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Components of Effective Writing Content Conferences in a Sixth-Grade Classroom

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ABSTRACT

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Students are now required to show proficiency in writing through performance on standardized tests. Educators and researchers are looking for ways to improve persuasive and argumentative writing created by students. The writing content conference setting gives educators and students opportunities to discuss student writing in a one-on-one format in which students receive feedback. Ideally, this helps them to create multiple drafts of writing that improve with each revision. Many practitioner guides have been created that offer suggestions as to how conferences can be conducted and what types of interactions can theoretically occur. Few, however, have examined what actually happens during writing content conferences. Two case studies were conducted in an effort to describe with greater specificity key components of effective writing content conferences in a sixth-grade classroom. Students participated in five content conferences over a period of three months. Each conference was video recorded and later transcribed. The teacher-researcher describes the structured and predictable pattern in which students identified the purpose for the conference, examined a main issue of content with their teacher, and planned for future writing and future conference settings. Important issues of ownership also emerged. Effective conferences were student-directed and taken seriously by the students. The atmosphere of the conferences was safe and conducive to students taking risks. As young writers were encouraged to use their writing as means of expression for telling the stories of their lives, they often chose to write about socially taboo and thematically mature subjects. Future research should examine how workshop formats and writing content conferences affect student achievement in argumentative and informative writing.

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And thanks to my students. Your stories are worth telling.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2008 I was living in Mozambique as a volunteer teacher at a college for future educators. There, I had the privilege of meeting a Mozambican author and poet named Mia Couto who was giving an intimate lecture for a small group of students studying Mozambican poetry. After the lecture, a student raised her hand and asked Mia Couto how he became an author. His response surprised me as he neither gave a history of his first memories with literature nor did he pay tribute to a mentor who helped him navigate the seas of rejection through which one must swim before becoming a published author. Instead, he looked at the student and said, "I've always been a writer. We all are. We all have stories to tell. The saddest people I know are those who don't know that." When I returned to my home that evening, I opened a notebook and began scribbling down ideas for stories that only I could tell.

As an educator of sixth-graders, I still find myself scribbling down ideas for stories. Sometimes they are stories I am going to write, and at other times they are suggestions I have for my students as we discuss their writing. I feel that my students are not mere regurgitators of facts and figures; rather, I feel they are creators—artists, and artists in utero—waiting to be given the opportunity to express their thoughts and desires.

I often conference one-on-one with students in the academic setting in an effort to give personalized and tailored instruction that caters to students' particular needs as writers. Students create writing that reflects their individuality and voice, but teachers can facilitate this creation by praising, offering suggestions, by questioning, and by allowing students opportunities to correct their own mistakes. Through writing content conferences, conferences in which revisions of content are key and not edits of convention, I believe educators have the potential to instill the confidence and skillset necessary to create lifelong writers.

The view that writing is a process and not merely a product is one that has become prevalent in both research and practice. Hairston (1982) claimed that while a paradigm shift occurred as the literacy community at large began to accept writing as a process in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this movement from end product to learning process began as early as 1957 when Noam Chomsky published *Syntactic Structures,* in which he examined the acquisition of language and questioned the notion that a child could be formally taught to speak or master language. Chomsky claimed that structures of syntax were intuited with relative ease by children. Language learning occurred as parents and teachers attempted to teach it and as young learners made sense of their worlds based on a predisposition to use and understand language.

As writing, reading, and language acquisition gained legitimacy as fields of study, certain of the traditional and long-accepted pedagogical practices of literacy instruction fell under scrutiny. Emig (1971) found in a case study of twelfth-graders that the composing process had been overly simplified and product based, not allowing for the nuances and inherent differences in the writing process used by actual authors. Murray (1982) published a piece entitled, "*Teach Writing as a Process Not a Product,*" in which he outlined 10 implications for teaching writing as a process. As examples of key areas of concern, he advocated student choice in writing topics, promoted fewer absolutes and arbitrary restraints in drafts and revisions, and encouraged writing in all of its forms, thereby giving equal privilege to varied genres and modes of literary creation. He also adamantly promoted student ownership of writing, or the idea that the "text of the writing course is the student's own writing", in which the "student finds his own subject," and the "student uses his own language" (p. 5).

Murray (1979) also suggested conferencing to promote literacy as a method that allowed students to develop as writers. He began conferencing with his students as he saw a need to do

more than offer suggestions by marking student writing and hoping for improved drafts. He found that constant written feedback was not only cumbersome and time consuming for educators, it was also ineffective in creating writers that understood the changes they were being asked to make. Traditional approaches in feedback required that the writer create a final draft and that the teacher responded in writing and assigned a grade. Rarely did writers have the opportunity to return to drafting on the same piece before it was assessed. In contrast, during one-on-one conferencing, writers were encouraged "to react to their own work in such a way that they write increasingly effective drafts" (p. 16). In my class, I attempt to conference with each student at least once every two weeks with the hope that my students will show steady improvement as they draft their writing in its various stages.

Content Conference

Mirroring the processes of revising in the professional fields, my sixth-graders meet with me to discuss improvements for their writing (Calkins, 1994). These conferences are held one-on-one in order to respect student individuality, specific needs, and interests, and I facilitate a conversation that should allow students to improve their own writing (Clark, 1985; Meyer & Smith, 1987). Harris (1986) stated, "The role of the of the teacher is . . . to assist in the process, to help each writer move through draft after draft of the writing and focus on his or her unique questions and problems" (p. 6).

Teachers have wanted students to become better writers as a result of the conferences they hold on a regular basis. Graham and Sandmel (2011) said, "instruction in writing through minilessons, conferences, and teachable moments should result in improved quality of writing. These teaching tools also provide mechanisms for addressing the instructional needs of individual students" (p. 397). Instruction during conferencing, however, is not to take away from

student ownership of the writing created. Teachers were to advocate for their students while respecting students' needs and desires to use their own words and give meaning to their own thoughts. White and Arndt (1991) stated that the majority of one's attentions were to be focused on content rather than convention:

> In a process approach, reading [a] student's work involves responding to the text as a *reader*, rather than simply as a *marker*. Even if, eventually, the linguistic, stylistic or formal features of the text are evaluated, the first reading should be concerned with meaning and purpose. (p. 124)

This does not imply that other aspects of writing like grammar, punctuation, word choice, and other features of convention are to be completely ignored. Rather, "Content needs to be more important than mechanics in the minds of teachers of writing" (Wilcox, 1997, p. 508).

Content Conference Problems

Problems within content conferences surface for a number of reasons. Each teacher and each student bring a different skillset to the conference. The intent of the content conference is to allow the teachers and students to participate in a dialogue that improves writers' abilities as well as their writing, but even as the relative writing expert when compared to my students, I recognize that in many ways they may be my creative superiors. As content conferences held in my classroom are dialogues between two people with varying levels of expertise, there are a number of predictable difficulties that often appear including ownership, resistance, over acceptance, negativity, and individual differences.

Ownership. Central to the tenets of the writing workshop is ownership, that students are the ultimate creators of the written text. While teachers may offer suggestions toward revision of content, students are expected to use suggestions in ways that *they* feel will improve their

writing. Freire (1987), advocating the respect teachers should maintain for their students as creators said, "The fact that he or she needs the teacher's help, as in any pedagogical situation, does not mean that the teacher's help nullifies the student's creativity and responsibility for constructing his or her own written language and reading this language" (p. 34). I attempt to allow my students opportunities to create, and I want their writing to ultimately belong to them, but I do not sit idly and allow my students to flounder. As an educator, it is my responsibility to make suggestions and facilitate discussions that can lead my students toward stronger writing.

Proponents of process writing emphasize that when a student's writing is taken over by the teacher it no longer reflects the ideals of process writing (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994). The degree to which a teacher should allow for student autonomy and a gradual release of responsibility is less clear. While student opinion must be valued for a successful content conference, there is also a presupposition that students will positively react to critique and suggestions, which may not always be the case.

The teacher's role in maintaining students' ownership of writing cannot be overemphasized. The teacher must balance influence by exhibiting teacher moves—words, gestures, suggestions, praise, written critiques, prompts, demands—that leave student ownership intact. Murray (1979) stated, "I must be responsible and not do work which belongs to my students, no matter how much fun it is. When I write it must be my own writing, not my students'" (p. 17).

Resistance. Bissex (1981) stated, "Revisions are made voluntarily. Writers do not learn from revisions made under pressure—because a teacher or reader insists" (p. 75). Writers should ideally conference to improve their writing abilities for the future, not just to improve the piece that is discussed in a conference. There are cases, however, in which students resist suggestions.

