

The Power of Partnerships: Improving  
Writing Through Conversation  
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**A Need for Writing Partnerships**

We write to communicate with others. It's important that what we're trying to communicate is read and understood clearly by our audience. Young writers need an audience for their writing and writing partnerships provide an audience throughout the writing process, not just after publication. In a writing partnership a student has one person in the classroom that they can bounce ideas off of and that person will give them an honest opinion and can make suggestions for changes or improvements. Long-term writing partnerships allow for students to get to know each other intimately through writing. With this relationship writers can build on each other's knowledge and feedback in a respected environment and can work throughout the year at improving each other's writing craft rather than just correct one piece at a time.

Student conversation is regarded highly by experts in every subject area. A classroom in which students are doing the most of the talking is where students are also doing the most of the learning. Getting students to have conversations about what they're learning about writing is a great way to reinforce explicit instruction provided in class and independent writing practice during independent writing time. If students are able to have a meaningful, constructive conversation about their writing or a peer's writing, which is the goal, then they must really understand and be able to apply what has been taught.

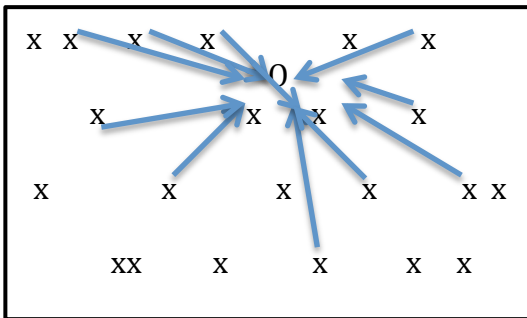
I've experienced being a member in a writing response group when I participated in the Oakland Writing Project. I found that when meeting with the same group of people and by having clear conversation points I was able to bring my own writing to places I wouldn't have been able to on my own. Just from hearing the thoughts and

reactions of my group after they read my writing gave me so much information about what my writing actually said to my audience. I remember I wrote a poem about my cat and somehow, through what I had written in the poem, my peer responders all thought I was going to have a baby. This was *not* my intended message so I knew that I had some work to do about the tone of my poem. Through our writing, I got to know my peers and because of that I was able to give them meaningful, pointed feedback based on the snippet of their writing lives I had experienced with them, their strengths and their previous pieces. I met with the same people over the course of just a month, so I can only imagine what kind of experience my students could have if they met with the same peers over the course of a year. I want my students to be able to give truly meaningful feedback to their peers based on what they know about their partner as a writer. This conversation can be powerful. By fostering this kind of academic conversation I hope to enable my students to improve their own writing and to extend this type of talk to other disciplines in the classroom.

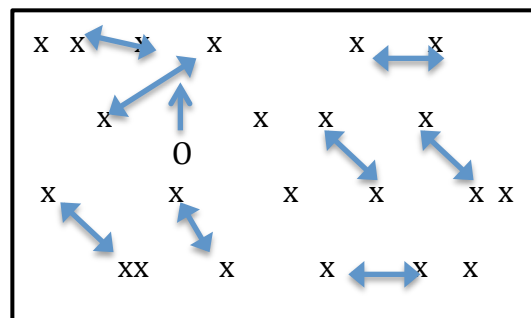
### **Writing Partnerships Solve Problems**

I recognize and admit that I've probably been the largest source of writing feedback for my students during their writing process. From my coursework and research, I realize that this shouldn't be the case because students may be tempted to write just for me as their audience, keeping my writing preferences in mind when they make important decisions. Not only is this practice hindering my students from hearing other's ideas about their writing but I am not able to reach and talk to every writer who needs advice when they need it. In this way, writer's workshop independent writing time is like a whirlwind for me. I'm moving from table to table conferring with as many

students as I can, but I never reach everyone I want to, or who needs me. This ends of being a waste of time for writers as they stall their writing waiting for me to meet with them. I realize I haven't been utilizing the twenty other minds in the classroom that are capable of, and would benefit from, giving feedback to the other young writers in the class.



In a traditional writing workshop the teacher struggles to confer with all students



With writing partnerships students have a person to confer with whenever they need one.

