elbow’s “Map of Writing in Terms of Audience and Response” (see fig. 3) and asked them to fill in the chart according to their past experiences. The left-hand column describes types of audiences students may have written for, and the top row describes types of response students may have experienced. Elbow suggests that most writers have few experiences in the first two columns—sharing without response and response with no criticism or evaluation. In class, we discussed the areas on the map that had been neglected in their previous writing experiences. After discussing these areas, I explained that our goal in the writing class is to experience all of these audiences and types of response.

FIGURE 3. Map of Writing in Terms of Audience and Response (Elbow)

Map of Writing

	Sharing, but no response	Response, but no criticism or evaluation	Criticism or evaluation
Audience with authority, e.g., teachers, editors, supervisors, employers			
Audience of peers			
Audience of allies—readers who particularly care for the writer			
Audience of self alone—private writing			

Map of writing used by permission of Peter Elbow.

Not surprisingly, the most-neglected area for my students was “sharing without response.” Elbow describes this sharing experience as similar to a poetry reading. Writers share their work and listeners applaud at the end. He concedes that asking writers to share writing and then having listeners respond with clapping or silence could be awkward; hence, he recommends responding with “thank you.” For at least the first two weeks of the semester, I ask students, any time they share writing, to respond only with “thank you.” While students laugh at this suggestion at first, this “plain sharing” helps students to become listeners and helps them to experience sharing writing with a group of supportive listeners instead of a group of judges. The benefits, according to Elbow, go beyond experiencing a supportive audience: “Plain sharing leads to better responding. It helps writers become more comfortable reading their writing out loud because they don’t have to worry about the response from listeners. Plain sharing also helps listeners become more comfortable and adept at listening to writers read their work because they don’t have to worry about how to respond” (42). “Thank you” became a turning point in developing students’ confidence to share their writing in a peer conference. “Thank you” stalled students who were excited to correct other writers’ work, created a cushion for students who lacked confidence in their writing, and developed listeners. A simple “thank you” allowed students to listen and respect the thoughts of their peers without worrying about how to respond. Appreciative listening is an important social skill and the foundation of a good conversation. After two weeks of sharing without feedback, we explored other parts of Elbow’s map, which included offering critical or evaluative feedback.

Organizing Writing Groups

When considering my own writing experiences, I realized that I prefer sharing writing with people I know. When I go to a teachers’ meeting, I can hardly stop talking because I am so excited to see my colleagues and friends. Yet, I did not allow students to talk casually to friends in a writing conference. Once I accepted and acknowledged the importance of small talk, I asked students to partner with a friend or someone in the class they

trusted and begin their sharing time by catching up with one another, sharing the latest news and updating each other on happenings at school and home. After two to five minutes of this talk, I redirected the students and asked them to begin to share their writing. Instead of trying to keep friends from working together, I often *asked* them to work with the friends in the class that they felt most comfortable with.

While sharing writing with an “ally” is important, growth in writing comes with risk-taking, and one important risk is sharing writing with an audience that a writer may not know well. I knew students needed to share with new audiences as well as with old friends. Our classroom writing community needed a delicate balance of comfort and risk. I approached this obstacle by asking students to write down the names of three or four students they would want to have in a group. In a class of 30, I organized 15 sets of partners. Students each chose a partner who was an ally, and I paired partners so I would have a group of four. Every four to six weeks, I would assign the partners a new set of partners to work with. In this case, students would always have a peer who they felt comfortable with in their group, and the partners would also have two new respondents.

During the writing groups, students read their writing aloud to their group, and if I had time, I made copies of student writing so each member of the group could read along. Emphasizing the need for writers to read their work aloud helped the conference. Writers maintained ownership of their paper, and many times they caught sentences they wrote that lacked fluency or contained sentence-level errors. In addition, once writers hear their words read aloud (even by themselves), they may be able to hear voice, organization, and faulty reasoning. Reading aloud helps students build their writer’s ear.

Improving Writing and Social Skills

Student responses in a required English IV class seemed to focus as much on improved relational skills as improved writing:

Met many new people! Lots of nice classmates. Best benefit of peer conference. It’s helped me get to

know people more. Maybe I don’t hang out with them but I at least talk to them now.—Heather

It helped me get to know people in the class better.—Katie

I’ve seen new sides of people, and I think it forms a sense of fellowship and trust. It [peer conferencing] is very bonding.—Scott

I felt comfortable responding to other’s work in English IV because I felt that everyone could take in advice and use it to their advantage. I felt comfortable sharing my work in English IV because I felt like everyone would give me constructive criticism instead of tearing my paper apart.—Ricky

It seemed all the kids so concerned with keeping up appearances suddenly stopped being so concerned about that and cared about writing for ten minutes.—Ben

Creating effective peer-conferencing groups takes time and a commitment to writing daily and sharing writing daily. Several components became the cornerstone of our writing classroom:

- Writing for a variety of audiences
- Responding to writing in a variety of ways—from sharing without response to evaluative feedback from an authority
- Allowing students time to talk

Students want to share their writing, but they may not know how to do it. My goal was for peer conferences to look more like a conversation than a review of a checklist. Opportunities for supportive listening through the simple phrase “thank you” made all the difference in creating a safe writing community where students could learn to share their work. Talking about their writing ideas, and not just the surface mistakes, enabled the students to feel like real writers. Peer conferencing improves writing, and the social skills embedded in effective peer conferencing help students build community in the classroom and learn how to build community beyond the classroom. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION	Lisa Storm Fink and Christy Simon, RWT
<p><i>"I liked your story about you and Paul. I think you should add a little more detail and you should change the end two sentences so it will sound better."</i> Sound familiar? This student response is typical of the way untrained students give feedback on each other's drafts during response groups. The PQP technique—Praise–Question–Polish—described in "Peer Review: Narrative" requires group members to take turns reading other writers' drafts aloud as the author and other students follow along with copies. This helps the writer to hear the piece in another voice and to identify possible changes independently. The other respondents then react to the piece by writing comments on the PQP form. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=122</p>	

Francisco Santiago

Francisco Santiago
had a silver chain
carved with skulls.

He tossed it high,
dragged it across the table,
would not speak,
would not stop,
not even when spoken to.

Would not stop.

The air was heavy
with stink bomb detonated
in the airless corridor.

Across the years flash
memories of Benediction
when altar boys would heap incense
into brass vessels decked with chains

and swing them high
to sweeten the air.

Francisco Santiago
is twelve years old,
has a probation officer,
a hot temper,
an eye for detail,
a feeling for ritual.

Solemnly and sullenly
he swung his chain of skulls,
swung it high,
swung it low,
would not stop,
not even when spoken to.

Would not stop.

—Joan Sullivan Gray
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Joan Sullivan Gray has been involved in urban education for many years and currently works at the Boston Latin School where she teaches English and the humanities. She is also a painter and photographer who often retreats to W. B. Yeats's "land of heart's desire" in County Sligo in Ireland.