Herein lies one of the major difficulties of the content conference. To allow for student ownership, a teacher has to respect the student's opinion. Taken to an extreme, this could imply that a student should be allowed to resist all revisions including the making of multiple drafts, adding detail to develop a piece, or considering content appropriateness. Were one to allow for such freedom, he would be placing his students in situations in which they would not learn what they should about the writing process, and this may also create a lack of self-discipline and work ethic.

Over acceptance. Another difficulty within conferencing is the over acceptance of teacher suggestions. Zieglar (1981) stated that many students might try to conform in an effort to appease the teacher:

Actually, students are more likely to be too *agreeable* to suggestions than too resistant. Sometimes I look quickly at a piece of writing, under the pressure of having to deal simultaneously with up to thirty-six students, and I make a suggestion off the top of my head. The student, without considering, makes the change. (p. 96)

Over acceptance of suggestions can be potentially damaging to student writing and opinions. Such acceptance undermines the authority that students are to maintain of their writing, and it also allows students to fall into a state of complacency that permits their creative muscles to atrophy. If students accept each and every teacher suggestion without questioning, their writing, with all of its potential as well as its problems, no longer belongs to them and their learning and progress suffer.

Over emphasis on conventions. By name, the content conference suggests that teachers and students will concentrate their efforts on the content rather than mechanics and conventions of writing. DeGroff (1992) found that teachers were more likely to respond to stylistic

preferences when dealing with high-achievement writing. Conversely, in conferences with low achieving writers, teachers often focused on writing conventions and gave less attention to writing content. Murray (1979) warned about focusing on conventions prematurely. He felt that such a focus was ineffective in helping students to clarify meaning and enhance content. Opportunities for editing of conventions and mechanics typically come after writers' ideas have been organized, drafted, and revised. Low achieving writers, however, are not always given opportunities to make content revisions as revisions of convention often take precedence.

Individual differences. There are also unpredictable difficulties within the content conference due to individual differences. Difficulties are often unique to the individual classroom setting in which they surface, and unlike other problems, there are far fewer suggestions on how to approach those of an unpredictable nature. Teachers are left to find their own answers using their best judgments and instincts. Tobin (1993) stated, "I would argue there is no model or typical conference. Like writing, the writing conference is a process—not static, not a noun, not a thing, but rather active, dynamic, organic" (p. 43). Similar to the ways in which teachers must adopt and then modify styles of classroom management, teachers adapt their conferences to their specific needs. Clark (1985) described the need to have a number of strategies when conferencing because of the complexity of the issues with which one might confront:

> Each student is different and so is each writing task; what works with one may well not work with another. So you need to fish strategies out of your repertoire, perhaps trying several different ones to find one that works. (p. 139)

While fishing out strategies is undoubtedly necessary in the conference setting, looking at conferences with a lens that focused on the intricacies of the interactions between teacher and

students would provide educators with ideas with which they could improve their own conferences.

Statement of the Problem

Much has been written on the problems associated with the content conferences, and many have attempted to give suggestions in an effort to ameliorate the difficulties that teachers and students face. These suggestions for conferencing, however, not entirely unlike the teacher suggestions students receive in a content conference, have often "gone unquestioned," and "unexamined." They are "presented as such a simple part of teaching practice that the least able of us should be able to do well" (Black, 1998, p. 8). The reality is, however, that teachers are often flustered with the outcomes of content conferences and are looking for specific ways to advocate change in the content of their students' writing. We must therefore, attempt to demystify the conference and provide students and teachers with the best suggestions possible. Little research has examined problematic situations encountered and opportunities for growth created by teachers during content conferences.

Graves (1984) stated that conferences needed to be examined by practitioners in an effort to establish what the norms of conferencing and what regularly occurs in those settings:

We need to describe in detail what is contained in the writing conference with good teachers of writing. Also, teachers who are just starting to teach writing should be chosen so that their changing patterns of conferring with children can be recorded over time. We are speaking of case studies of specific teachers in a variety of settings. (p. 103)

Graves (1984) proposed such research more than three decades ago. Those who have taken up the call by reflecting upon their practice and sharing what works for them have offered suggestions based on their lived experience and the experiences of those around them. These are

useful steps, but what has not yet been examined is *why* certain practices work and *what* elements are present when they do. One may suggest that a teacher ask open-ended questions, but what remains unknown is the final effect of those questions, how they are delivered, and how they are interpreted. Many teacher moves must be analyzed within the context of the content conference in an effort to describe what is actually happening in an effective content conference.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the components of effective writing content conferences. Case studies of sixth-grade students were used to determine the effects that teacher responses, questions, and suggestions made during content conferences had on student writing and the attitudes of the writers. As the effects of teacher moves on student writing were better understood, implementation of appropriate moves and avoidance of inappropriate moves would be easier for teachers wishing to improve content conferences.

Research Question

The following question guided this study: What are the components of effective writing content conferences in a sixth-grade classroom?

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This chapter describes the types of research that influenced writing content conferences. How writing came to be viewed as a process rather than a product, and the evolution of writing instruction and research beginning in the 1970s will be examined. Also, this chapter outlines how many studies have discussed aspects of the writing content conference. Even though there has been an increase in research in writing instruction and content conferences, many questions remain unanswered. This study adds to the body of research looking at writing as a process rather than a product by describing components of effective writing content conferences in a sixth-grade classroom.

Process Writing in the 1970s

A number of writings were produced in the 1970s that examined the way written language was created (e.g., Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod & Rosen, 1975; Coles, 1974; Elbow, 1973; Emig, 1971;). Hairston (1982) claimed that in this decade a paradigm shift had taken place from the traditional product-driven instruction to a process approach. Writing was no longer thought of or taught as "a polished essay every Friday, each week a different mode" (Lain, 2007, p. 20).

Emig (1971) described what happened at the ground level within a composition class made up of twelfth-graders. Students were asked to write autobiographical sketches and to create three themes while being tape-recorded. Her study brought to light the disparity between what teachers thought they were teaching and what their students were actually doing. Using case study analysis of eight twelfth-graders, she concluded the following:

Changes need to be made in the way composition is taught in American secondary schools. A basic part of the revision is probably the training and retraining of teachers in

composition: specifically, teachers of composition should themselves write in both the reflective and extensive mode so that when they teach, they are more likely to extend a wider range of writing invitations to their students. (p. 4)

The reflexive mode referred to describes one's thoughts and feelings with the main audience being the writer himself. With the extensive, the main audience is someone other than the writer and the ability to convey a message that is clearly understood is key. While Emig maintained that her study was not a "definitive, exhaustive, nor psychometrically-sophisticated account of how all twelfth graders compose" (p. 4), it played a crucial role in writing research and is generally thought of as one of the seminal pieces in the process writing movement.

Britton et al. (1975) followed a similar path of intent and discovery, but on a much larger scale, by examining how students developed as writers over time. They too, were not concerned with the "quality of the pieces," rather, their efforts were "to consider above all the *processes* and *functions*" (p. 12). To accomplish this the team looked at 2,122 pieces of writing from 65 secondary schools. Student writing was sampled from students in the first, third, fifth, and seventh years of the British schooling system, and writing was taken from a wide range of curricular subjects, not just language arts. The researchers were attempting to categorize the types of writing that happened in schools, and they were also attempting to identify the skillset and tools employed in this writing's creation.

Findings showed that the writing produced by school aged children often had a somewhat artificial audience, or if not artificial, a very limited audience as the teacher was typically the only person involved in reviewing student writing or giving any feedback. Also, most writing was transactional with its main use being "to inform or to persuade" (Britton et al., 1975, p. 146). Personal narratives and poetic expression decreased significantly as children matured, and much

of their writing was confined to English language arts classes with very little writing required or produced for other content subject areas. They concluded that writers often do better when a defined plan is not in place and they are simply given the freedom to create. This suggested that for students "the approaches they have worked out for themselves often take precedence over careful advice—offered to them" (p. 38).

Perhaps of most significance to the process movement was the conclusion that audience was crucial in addressing student motivation and the function of written work. Britton et al. (1975) described how adequate opportunity to write for real audiences would potentially affect student writing:

> We emerge, none the less, holding on to the belief that work in school ought to equip a writer to choose his own target audience and, eventually, be able when the occasion arises, to write as someone with something to say to the world in general. And we believe many more children would develop the ability if they had more opportunities and stronger incentive (p. 192).