How I move my students from just conferring with one another and giving surface-level comments, to improving one another's writing through talk is a challenge. Students enjoy talking with each other and enjoy hearing each other's writing and they enjoy giving feedback, but the content of their talk is often not helpful to the writer. We often hear in peer conferences, "I like it, it's good." Graham, MacArthur and Fitzgerald (2007) wrote, "When students are given general instructions about response and revision or asked to engage in peer evaluation without specific guidance, they often are reluctant to criticize each other or are unable to provide significant help because their evaluation and revision skills are limited." My focus is to find out what evaluation and revision skills my students need to master in order to use them independently and apply them to their own, and their peer's writing.

**“What the Child Can Do in Cooperation Today, He Can Do Alone Tomorrow”  
- Vygotsky**

Student talk is vital. “Writers need to talk about their writing and the thing that seems to make or break many writing workshops is the presence (or absence) of productive talk.” (Ray, 2001, p.12) The conversations students have with each other hold a lot of power. The student who receives feedback gains another viewpoint about their writing. The writer hears how their peer read their piece and learns the reaction they had. “Peer response activities are most fruitful when they enable students to get timely feedback from ‘real’ readers whose intentions are not to evaluate but to proffer genuine reactions and queries.” (Goldberg, 1996, p. 312) Instead of an adult who evaluates and grades writing, they have a fellow writer who has been through similar writing instruction and can help guide the writer in a new direction. Students can meet with their writing partner when they need to, rather than wait for the teacher to come to them. The student in need has someone else to rely on other than themselves and the teacher.

The other partner, the listener and responder, also benefits from this type of conversation. “Writing partnerships foster frequent student-to-student conferencing, substantially increasing students’ practice with critiquing writing and with recommending actions.” (Hsu, 2009, p.153) Every time a student reads a peer’s work and responds, they practice the work that all writers do. They recognize how the written piece was perceived and can offer suggestions to strengthen the communication between writer and reader. With this practice the listener/responder learns what it is a reader needs from a piece of writing and can keep that in mind while writing their own work. When working in writing partnerships, “the students show a growing tendency to include elements which allow the reader to understand the writer’s intentions and how the text should be

interpreted.” (Crinon & Marin, 2010, p. 121) The responder learns what works for the reader and can successfully include those things in their own writing.

Writing partnerships benefit all students involved. When students are paired with someone whose strengths are different from theirs, they can begin to use the same type of craft in their own writing. Students with learning or emotional impairments also participate in writing partnerships. Students who revise with a peer show increased appropriate peer interaction, decreased writing apprehension and signs of internalizing cognitive-writing strategies. (Kindzierski, 2009) The act of revision based on feedback is given value when there is a real audience involved. That is, writers are more conscious that the audience is real and needs to be able to understand the writing. Young writers need guidance to evaluate, modify or restructure their ideas and to add and delete content to improve their writing. (Matsumura et al., 2002) Revision is challenging, especially for struggling writers, so to have a peer to assist with ideas, revision might not be as big of a task. All students can learn from each other and can apply what they’ve learned to their writing with writing partnerships.

### **Setting the Stage for Success**

To implement writing partnerships in the classroom, the first month of the year should be dedicated to establishing a strong writing workshop foundation. Class norms for writing time are set and practiced with diligence. The teacher should launch the writer’s workshop with excitement to rally students for the year’s writing work. Students should feel pride in their small successes when the teacher and classmates compliment their writing and this confidence serves as a springboard for future writing risks. In these beginning stages the teacher will observe and assess writers to find their unique strengths

and weaknesses and this information will be used to guide future lessons and instruction decisions.

Using this early knowledge about individual writers, the teacher matches students with their permanent writing partners for the year. Partners are established based on what the teacher has learned about the student thus far. Partnerships where each student has different strengths are desired because the partners can provide a unique perspective to improve the writing practice of the other. The class sets partnership norms together and the students are introduced to language and vocabulary applicable for assisting a peer with writing.

