Peer-to-Peer Writing Conferences
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Background:

I am a Specialist KS2 English Teacher at Blackheath Preparatory School and I am also a Writing for Pleasure Affiliate. I am an experienced Literacy Leader and have led CPD workshops on the subject of Reading and Writing for Pleasure. I also participate in the UKLA's Teaching Writing Special Interest Group. I am passionate about supporting and inspiring young people to take pleasure in reading and writing. For my own pleasure, I enjoy writing poetry, short stories and blog posts about my journey as a writer-teacher.

Principle(s) in focus:

- Reading, sharing, thinking and talking about writing
- Teach daily mini-lessons
- Pupil conference: meet children where they are

Ever since Ross Young and Phil Ferguson observed my teaching of literacy (Young 2019), I have been working on improving feedback with pupils in class. Taking inspiration from Patty McGee's *Feedback That Moves Writers Forward* (2017) and Carl Anderson's *How's It Going?* (2000), I began to introduce pupil conferences in class as a way of giving timely, meaningful feedback to my students and it is now a regular part of my practice.

Aims:

'Both written and oral feedback comes down to the same thing:
words, and the tone of them, that first begin with the writer within.'

Patty McGee, *Feedback that Moves Writers Forward* (2017)

By being a supportive and encouraging teacher-writer, I hoped to build a community of writers where reading, talking and sharing our writing was central to our class learning environment. My aim was to teach students to take an active role in conferences by immersing them in conference conversation at every opportunity. In mini-lessons, I directly teach them about their role in conferences, how to use conversational strategies that support their talk, and teach them how to talk about their writing.

In particular, when teaching Year 6 pupils in the lead up to their 11+ exams, pupil conferencing became key to supporting pupils with their creative writing. The groundwork for conferencing was laid over several months throughout the Autumn Term, where I would host regular pupil conferences to give praise and advice about the craft of writing, writer-to-writer. 1:1 conferencing allowed the children to identify their strengths and understand how to improve. Verbal feedback was regular, timely and specific and it also helped to build a 'growth mindset' approach to continuous learning.

When the pandemic led to extended periods of online learning, I found that it was not as easy to give regular feedback (either written or verbal) and conferencing with individual pupils to discuss their writing 1:1 became incredibly challenging. I wanted to introduce a number of self-regulation strategies to support learning from home. As part of this, I wanted to explicitly teach the children how to host peer-to-peer writing conferences with other students in the class so that they were able to give and receive support from one another in breakout rooms whilst learning remotely. Given that children were familiar with conferencing with myself throughout the Autumn Term, this was a natural progression that I hoped would encourage greater independence and self-regulation.

Description:

Part 1 - Pupil Conferencing

There are three key reasons to host pupil conferences:

1. To get help/support/advice
2. To share your work with an audience/reader
3. To get feedback on your writing

As a mini-lesson, I introduced the idea of peer-to-peer Pupil Conferences. For this, I focussed on 'revision conferences' (Anderson, 2000) and explained that we would be using this strategy in breakout rooms to help us improve our memoir drafts. I explained that it was an opportunity to clarify big ideas, rethink structures, add on or delete content, craft and hone their writing, or simply to make sure their writing made sense. We discussed why hosting pupil conferences were important and, inspired by the Writing for Pleasure Centre's guidance on pupil conferences (Young & Ferguson 2020, 2021), we talked about what they should focus on during their conferences and how they could initiate their discussions. For example, using the phrase, 'How's it going?'.

In the first part of the conversation, the writer was invited to read aloud their memoir and their partner listened carefully. The listener could then ask questions to clarify or deepen their understanding, before sharing their own assessment of the piece, whilst the writer would respond to questions and listen carefully to feedback. The listener would then give one or two suggestions for the writer to help them to improve their composition. They would then swap over, reversing the roles.

We discussed sharing feedback sensitively, particularly as we were working on personal memoirs, and how to phrase our words carefully, considering the tone of our language. I displayed some negative feedback on the board and asked the class how we could reframe or rephrase the language to ensure it was constructive, whilst also considerate.