As research began to support the view that traditional approaches to writing were less desirable than those associated with the writing process, authors also contributed to the academic climate of the era by publishing books and essays that pushed the process movement into the mainstream. Murray (1982) created a manifesto in which he proposed "when we teach composition we are not teaching a product, we are teaching a process" (p. 14). He outlined 10 implications for teaching process, not product:

1. The text of the writing course is the student's own writing.

2. The student finds his own subject.

3. The student uses his own language.

4. The student should be allowed to create as many drafts as he needs to effectively communicate his ideas.

5. The student is encouraged to attempt any and all forms of writing.

6. Mechanics come last.

7. There must be an allotted time for writing to occur.

8. Papers are examined primarily to see what other choices the author might make.

9. Students must explore the process in their own way.

10. There are no rules, no absolutes, just alternatives.

Graves (1975) undertook a study "to explore the writing processes and related variables of a group of seven-year-old children" (pp. 227-228). Classrooms were labeled as either formal or informal environments, with the major distinction being the degree to which students were given choice in the creation of assignments. The students in four second-grade classrooms (two formal, and two informal) were observed over five months in an effort to explain the processes that students were taught and that they incorporated as they learned to write. Graves used a multi-tiered approach which divided the study into phases, beginning with a large sample size and narrowing his focus over time. Writing samples from 94 children were reviewed and coded for thematic choices, writing frequency, and the types of writing (unassigned and assigned). In the next level, 14 student writers were observed in 53 writing episodes. Students were then interviewed in an effort to show children's views of their own writing and what it meant to be a good writer. In the last phase of the research, a case study of one student was used in conjunction with all of the data collected to give an in-depth view of the writing process as it applied to young students.

Graves (1975) found that informal environments that allowed for student choice in deciding upon a topic fostered more writing than more formal environments. Also, environments that required disproportionate amounts of assigned writing with assigned topics inhibited student writing. In less formal environments where students decided what they would write, they produced more writing. Using the case study for final conclusions, Graves listed four main factors which contributed to the writing process: the environment at home as it supports or discourages the writer, the teacher, the child's development, and one's peers.

With such an outline in place, authors created their own interpretations of the process movement. Coles (1974) saw mastery of the writing process as a series of open-ended tasks or assignments that one could "work out in your own terms and for yourself what it means to see yourself as a composer of your own reality" (p. 1). Central to his invitations for learning were the ideas that the learner needed to be treated as an equal in the process and that all tasks would ultimately become reinvented tasks modified by the self-motivated student. The learner's lived experiences, feelings, thoughts, and intrinsic motivations determined the writer's success.

Elbow (1973) proposed a teacherless classroom in which the students assumed the roles of the teacher. He said, "I think teachers learn to be more *useful* when it is clearer that they are not *necessary*" (p. x). He advocated process writing as a battle of two points—"stuck points" and "breakthroughs." By barreling through the uncharted waters of not knowing where one's writing was going prior to creation, he found that the damming effects of uncertainty in writing would eventually give way to the deluge of information and insight waiting to be expressed. "First you do it badly, gradually you do it better. If you refrain from doing it badly, you will never learn to do it at all" (p. 36).

The process movement gained momentum as its proponents found it a liberating shift from past approaches. Bloom (2008) described how process writing appealed to those involved with the teaching of writing:

> There are many reasons why the process paradigm won the hearts and minds of English researchers and teachers. In contrast to the current-traditional paradigm, which it either replaced or supplemented, the process paradigm was dynamic, not static. (p. 94)

Process Writing in the 1980s

In the early 1980s, Calkins (1983) created "a tentative map of children's growth from first to fourth grade" (p. 7). To accomplish this, she observed the daily writing activities of 16 children in 7 classrooms, following first-graders through second-grade, and third-graders through fourth-grade. After observing children's writing over a period of years using case studies, a number of conclusions were reached that Calkins felt could be applied to a larger audience.

> My hope is that through closely observing one child's growth in writing, we'll learn to watch for and to respect each child's growth in writing. My hope is that by understanding the pathways one child has taken in learning to write, we may be able to discern and trust the pathways other children will take. (p. 7)

Calkins approached new territory in the field of writing research as her studies concentrated on young children and their processes of writing. Building on the view that writing was a process and not a product that influenced content conferencing with college aged students (Murray, 1979), and also that students desired the autonomy not often provided by traditional classroom settings, Calkins observed how young students benefitted from many of the same things older students did—namely, a real audience, ownership and independence, choice of topic, and conferring with teachers and peers.

Process writing and teaching won a strong fan base on the surface. The simplicity of the structure was easily accommodated by practitioners and researchers because it "seemed so clear and straightforward" (Bloom, 2008, p. 95). Process was not a series of rigid rules with specific academic outcomes. It existed as a basic framework that could be adjusted according to the needs of the teachers and writers as long as they adhered to the basic structures of prewriting, writing, and necessary revising and drafting. Loose interpretations of process allowed for autonomy within the classroom as teacher and student were given ample opportunity to create and conference. Lack of rigidity in format, however, led to a sparsity of research and a tendency for writers and authors to give their respective views and implementations of process instruction rather than quantifiable findings.

Conferencing in the 1980s and 1990s

Many authors wrote of their experiences with process writing and its suggested implementation in the classroom (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Calkins & Harwayne, 1987; Graves, 1983; Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Murray, 1985). An integral aspect of the writing process was the writing content conference, sometimes carried out in small groups (Slaughter, 2009), but most often in one-on-one settings with the teacher and student acting as equal participants in the conference (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994). Specific attention was given to the writing content conference as a central tenet of the process approach. Content conferences were to take place with students as they were cycling through the phases of drafting, and most often these conferences would not include discussions of writing conventions like punctuation or grammar. These conferences were designed to help writers find ways to look at the substance of their writing by creating a safe environment in which the teacher could listen, praise, offer suggestions, and ask questions as to how and why a writer was making the choices they were.

Lain (2007) said, "If the minilesson is the mind of the writing workshop, the conference is its heart" (p. 25).

Murray (1980) said, "In teaching the process we have to look, not at what students need to know, but what they need to experience" (p. 13). He advocated one-on-one conferencing with students so that as they experienced the various stages of the writing process they would be guided to find their own voice as "the teacher and student face the task of making meaning together" (p. 13). He also advocated creating a semi-chaotic state in which the writer was gently pressured beyond what he or she initially expected to "discover that writing is a process of discovery" (p. 15). He emphasized that within the conference independence and student ownership be maintained and that students and teachers recognize the power of the student created words.

> The writing conference will not be fully understood if it is seen just as a dialogue between teacher and student or writer and writer. The text itself plays an important role, usually an equal role, sometimes a dominant role in the conference. (p. 15)

Graves (1983) suggested conferences follow a predictable format so that students would be prepared for the ensuing dialogues, and he also proposed such predictability as it fostered necessary independence in the writer learning to trust his own voice and intuitions. Conferences were to follow a format of open-ended questions designed to help students note the progress in their writing, and each conference was to push writers to make revisions and redraft, never implying finality or perfection. He noted, "Not all problems are solved in conference. Sometimes it is important to cause problems, problems that are solved *outside of conference* or in the next draft" (p. 117).

Carnicelli (1980) found that the conference was "regularly discussed at conferences and workshops and in the professional literature, where testimonials to its effectiveness have become quite common" (p. 101). Recognizing the need for more objective sources, Carnicelli collected 1,800 student responses to conference teaching at the University of New Hampshire. Each student had either a weekly or bi-weekly conference over the course of a 15-week semester. He admitted that he did not perform statistical analysis of the responses, but by reading each response and recording "typical and recurring comments" he felt that a "clear and consistent picture" had been created (p. 101).

Canicelli (1980) concluded that conferences were effective in teaching writing for a number of reasons. All students wrote that the conferences were more useful than the classes themselves. In the conference setting, the oral responses to student writing were more effective than the traditional written responses on their papers as students were able to ask follow up questions of their professors and get immediate feedback and clarification. Also, conferences promoted self-sufficiency as students began to rehearse the possible questions and suggestions they would receive and then modify their own papers before being prompted by their professors to do so. Finally, he found that the "conference method is not only the most effective way to teach writing. It is also the most efficient" as teachers were no longer taking all of the papers home and making marks on them in a time-consuming manner (p. 110).