After the partnerships have formed, students learn about reasons why they meet with their partner and when they should meet with their partner. Some ideas for this include having students ‘touch-base’ at the beginning and ending of independent writing time so that they can set a goal before writing and then they can report to their partner about what they accomplished. This type of short check-in will help keep writers on track and focused on their task.

Partners may also choose to talk during independent writing time. During that time students may want to meet with their partners for a variety of reasons. Students may just want to talk with a partner to find their way within the topic at hand, or to bounce ideas off others and then choose from the new wealth of ideas now available to them. (Browning & McClintic, 2005) A ‘Let’s Share’ conference is a time for partners to share their drafts and to give compliments. An ‘I’m Stuck’ conference would be where partners discuss and solve problems in their drafts. An ‘Editing, or Spelling Conference’ would take place when writers need a peer editor. (Dahl, 1986)

During this formative point in the year when partnerships have met gotten acquainted, teachers also provide a lot of modeling about the types of responding students do within partnerships to keep conversation focused on the writing and the writer. Teachers can model ‘compliment sandwiches,’ the ever-popular way to coat constructive criticism with compliments. The students can practice giving a compliment followed by a suggestion for improvement and then finished with another compliment. In a study of fifth grade students in peer conferences, Goldberg found that “the initial praise students gave to each other signaled that a reader had attended to the work and built rapport between reader and writer by recognizing strengths of an essay before identifying weaknesses. Thus the praise may have played an important social function in the peer response sessions.” (Goldberg, 1996, p. 302) Writing partners need trust so that they feel comfortable sharing their writing. By giving compliments partners know that their writing will be validated at least in a small way by the responder. Students can also remember the acronym TAG (Hsu, 2009), which stands for T—Tell what you liked, A—Ask a question, and G—Give a suggestion. These supports for peer response help keep students talking at a time where they might not know what to say. Rather than keep them silent, this practice eases students into talking about another’s writing without feeling guilty about not liking every single thing about it.

### **Deepening the Conversation**

For students to have meaningful, high level conversations about writing, teachers must provide the vocabulary students will use in future peer conferences. In a study about implementing writing partnerships in a third and fourth grade classroom in South Carolina, Kezia Myers and Josie Pough found that in the initial stages “students had no



model for how to ask questions that would prompt writers to think deeply about the expression of ideas.” (Myers & Pough, 2002) We can give the students a framework for conversation but without the right vocabulary and questioning, students’ conversations will remain at surface level, focusing only on the piece at hand rather than focusing on the writer and their choices. There are several opportunities every day for writing teachers to model constructive feedback.

In the beginning of the year, teachers can focus minilessons around peer conferring practices, introducing the kind of language used when giving suggestions and feedback. Students and the teacher then create conversation norms that extend from the general conversation framework. Word walls with writing vocabulary may help students with steering each other to strengthen their work. Further, the teacher models constructive vocabulary usage during teacher-student conferences in independent writing time and asks a lot of guiding questions to support the student’s writing. “The power of the teacher/student conference is in the model it presents for students to emulate. Through these interactions, students not only learn to trust their inquisitive spirits but they effectively become English teachers too.” (Mciver & Wolf, 1999, p.56) In these conferences students not only receive feedback from their teacher about their writing, but they also witness appropriate questioning that supports the writer. They can model their peer conferences after the interactions they had with their teacher. This puts a lot of power in what the teacher says during a student/teacher conference, so the teacher must be conscious of the types of feedback provided.

The teacher continues modeling constructive feedback during share time, using vocabulary that they wish for students to use with each other in their peer conferences.

For example, after a student shares a rough draft with the whole class the teacher can model with a compliment about something in their writing they want the student to continue doing, they can ask a question about the writing and then they can give a suggestion. Students will later do what the teacher is doing and will frame their questions in the same way the teacher does.

The teacher supports existing partnerships by participating in partner conferences occasionally throughout the year. The teacher reinforces norms set at the beginning of the year and coaches partnerships that are struggling. The teacher continues to be a guide and a model for partner talk and the kind of questions partners ask. At this point in the year the students should be deepening their conversation to focus on the writer rather than the writing. Partners base their suggestions based on their knowledge of the writer. They've seen their partner struggle or experiment with things in their writing and can use those experiences to guide their talk.