Children were also invited to print out some prompt questions (Young & Ferguson 2020) to aid their initial peer-to-peer conferences (pictured). I
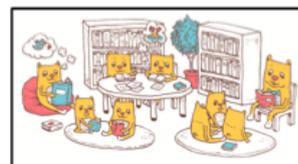

explained that they should focus on sharing what they thought worked really well, as well as trying to leave the writer with a piece of advice to follow up on. Finally, we would come back together as a whole class and discuss some of our 'next steps' and whether our discussions had been helpful. I would also play a short recording of some excellent conferences and the children would discuss what worked really well in these interactions (some of these clips are available on the next page).

Impact:

The impact was amazing. It really helped that the children were used to the idea of conferencing about their writing with me and it was a natural progression for them to begin to take on the role of the 'teacher-writer', giving each other valuable feedback.

There was a wonderful mixture of appreciation of each other's writing, a wide range of constructive criticism and respectful offering of suggestions for improvement. What surprised me the most was the level of maturity with which they spoke. They gave carefully considered feedback and were incredibly respectful of each other as writers. I felt that it really strengthened the class as a community of writers

and built trust between the children. They clearly appreciated the praise and advice they were being given.

I had been regularly sharing knowledge of how to craft writing, as well as strategies and techniques to improve writing via mini-lessons throughout the year and it was brilliant to see the children now sharing these with one another. The children had become incredibly independent and as a class they were evidently more confident in the language they were using and the advice they were offering.

These clips were from our first peer-to-peer conferencing session and some of these were used as models for discussion around what makes an effective peer-to-peer conference:

🔊 [Pupil Conference Example A](#)

🔊 **[Pupil Conference Example B](#)**

🔊 **[Pupil Conference Example C](#)**

🔊 **[Pupil Conference Example D](#)**

🔊 **[Pupil Conference Example E](#)**

🔊 **[Pupil Conference Example F](#)**

You can hear how the children think of themselves (and others) as writers and how they are able to offer advice to one another. At the end of the lesson, when we talked about the feedback they had been given, it also gave me an opportunity to identify any noticeable patterns or common areas of development to help inform future mini-lessons.

Reflection:

I think that we can sometimes forget that we are not the only teachers of writing in the classroom! We might underestimate children's abilities to offer valuable and meaningful feedback to one another or assume that children may not make the most of feedback opportunities. Teachers may worry that children might simply sit in awkward silence or talk about everything *except* the writing. However, tapping into peer-to-peer feedback is an invaluable tool that supports writers in meeting their goals. I agree with McGee (2017) when she says that, 'reaching a goal can go a lot more smoothly, and be a lot more fun, when we turn to others for feedback'.

By setting up children with a clear conferencing structure and guidance for meaningful feedback, peer-to-peer conferences are supported without being constrained. I also think modelling regular teacher-to-pupil conferencing over time helped children to see how conferencing works and how it can be effective in moving their writing forward. Building in time for regular writing conferences and practising the structure or language over and over again helps to make writing conferences feel less like a step-by-step script and more like a natural, flowing conversation. Showcasing writerly conversations that make the most of opportunities for feedback can also be a great way to aid understanding about what works well.

I hope to focus on encouraging more peer-to-peer conferencing with Year 6 now that we are back in the classroom. I hope that we can continue to shift from 'correcting mistakes' to a growth mindset that sees feedback as an opportunity to learn and improve and transforms students' writing.

References:

• Anderson, C., (2000) *How's it going?* USA: Heinemann
• McGee, P. (2017) *Feedback that Moves Writers Forward* New York: Corwin
• Young, R. (2019) *What is it 'Writing For Pleasure' teachers do that makes the difference?* The

University Of Sussex: The Goldsmiths' Company
• Young, R., Ferguson F. (2020) *Real-World Writers* London: Routledge
• Young, R., Ferguson, F. (2021) *Writing For Pleasure: theory, research and practice* London: Routledge