Walker and Elias (1987) audiotaped and transcribed 17 conferences at two universities. Participants that included both students and teachers were asked to indicate their feelings toward the conferences, whether they felt they were successful or not, and then the five highest and five lowest rated conferences were compared. They came to three major conclusions:

First, how much students talk is not a key determinant of successful writing conferences. Second, what teachers and their students talk about—the agenda—is. And, third, in successful conferences, the focus is on the student and the student's work and not on the tutor and his or her agenda. (p. 281)

Sperling (1991) observed the conferences of a ninth-grade teacher and three of his students. Conferences lasted anywhere from one to fifteen minutes in length, and they occurred regularly. Sperling collected field notes, audio-and video-taped conferences, transcribed them, analyzed student writing, and interviewed three students as well as the teacher. Sperling concluded that the role of the teacher as an authority and as an expert was essential if students were to incorporate the suggestions given them. Also, the varied nature of each student's needs required that the teacher approach the conferences in a nuanced manner with the specific adjustments for each conference. She also concluded that student writing improved as students were fostered through the process in one-on-one conferencing, but that such conferences needn't follow a strict outline or format. Teacher talk could be effective even if it was not masterfully executed or overly memorable. Sperling said, "The conversations that go unnoticed by instructors and also by the students, the fleeting exchanges to which participants may attach little importance, can carry a weight of their own" (p. 157).

Conferencing Today

Conferencing is carried out in much the same way today as it was three decades ago. Incorporating the findings of researchers more concerned with younger writers (e.g., Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983; Harste et al., 1988), process writing and writing content conferences continue as popular modes of teaching writing (Graham & Sandmel, 2011), though they are no longer as popular as they once were. Similar to the writings of the 1970s, there is

little research proving process writing's effectiveness, though many have continued to attempt to show how and why it works (e.g., Calkins, Hartman, & White, 2005; Routman, 2005; Slaughter, 2009).

Bell (2002) studied the writings and interactions of eleven undergraduates voluntarily participating with a professional tutor to see if students incorporated the tutor's suggestions given during the writing content conferences. This study resulted from his research in which tutors looked for more formal errors of convention like punctuation and usage that he found inconclusive as almost all errors of this type could be discussed and changed within the time allotted for an editing conference. Instead, the second group of conferences, while not dedicated entirely to content changes, included suggestions for content revisions that would have to take place outside of the conferences and therefore show which suggestions students decided to make in subsequent drafts of their writing.

Conferences were audiotaped and categorized as conferences that either focused on fixing a student's paper or those focused on teaching the student certain strategies and skills to improve writing. Many of these improvements focused on grammar and conventions, but there were also improvements along the macrostructure of the piece that affected the content. Bell found that college-aged students who interacted with professional tutors were very likely to incorporate the suggestions of revision. He concluded that students who voluntarily approached a conference setting made the types of changes discussed in the conference setting and that at least two thirds of these revisions required extra time outside of the conference to complete.

Nickel (2001) conducted a teacher research study investigating the possible reasons why students might resist suggestions or retreat from teacher initiated changes to their writing. She audiotaped conferences with four students who were particularly resistant to teacher suggestions

in an effort to find themes of what typically occurred in these conferences. She also kept daily field notes of her impressions. Nickel found that conferences she deemed the least effective were typically those in which she dominated the conversations. Though she was often inciting discussion, if a student was confused or less inclined to respond she would carry the conversation herself. Student confusion also occurred when the teacher could not understand the student's intentions in writing a certain piece, when students felt their stories were complete and therefore not in need of revision, when students had difficulty describing their intentions for a work in progress, or when teacher suggestions were too complicated for the young writers to apply.

Glasswell, Parr, and McNaughton (2003) observed nine teachers from New Zealand whose interactions in conferences "inadvertently turn out to be less effective than they hoped" within the workshop format (p. 292). One hundred eight video-taped conferences of students in first-grade, fifth-grade, and eighth-grade were analyzed to in order to depict the complexities of the writing content conference. Each teacher interacted with three students who were proficient and with three students who were struggling.

Teachers unintentionally worked against themselves in four ways. Conferences with low performing writers were typically longer than those with proficient writers. In this setting, however, the conferences were often less productive despite the additional time allotted as teachers were often interrupted by other young writers. During these interruptions, low performing writers often played or participated in other off-task activities rather than actually participating in the writing process. It was also found that conferences with struggling writers were interrupted more frequently and for longer amounts of time than those with proficient writers. Conferences with low performers tended to deal with errors of convention like punctuation and spelling rather than content. Finally, in conferences with low performers,

teachers often took control of the conference by speaking more and thereby undermined the importance of the student and the student's responsibilities as a writer. Over time, low performers began to expect that their writing would be fixed by the teachers and that they did not need to carefully examine their own writing as they knew their teachers would eventually do it for them.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Calkins was a veritable force in the process writing movement. Today, her research and writing continue making major contributions in the field. In 2005, Calkins, Hartman, and White began an analysis of multiple writing content conferences in an effort to produce a handbook for conferring. "We planned to transcribe lots of conferences and then to pop the transcripts into a book that would show how conferences do and do not change across yearlong curriculum" (p. 4). They were also trying to use transcriptions of conferences from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project to identify teacher moves and predictable patterns in conferencing situations. They reviewed their conferences looking for identifiable groupings and categories. Over the course of 18 months, they transcribed conferences trying to give teachers a guide for their own conferences—identifying teacher initiated moves and responses—and their attempts to do so were published as a number of transcriptions.

Calkins, Hartman, and White (2005) subdivided their writing content conferences into phases of research, decision making, teaching, and linking. Research portions of conferences were those in which a teacher was trying to identify a writers strengths, needs, and tendencies and these typically took place earlier in the year and as a child was beginning a certain piece. The decision aspects of a conference were broken into three parts of first finding what the child had done well to give a compliment, deciding what to teach the child, and then deciding how to

go about teaching it. The teaching portion of a conference included making explicit suggestions of what a child could do to improve their writing and then modeling how a child could go about doing it. The last portion of the conferencing was linking the writing content conference to the child's ongoing work. In the conferences they found to be most successful, a teacher would end the "conference by citing especially transferable things" that a student will incorporate into his or her own writing (p. 85).

Rationale for Study

Despite the fact that they are dwindling in the classrooms, process writing and writing content conferences within a workshop setting are established formats for writing instruction. Many researchers and educators have dedicated time and effort to look into the content conference in an effort to help guide instruction. This study helped to clarify the specific components of effective writing content conferences with sixth-graders.

Chapter 3: Method

The purpose of this study was to describe components of effective writing content conferences in a sixth-grade classroom. Educators and researchers have approached the content conference with suggestions and proposals for practical applications within the classroom setting, but there is still a need to for closer examination. Graves (1984) anticipated that such examination would come directly from teachers and collectively serve as a body of work from which teachers and researchers could gain insight into the specifics of process writing. Writing content conferences were video recorded and then later transcribed so that I could define the patterns of interaction that occurred between teacher and student. These video recorded conferences were collected over a three month period beginning in March 2014 so that the types of interactions and the effects of these interactions could be coded for themes and threads of similarity and dissonance that occurred across multiple content writing conference situations.

This chapter will outline the classroom context in which multiple case studies were conducted, and describe the participants and how they were selected. The design of the study, writing workshop norms, and classroom conferencing procedures will be shared along with how data were collected and analyzed.

Classroom Context

The study took place at an elementary school in Salt Lake City, Utah. The school had 556 students, of which 61% were Caucasian, 27.2% were Latino, and 1.8 % were Asian. Just under half of the students, 43.5%, received free or reduced lunch. The population of the school was composed 53.2% female and 46.8% male students, and 7.9% of the students were English Language Learners (ELL). The school had three distinct learning populations, which included the neighborhood classrooms, the identified gifted and Spanish immersion classrooms, and the

magnet program for students identified as emotionally disturbed. All of the students in this study, however, came from the neighborhood classroom setting.

The sixth-grade class in which the study was conducted had thirty-three students. Of these, two were Native American, nine were Hispanic, one was Pacific Islander, and twenty-one were Caucasian.

Participants

Students were selected from my sixth-grade classroom in which I previously taught approximately a third of these same students the year before. They were part of classroom composed of both fifth- and sixth-graders. All of the fifth-grade students from the previous year were in my classroom again, now participating in a classroom composed entirely of sixth-graders. I felt that my students were ideal candidates for a study examining content conferencing because the structure and groundwork of the writing workshop had already been established within the classroom. Having already taught 12 of my 33 students the year before, I planned for an expedited timeframe in establishing routines and expectations during the writing workshop, as many of the students were already familiar with the format.

The two student participants in this study were chosen from among those in my class. One had been in my class the previous year as a fifth-grader, and the other was in my class for the first time. Students were selected in consideration of issues of ownership, resistance, and acceptance of suggestions that surfaced during their content conferences in the months of the school year prior to beginning this study.