### **Extending the Work of Partnerships**

When partnerships are working cooperatively and the students have been consistently working to improve each other's writing in a meaningful way, peer response groups may be implemented. In this way students can meet with a group of peers during a set time rather than just one peer. Their conversations can include more peers' opinions and at this time of the year, with enough practice, students are ready for many opinions and to make their own writing decisions with or without those opinions. "Momentum increases when students see their writing can be reviewed by an editorial team. Response groups are another area for partners to reconnect with the larger community, and their feedback skills are stronger, thanks to the partnerships." (Hsu, 2009, p. 157) Students are

held accountable by others to reach their goals in their writing and to make changes as needed. The peers in the group help the writer with suggestions for improvements and compliments on things that were especially good. When students are equipped with both the knowledge of what makes quality writing and the language needed to support peer writers they can meet in larger groups and support each other with expertise.

### **Writing Partnerships Celebrate Their Hard Work**

The end of the year is a crucial time for writing partnerships. Students reflect on their work with their partners. Teachers can facilitate this through an end of the year celebration. Students can share their best pieces as an author's gala or can read their favorite work to younger students. The class can congratulate each other on a successful year. Partners can compliment each other on their growth from when they were first paired up. This celebration can bring a closure on the year and can drive students to continue their writing in the summer. As a member of a writing partnership a student can ask themselves the questions they would ask their partners. Family members and friends can serve as writing partners to young writers during the summer.

### **Careful Language is Key**

In writing partnerships students are encouraged to ask questions. Asking a useful question is an important skill that students learn through their conferences with each other. Students' natural inquisitive personalities serve perfectly in a writing partnership as writers need somebody to push back on their writing. I've always heard that the people in the classroom who do the most work learn the most. When teachers are the sole conferrer during independent writing time the teacher learns a lot about each writer and about writing in general. When students are the conferrers they are the ones who

learn. Partners learn and apply the strategies taught in minilessons and teacher-student conferences and they imitate their teacher's conferring behavior when they talk with each other about their writing. Writing is very social and writing partnerships embrace that.

This year I plan to implement writing partnerships, and later peer response groups, in my writing workshop instruction. My hope is that through talk students internalize more of the strategies and skills taught during writing. I know now that students know what to confer about and what to say based on teacher modeling and guided practice. My conferring will have to be a bit more careful in terms of the language I use. If I want students to use writing terminology like setting and mood and aside I should use those words in my minilessons, my think-alouds, and my conferences. I intend to make writing partnerships something that students look forward to by allowing students to meet with their partners when needed. I was initially worried about the structure of writing partnerships and how they would work within my usually-very-quiet writing workshop but I see now that with enough scaffolding and modeling of what exactly a partnership conference entails I anticipate that students will be able to meet successfully without disrupting others. I anticipate that instead of writing workshop time being exhausting for me and boring for my students, it will be stronger for me and more worthwhile for the writers.

## Reasons for a writing conference

### *“Let’s Share”*

Both partners can share their writing. Give each other compliments afterward. Ask for this type of conference if your writing needs some inspiration.

### *“I’m Stuck”*

Tell your partner your ideas so far. Your partner will help you figure out what to do next. Ask for this type of conference if you’ve got a good start but you need some ideas to continue.

### *“I Need an Editor”*

Your piece has been revised and you want to publish. Your partner can help you polish the piece by checking spelling and punctuation.

## Responding to an Author

### **T – Tell a Compliment**

“I liked how you...”

“I noticed that you...”

“The piece was strong when...”

“I was excited when...”

### **A – Ask a Question**

“Could you explain the part where...?”

“What happened when...?”

“Why did you choose to end it like that?”

### **G – Give a Suggestion**

“The beginning could be different by...”

“What if it ended like...”

“You could use your five senses to describe...”

“The character could be more real if you...”

# TAG Record Sheet

<b>T</b>	
<b>A</b>	
<b>G</b>	

Title ..... Author .....

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