Teacher. I earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education six years ago and have been teaching in the same school for the past five years. I have been teaching process writing in elementary school during this time and have actively participated in the writing process. I

became familiar with process writing through professional development opportunities and other mentor teachers who advocated process writing as an effective way to encourage students to write like real authors. At the time of this study I was pursuing a master's degree with an emphasis in literacy education.

In teaching writing, I often use examples of my successes and failures during mini-lessons to show my students that I follow the same process of writing that I expect of them. When authors came to visit the school, I often had discussions afterward with my students reminding them that those writers followed a similar process of idea catching, writing, and revision that we used daily.

I also had a particular interest and familiarity with content conferencing as I was pursuing a graduate degree in teacher education that required frequent meetings with professors and faculty to discuss writing of various forms. My students seemed well suited for this study as a rapport had already been established with many of them over the course of the previous year. This relationship seemed to be helpful as we conferenced.

Students. In considering candidates for my study, I invited ten students to participate, some of whom were in my class the previous year and others who were not. Of these, five returned the parental consent and student assent forms and agreed to participate in conferences that would be video recorded and analyzed. These five students participated in five conferences each at least once every two weeks. At the end of data collection, I chose to concentrate on the conferences that I held with two of these students, as issues of ownership had surfaced that I wanted to examine more closely.

Names of both student participants are not used in this study, and in this chapter I refer to them as Student A and Student B.

Student A. Student A had been attending the same elementary school for three years, and she had frequently received high marks in core subjects. She was in my class the year before as a fifth-grader, and even then as one of the younger students in my class, she was one of the strongest writers. Her vocabulary was extensive, she read books that were written at a high school level, and her poetry was powerful. I chose her because she was very opinionated, especially when it came to her writing. When we conferenced the year before, it was often difficult to convince her that her writing needed revision because she felt it was better than that which her peers were creating after multiple revisions and conferences.

Student B. Student B approached me and asked if her conferences could be video recorded when I announced that I was going to conduct this study. Initially I thought I would use only students who had been in my class as fifth-graders, but only a third of my students had been in my class the previous year. Student B was conversationally fluent in both English and Spanish, but she still received ELL services because of her limited academic vocabulary in testing situations. She had attended three different schools in as many years, and she had transferred to my school at the beginning of the school year because of social difficulties she was having with peers. She was a willing participant who wanted to find ways to improve her writing. She, like many of my students, was learning how to conference in the writing workshop for the first time.

Design

This was a descriptive study that followed a case study design. Case study as a framework was suitable for the research question as "case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within real-life context" (Yin, 1994, p. 1).

In an effort to create an in-depth view and description of the intricacies and inner workings of the content writing conference, two students and I participated. Yin (1994) wrote that "any finding or conclusion in a case study is likely to be much more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information, following a corroboratory mode" (p. 92). To that end, I used multiple sources of data to establish accuracy of information and to deepen my understanding of the interactions that occur during the content conference. Two students were chosen to participate in the study in an effort to find themes and threads of similarity and dissonance that occurred across multiple content writing conference situations. Also, I acted as a participant in the research as my interactions with the students and the results of these interactions were described and analyzed.

Background and Procedures

Prior to formally collecting data outlining the interactions between teacher and student, it was requisite that the writing workshop was functioning and self-sustaining. The first few months of the school year were dedicated to familiarizing my new students to process writing and the workshop routines. We began by creating personal narratives in order to find our voices as storytellers and writers. We also spent the first months looking deeply into exemplar texts to find how various authors kept their readers interested by beginning with hooks, providing problems for their main characters, and delaying resolutions until the endings of their stories.

Many of my students were initially concerned with the expected or required lengths of their stories, but I reminded them that I was not going to give them a prescribed number of pages to fill. I told them they would know when their stories were finished, and as the year progressed many students who had seemed reluctant to write more than a few paragraphs in the first few weeks of school were creating pages upon pages that they wanted to convert into chapter books.

Along with my students who participated in the workshop in my classroom as fifth-graders the year before, other students had varying degrees of familiarity with process writing. However, even those familiar with the workshop format had experienced it differently than it was implemented in my classroom. Data collection therefore did not begin until the writing workshop was in place and my students were comfortable with the format as it was realized in my classroom.

Students knew it was their responsibility to be ready to write every day. At the end of many writing sessions I would take a status of the class and ask each student what he or she would be working on the next day. Also, students were expected to prepare at least one written piece that would be shared with peers monthly, but these written pieces were not always taken all the way through the writing process. Students were constantly writing, but only a portion of their written pieces ever became final drafts.

The writing workshop was typically divided into sections of learning, sharing, and doing. In my class there was often a time for sharing either at the beginning or the ending of each writing session with a few students who would read short sections of their writing in front of the class (Atwell, 1998), a time for a mini-lesson tailored to the writing needs of my students, and a time for students to actively participate in the writing process by prewriting, writing, or revising. While there were other opportunities for writing during the school day when other content areas were being taught, I allotted an hour specifically for writing instruction in the workshop format.

Content writing conferences with the teacher were examined in this study. In these conferences, the students and I met one-on-one in a place in the room specifically designated for conferencing with the teacher (Graves, 1983). Students and I were to act as equal participants, and conferences usually lasted three to ten minutes (Murray, 1985). There was often a specific

reason for meeting which might have included, but was not limited to, brainstorming together if the student felt stuck or was suffering from writer's block, looking for opportunities to add detailed descriptions to help a reader connect to the text, ensuring that the flow of a piece was intact, or checking to see if the writer had a clear purpose and direction for the writing in consideration.

The content writing conference did not follow a specific format with prescribed interactions of suggestions, questions, or listening techniques. Rather, I expected to adjust interactions as dictated by the specific needs of the student participating in the conference. Murray (1979) said, "I do not know what my students will be able to do until they write without any instruction from me" (p. 15). He, therefore, proposed that teachers allow the content and instruction to surface organically as the writers' needs steered the majority of instruction. Students were expected to come ready to conference with an objective in mind, but how the students and I reached that objective was not pre-planned or specified prior to the conference beginning.

By the time I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), students had been introduced to many different genres and types of writing. Students were creating articles for our class magazine, poetry of various types including song lyrics and spoken word riffs, fiction stories, legends and myths, how-to speeches, argumentative essays, short stories, opinion and advice columns, and myriad other types of writing. Students had grown accustomed to the amount of writing that took place on a daily basis. They had been taught and helped to teach many lessons that targeted specific writing needs of the class, and I felt they were prepared to participate in a study that looked deeply into the interactions between teacher and student during writing content conferences.

Data Sources

   The three types of data collected in this study were video recordings of the writing content conferences, field notes that I wrote at the end of the day after conferences had been held, and written transcripts of the video recorded conferences.

   Video recordings. A camera was set on a tripod in front of the students and me as we conferenced. Typically we sat side-by-side on the floor at the front of the classroom. Students were recorded during five different conferences each. Each recording was between 5 to 10 minutes in length. Video recordings were not reviewed until data collection was completed approximately three months after I began. The purpose of the video recordings was to be able to examine the various patterns of interaction that occurred in the conference setting by looking at gestures, student and teacher reactions to questions and suggestions--both verbal and nonverbal-- and other teacher and student initiated moves that surfaced during the conferences.

   Video recorded footage was transferred to a password-protected computer, and all conferences were stored in separate file folders for each student on an external hard drive until data analysis began.

   Field notes. I created a short form for field notes (see Appendix A) which was designed to describe what happened during the conference, outline goals that were made for future writing, explain the ways in which I saw student writing improving, and describe what I thought went best in the conference. Ideally I would have been able to fill out this form immediately following each conference, but time constraints did not allow for this, and I had to fill these out after school. Field notes helped me keep my thoughts organized and reminded me which topics were discussed during conferences when data analysis began three months after data collection.

Field notes were kept in a locked file cabinet, and I did not review them until I began data analysis.

Reflection field notes were also taken once open coding sessions began. Coding took weeks as I looked at the data in various ways before deciding upon a unit of analysis. In examining my field notes, I was able to keep track of the categories I was creating in describing the interactions students and I had during content conferences, and I was also able to make modifications to these categories when necessary by reviewing the categories I had previously created.

Written transcripts. Video recorded footage was viewed by two university students who transcribed the conferences into written documents. Many of the interactions occurred so quickly in the video recordings that it would have been necessary to pause the recordings every few seconds to document the all of the interactions in each one. With the written transcripts, however, I could underline phrases and make marginal notes while reviewing sections of the video recordings. Also, the written transcripts were valuable during my initial codings of the data.

Data Analysis

After conferencing on five separate occasions with both students participating in the study, I chose to look closely at the conferences that occurred in an effort to describe the patterns of interaction that occurred in the conference setting. Issues of ownership had surfaced that I felt were unique to their specific writing and conferencing styles. Many of our interactions during the writing content conference were typical of what occurred with other students in my classroom.

Initial codings of data. On the first pass with the data I watched conferences to identify a unit of analysis. Each conference typically had a brief introduction, a section in which the

student presented an issue to be discussed, a section during which I gave input pertaining to the student initiated discussion, and a wrap up section in which the students and I set goals for future conferencing.

After viewing a few of the video recorded conferences, I pondered how I was going to measure my research question which dealt with describing components of effective writing content conferences. I decided that the video recordings by themselves would be too difficult to analyze, so I turned to the transcriptions of the conferences to be able to analyze the conferences in smaller units, sometimes only a phrase or a word in length. Conferences were transcribed by two university students who had done similar transcriptions for other studies.

I then began open coding with the transcriptions of conferences with Student A. I looked at the conferences line-by-line, oftentimes even closer than that, and began the process of coding what I saw. Every time a line had a different tone from the one before, (e.g., a question, an answer to a question, a humorous aside, an interruption), I designated each interaction a specific letter. After the first pass through the data in this way, I had coded 13 different interactions, thereby having labeled interactions letters A through M. Also, after coding in this way, I copied and pasted each piece of text from one conference with Student A and placed it in its respective category to see if each line fit into the categories I had created.

During my first run through in coding I was cautious about my codes. I did not feel that my coding was necessarily indicative of what had happened in a conference. After a few days, I returned to look more deeply at my codes to see what revisions needed to be made.

On my second read through the conferences I coded for Student B using the same categories I had established in previous coding sessions. I found certain categories needed to be broken into smaller parts, and I also found others needed to be combined with different groups.

By the end of this second pass through the data, I had the added new levels of categorization so that I now had labeled 23 unique types of interactions (see Appendix B).

I felt a few of the categories were developing well, especially those that were more straightforward, but I could see that the category of I-2 Teacher Suggestion was going to have to be broken into smaller parts. Also, the A-2 sections were becoming quite complex and were not always distinguishable from each other, but I had not yet found ways to simplify them.

There were problematic sections labeled N, O, and P, as they didn't really seem to fit into any of the categories I was using. They happened infrequently, but when they did, they seemed to be appeals for help without being overly obvious, short asides that indicated lack of confidence in one's ideas, and other interactions that did not seem to fit into the categories I had created.

I realized in relying too heavily on the written transcriptions I was going to miss the nonverbal interactions such as gestures, eye contact, marginal note taking, and other interactions that had to be seen and not merely read. Also, many of my codes could easily categorize the interactions of little significance, but the types of interactions that I was really interested in like appeals for help and short asides showing a lack of confidence were being overlooked.

Unit of analysis. Frustrated with my findings after multiple coding sessions, I decided to approach the data from another direction. I felt that I was zooming in too far with a micro lens by parsing each word and phrase and trying to find meaning. I felt I was overlooking the weightier possibilities of the study and that a macro view would be more helpful in answering my research questions.

I returned to watching the conferences, now with the written transcriptions in front of me, and I decided to see what types of interactions I was overlooking by concentrating mainly on the

written transcriptions. I found that conversations were generally very fluid between teacher and student despite the fact that we made very little eye contact and were mostly looking at the written pieces the students were holding. Also, I observed that students were making marginal notes as they worked with me, that the students were prepared to conference with an issue and an objective in mind, and that there were many examples of the students maintaining ownership despite the fact that I was very involved during the conferences. These, I felt, were interactions that I should consider as I attempted to describe the effects of teacher moves in writing content conferences.

I noticed that I often initiated movement in the conference by asking questions, pointing to certain lines in the text, or by giving suggestions. My unit of analysis became the amount of time a student and I concentrated on one subject after I initiated a move. I found that most conferences began with an open-ended question asking the student to identify the purpose of the conference. All of the time the students and I spent discussing the objective of the conference was labeled *Purpose*. Then, typically, we discussed the issue and how to approach it, and this usually took up a majority of the conference time. This section in which students and I concentrated on the issue they had in mind by brainstorming, considering exemplar texts, making marginal notes, etc., was labeled *Examine the Main Issue*. At the end of the conference, students and I often made goals for future writing, restated what we had discussed or learned, and prepared for future conferences by identifying other issues we could discuss another day. I labeled this wrap up section *Conclude the Conference*.

I showed sections of the written transcripts and video recordings to a collaborating teacher, and he agreed that the three main sections were identifiable and could used in replicating the study.

Limitations

Several limitations to this study should be noted. Although my serving as both the primary investigator and the teacher is a strength of the study, it is possible that I could have positively or negatively affected the study in unexpected ways. Also, the findings are specific to the sixth-grade classroom in which they took place and specific to the students with whom I interacted. While it is possible that the interactions which occurred with these two students may be similar to interactions other teachers and students have during writing content conferences, generalizations can not be made that apply to my other students within the classroom or other students within my same school. That said, this research may inform other teachers and researchers interested in finding out the intricacies of writing content conferences. It may also validate the workshop format as a means of teaching writing to young people, and it may help others to consider conferencing one-on-one with students as a means of improving student writing.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to describe components of effective writing content conferences. In this chapter I outline the aesthetic of the conferences by describing what the conferences looked and sounded like and the established classroom routines surrounding the conferences. I also briefly report my initial findings that content writing conferences in a sixth-grade classroom followed a predictable pattern that I classified with the following labels: *Purpose, Examine the Main Issue*, and *Conclude the Conference*.

The explanations of the three sections of the conference help to give context and meaning to the greater findings of the study—the positive interactions that occur between teacher and students during effective content conferences. Issues of ownership emerged and are discussed as three subsections labeled *Student-Directed Conferences, Taking the Conferences Seriously*, and *Atmosphere of the Conferences*.

Aesthetic

Each day, three to six students would conference with me for five to ten minutes each. Conferences were held as often as students felt they were needed, but typically students requested to conference at least once every two weeks, though it was occasionally more frequent.

The writing workshop would begin with an announcement like, "Ok writers, it's time prepare to write." Once students had gathered the necessary materials such as notebooks, pencils, dictionaries, and returned to their assigned seats, I would initiate a mini-lesson that was tailored to the needs of the students observed during conferences. Mini-lessons typically lasted between 10 and 20 minutes, and often we would read short excerpts from exemplar texts, discuss difficulties in general terms that many students were having with writing, and look for imitable skills and strategies to improve writing and make it more effective.

After the mini-lesson concluded, we would practice the skills and strategies taught that day and that week. The first five minutes of this individual writing time were silent, and often I would join my students by sitting somewhere in the class with my notebook in hand and actively write without interruption. Then I would begin to walk around the room with the intention of stopping by five to six students, getting down on my knees to be next to them to give compliments, point out lines that grabbed my attention, and give brief suggestions.

Once I had briefly spoken to a few students, I would move to the front of the classroom and sit on the floor and prepare to conference. Prior to conferencing, students would write their names on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom in a numbered list. After a list had been created, I would call a student's name next to the lowest number on the board, and he or she would come join me at the front of the classroom.

We sat side-by-side on the floor most of the time, with the student holding his or her writing and a pen or a pencil to make marginal notes as we brainstormed and discussed possible revisions of content like adding details or "beefing up" certain sections. Conferences would begin as soon as the student sat down next to me, and I would typically begin with an open invitation such as "So tell me what we're going to look at today" or "Talk to me." Very little time was dedicated to discussing previous conferences, asking the students how their day was going, or really dealing with anything other than the specific content issue—typically just one— that the students felt should be discussed. This is not to say that the conferences were robotic, or overly serious, as quite often the students and I would laugh to the point of disrupting their peers who were quietly writing while we met. The conferences were, however, focused in the sense that the students and I began immediately discussing their writing as soon as they sat down.

I tried not to begin the conferences with a predetermined outcome in mind. Though I would often review anecdotal notes that had been made during or after previous conferences, I rarely told the students, "Today we're going to be talking about your introduction to your story," or, "I know why you're here today, so let's get started." The student was invited to determine the reason for the conference. I saw my role as that of the facilitator of discussion, and I expected my students to take the lead.

After determining the reason for the conference, the students and I would often read sections of their writing together, brainstorm new ideas for their stories, review strategies that might prove helpful in getting past writing road blocks, make notes in the margins of their rough drafts, indicate which lines or phrases we thought were strongest, ask clarifying questions, and make goals for future writing and future conferences.

When the topic the student chose had been discussed to his or her satisfaction, when we ran out of time, or when the student just seemed too impatient to sit any longer, the conference was over and a new student would be called to the front of the classroom, and a new conference would begin. I typically would conference with students for about 45 minutes a day, and individual conferences typically lasted between five to ten minutes.

Sections of Writing Content Conferences

After multiple codings of the data, it became apparent that it was not going to be productive to look at the data under a micro lens. In an effort to maintain meaning and bring clarity to the main interactions, the conferences were split into three sections that are first defined and then described in detail below.

The writing conferences followed a predictable pattern that I defined in three distinct sections: *Purpose, Examine the Main Issue*, and *Conclude the Conference*.

Purpose. This section began as soon as I made the open invitation to the student to describe why he or she was conferencing with me. The invitation was often made by saying, "Why are we conferencing today?" or "Talk to me." Students were expected to describe why they chose to sign up for a conference (e.g., brainstorming or adding depth to characters), and students often read short excerpts from their written pieces to give me context before any suggestions were made pertaining to the content. Purpose ended when, at a minimum, I felt I understood the purpose of the conference, and the Examine the Main Issue section began with a teacher-initiated question designed to allow the student to actively participate in the content conference.

Examine the main issue. An open-ended question, such as "What are your ideas for improving this piece?" or "Well, what do you think is missing?" would initiate this section. Examine the Issue was usually the lengthiest section. Students and I concentrated on one main idea, though we frequently approached the subject from various angles in an effort to deepen content discussions. This section ended as the student and teacher began preparing for future conferences and moved away from the subject identified in the Purpose section.

Conclude the conference. This wrap-up section began as the student and I were no longer discussing the main content issue. Typically, there was a short conversation about the student's goals for future writing or a brief discussion about which issues might be examined in future conferences. For example, it might begin with me asking, "So next time when we talk, what do you want me check up on?" Also, there was often a short wrap up of the conference. I would remind the students of what they would be working on, give a few compliments, and send them back to their desks to continue writing.

Ownership

The main purpose of this study was to describe in detail components of effective writing content conferences. After examining the video-recorded conferences and their written transcripts, I found that many of the interactions displayed specific instances in which students were taking ownership of their own writing in a setting that was conducive to student participation. Issues of ownership are described in three subsections: *Student-Directed Conferences, Taking the Conferences Seriously*, and *Atmosphere of the Conferences*.

Student-directed conferences. Conferences began with an open-ended invitation made by the teacher. Open invitations allowed students to describe why they had chosen to sign up for a conference, and in reaction to me making such an invitation, students began to describe their purposes and objectives. For example, after being asked why she had chosen to conference about a certain piece, a Student A responded, "Yeah, so it's like a murder mystery, and I got stuck, like, right here because I was wondering what she was going to say" (1st Conference, p. 1). After a few follow-up questions, student A and I began discussing possible options for the main character's dialogue. On another day, the same student came ready to brainstorm as she told me, "Well, this might sound kind of weird, but I'm having like a, let's see, a week-long brain fart. I can't write about anything" (4th Conference, p. 1).

Students would often read short sections of their writing to give me context before either asking for content suggestions or before initiating brainstorming sessions. Student A read to me on one such occasion when she was creating a choose-your-own-adventure story. After reading together, I asked, "Ok, so, at this point we've got like, we've got two choices from here and two choices from there, right? What are your tentative ideas? Like, what are you thinking?" (2nd Conference, p. 2). These types of questions, while giving the student structure and guidance, still

allowed the student to decide what happened within her story. She responded, "I was thinking I could like be on a plane and it wouldn't crash, it would just like land in the wrong country because it had to stop to get like some, whatever, you know. I don't know, like it just kept on going." The brainstorm continued and the student indicated many ideas she had for where her story should go next.

Allowing the student to direct the conference was not always the easiest way to begin. When the student was straightforward about the reason for the conference and it was made explicitly clear to me what the student's objective was, such invitations worked very well. However, there were also occasions when the same type of open-ended invitations resulted in responses that were vague or indecipherable to me. For example, I began a conference by asking Student B, "Alright, so, talk to me. What are we looking at?" (1st Conference, p. 3). In past conferences with this same student such an invitation had been met with a simple response that was easy for me to work with and the student was immediately able to discuss the issue she wished to discuss. On this occasion, however, Student B responded, "I made this story." She began to summarize what her story was about which gave me some context. It was evident that she wanted to conference because she signed up without being asked to, and it was also evident that she wanted to share her writing with me as she began to read excerpts of her story that she thought were important. It took a few minutes of reading, listening, asking follow-up questions, however, before I could correctly identify the student's purpose for the conference. It was not until I pointed to a specific line from the text and gave some positive feedback that it was finally made clear how the student was simply feeling a little self-conscious and insecure about her writing. I pointed to the line and said, "I like that. I like the part where the mom sounds like a real mom. I think that's real cool. What are you wondering about it?" (1st Conference, p. 5).

The student responded, "Like if it's good." As the conference continued, I found out that the student had received some negative feedback from a peer about her writing. She wanted to make sure that the improvements she had made to the piece were really making a positive difference.

During another conference, Student A identified that although she felt she had a solid introduction for her mystery story she was creating, she was having difficulty brainstorming details that could serve as hints for her readers. I agreed by saying, "I think there are some details that I need to know. Like, this is a killer hook and keeps me interested, but there was some sort of jump and I'm not sure, like how we can tie these two (sections) together. What do you think?" (1st Conference, p. 2). The student pondered, but after a few seconds she still hadn't verbally responded. I waited, pondering possible solutions, too, and the student finally said, "You know what would be cool?" At this point, I realized the student was ready to participate in the brainstorm and an interaction of two participating equals began. The rest of the interaction is included as it illustrates how the student and I brainstormed together while allowing the student to direct the conference:

Student A: I was thinking that they're like, wondering maybe that the guy was like her dad or something, and then maybe he like, he like didn't want her around anymore so he just decided to ax her off. And then he just pretended to be like a random hiker who came up to her and found her.

Teacher: Whoa. So, how are you going to, umm, get into the dad's backstory so that we know who he is and stuff?

Student A: Well, they're gonna investigate her family to see like why she was alone and who could have chopped her down, like if her family was in debt, they might have decided to get rid of her or something.

Teacher: Mmhmm. It could have been, could have been a money thing. Let's jot these ideas down. So you say possibly, like…

Student A: Money

Teacher: Money could have been a motive.

Student A: Murder

Teacher: Mmhmm. Um, we talked about the dad faking that he was hiking. Um, what else are we thinking there?

Student A: Hiker. Um, I was thinking that they uh, find the weapon and it was just like, here…

Teacher: The murder weapon's close by?

Student A: Yeah.

Teacher: Ok, let's jot that too.

Student A: I kind of want it to be like, a murder. Like, I want them to take the wrong suspect, like, think it was a murder for like money, from their parents, and take the wrong suspect.

Teacher: So write them, write that on the way. Wrong suspect is a cool twist—

Student A: And then I want them to research deeper into the murderer. Like, his stature and stuff.

Teacher: Mmhmm.

Student A: Um, research. And then, I wanted them to . . . I have no idea who's going to be the killer yet. It could be the dad because he's a weirdo.

Teacher: Well, let's set that up for next time then. If you're going to go with the wrong

suspect, let's be beefing up those paragraphs, and then by next time, umm, you and I can,

we can talk about these other things and which one we are going to include.

Student A: Yeah.

Teacher: Is that cool?

Student A: Mmhmm.

Teacher: Do you think you've got a direction?

Student A: Yep.

Teacher: Ok, cool.

Student A: Thanks.

Teacher: Yep. (1st Conference, pp. 2-5)

The student's ideas maintained the pacing and directionality of the conference, and when

she felt like she had achieved her objective in conferencing with me, she returned to her desk to

continue writing with the recently discussed ideas still fresh in her mind and still fresh in the

margins of her written text. The student was not left to flounder.

As the teacher, I was neither a non-participant nor a dominating presence, and the

student-directed conference functioned as the student maintained ownership of her writing by

having the ultimate say in what her story would eventually become.

Taking the conferences seriously. One aspect of ownership that was almost completely

dependent upon the students was their collective willingness to take conferences seriously.

Students showed that they acknowledged the value of the conferences by being prepared with

objectives and issues ready to discuss, by making marginal notes while working together, and by

desiring to conference and write about topics that might have been deemed taboo or thematically inappropriate for young audiences.

One instance illustrates how students were prepared and knew the purpose of the conference. Student B took her own writing and the conferencing so seriously that she wanted to dedicate an entire conference to finding a title for her story. When I asked her why we were going to be reading sections of her mystery story, she responded, "Well, I want to read it to you so you could help me on the title" (5th Conference, p. 1). I assumed there must have been other reasons for the conference, and I suggested that perhaps after quickly brainstorming a title for her story we could make a few other revisions of content. She informed me, however, that she had come to conference for no other reason and did not want to get distracted. We spent the entire conference brainstorming possible title options, and when the student felt satisfied that she had enough options, the conference ended.

Students also showed how they approached the conferences seriously by taking marginal notes during brainstorming sessions. Though I would often initiate the writing in the margins by telling the students that they might want to write all their brainstorming ideas so they would not forget them, they also initiated this type of note taking by themselves at times. As I would read over their shoulders, I could see that their notes were not usually the exact words I was using in the conference, nor were they always exactly the words they were saying, either. Instead, ownership remained with the students as they summarized phrases and ideas that felt they were going to need after they left the conference to improve their writing.

Students were writing for a real audience of their peers. At times I would be asked, "Is this good enough?" I would usually respond by asking students if they wondered whether it was

good enough for me, good enough for themselves, or good enough for another audience. Most often students would tell me they wanted their writing to be good enough for their peers.

On one occasion Student A came to conference and began reading a section of an essay she was writing about cutting, a type of self-harm with which many of my students were concerned as one of my students from the previous year had tried to commit suicide. I asked her why she was writing the essay and who her intended audience was. She explained that someone close to her had been cutting and self-medicating, and she wanted to write a letter to her in the form of a persuasive essay. The interactions that happened during this conference are included in greater detail as I feel they show how this student was prepared with an objective, how she was willing to revise in an effort to improve her writing, and how she had a real audience in mind.

Teacher: Ok, so this looks like it's gonna be a slam (type of poetry) or an essay.

Student A: I have no idea. You pick.

Teacher: You pick. You're the artist.

Student A: Ok, so this is like (the student began to read), "Ok cutter, since this is a pretty hot topic in here, I'll get to the point. What is the point? Why do you do this? I find it hard to think that hurting yourself is making anything better. Why do you think that causing yourself pain is making you feel better? It's not, it" (then she began to explain that she did not want to include a line that she crossed out as she read) "it may be a stress reliever now, but when you're 20 you're going to have a hard time finding a job if they think you're emotionally unstable. You should find out. Don't just sit there hurting yourself because your life sucks or your parents are rude. It really doesn't matter. You're ruining a perfectly good body and a perfectly good life in the process. How can

you go through the day when you know that you're hurting inside and you are also

hurting your outside?"

Teacher: Wow. Where is it all coming from? Is it recent happenings?

Student A: Yeah.

Teacher: With the craziness from some of the kiddos from last year?

Student A: Mmhmm.

Teacher: What's going down? What kind of inspired it?

Student A: Well, (another student) was writing one, and I just decided to, too.

Teacher: Ok.

Student A: Plus, there was someone in my life recently who's doing that.

Teacher: Someone close to you?

Student A: Mmhmm.

Teacher: And do you think you'll be sharing this writing with that person?

Student A: Yes.

Teacher: Yeah? Cool. Will that person be ok with hearing it?

Student A: I don't know.

Teacher: How do you think it will be accepted?

Student A: Kind of denying. Cause, there's this part right here (points to text), where I

say they don't really want help, but I'm going to (help) anyway.

Teacher: K. It's pretty cool. I think it's a very brave piece. I think, um, first of all as a

twelve year old you're just processing things so much more maturely than I ever was as a

twelve year old, and I appreciate that you write that. And, you have that real audience,

you know? What do you see? Are you going to take this through the process, like type it

up?

Student A: Yes.

Teacher: Are you going to write it in a letter? How are you going to present that to

someone?

Student A: I think, I would like to, I want to type it, but I want to handwrite it in a letter

for that person, and then I'll type it later or something else. (5th Conference, pp. 2-4)

As the classroom teacher I feared that sometimes the students would be writing what I

wanted to hear. As this student conferenced with me, however, I realized that while I was

privileged to read sections of writing with my students and was sometimes asked for help, I was

not the main audience. Students were writing for their peers about issues that were important to

them. When they asked, "Is this good enough?" they were not asking whether it was good

enough for their teacher.

Students took their writing seriously. They were prepared to conference with an

objective, they actively participated in discussions and brainstorming that led them to revise and

take marginal notes, and they wrote for an audience of their peers. Students generally remained

focused throughout the conferences, and it was rare to find conferences in which students

seemed to be merely going through the motions or seemed to be acting out of obligation, though

there was an expectation of conferencing with me at least once every two weeks.

Atmosphere of the conferences. The atmosphere of the conferences was one in which

the students and teacher both seemed comfortable with their respective roles. Students decided

the direction of the conferences and approached their writing with sincerity. They led

discussions, signed up for conferences when they felt they were most needed, and often were

able to clarify and defend their choices at various levels of the writing process. Ironically, in considering issues of student ownership in the conference setting, I also found that the teacher played an integral role in creating an atmosphere that was conducive to student participation and involvement.

Students often wondered if their work was of worth. In an effort to help them feel more comfortable sharing their writing, I would often try to point out golden lines and phrases I thought were worthy of praise before examining and discussing the issue the student had in mind for the conference. For example, Student B came to conference and initially told me she was stuck in her writing and wanted to brainstorm ideas for where her story might go next. When we began brainstorming, however, it quickly became obvious that she had many ideas for the directionality of her story already planned, and it seemed like all she really needed was an authority figure to tell her that she was on the right track. I told her, "Well, so you say you don't know (where the story might go), but you know! Like, you know where to take it. Let me repeat back to you all of the things you described" (3rd Conference, p. 3). I then proceeded to repeat to her all of the ideas she had shared with me and said, "You've got all these things ready to go. You're not stuck!" (3rd Conference, p. 4). This type of reassurance and positive praise seemed to reenergize this particular conference, and the student began to describe her ideas with greater confidence in later conferences perhaps in part as a result of such positive interactions.

At times students would get hung up on being able to describe a particular episode or choice that a main character was going to make in their stories. In such circumstances, I would often ask the students to consider what they would do in a similar situation. This often led to soul-baring confessions that might not be typical for the elementary school setting.

On one occasion, Student B was having difficulty deciding whether her main character should steal a painting and sell it for money or go about earning money by means of hard work. I asked the student, "Alright, so which one is more like what you would do in real life?" (3rd Conference, p. 2) She responded, "I would steal it." Rather than initiate a discussion about right and wrong, I asked her, "Well, how would you do it?" When she told me that she was not sure, I asked if she had ever stolen anything before. "Yeah." I asked, "What have you stolen?" The next few minutes of the conference were filled with details of a time when the student had stuffed an unpurchased calendar into her school notebook, had gotten past security without getting caught, and how she did not feel overly remorseful for her actions. This interaction is included as it shows how students were allowed to discuss topics in a setting that was safe and respectful.

Teacher: Alright, so are you stuck cause you're not sure how—

Student B: To like, to do the—if you stole the, stole the painting and stuff. I'm stuck.

Teacher: Alright, so which (choice) is more like what you would do in real life?

Student B: I would steal it.

Teacher: You would?

Student B: Yeah.

Teacher: Well, how would you do it?

Student B: I don't know.

Teacher: Well, have you ever stolen something before?

Student B: Yeah.

Teacher: What have you stolen?

Student B: I was a little girl, and I went to the Dollar (name of dollar store), and I had this

Hannah Montana folder, and I went to PetSmart, and there were these calendars, and I put

it in the folder cause I wanted to show off my Hannah Montana folder, and I got the

calendar and put it inside of the Hannah Montana folder, and then I just left with it.

Teacher: What (jokingly incredulous)?!

Student B: And the thing, it didn't beep or anything!

Teacher: Hmm. Never beeped. Alright, well, what if the thief does something similar?

(3rd Conference, p. 2)

We then went on to discuss how writing about a character who acted similarly might

produce something worth reading, or at least something to which others might relate as her

delinquent incident was probably one that other students had also experienced.

Humor also played a large role in maintaining the atmosphere of the conferences.

Though the students came ready to conference about a specific issue that they took seriously, a

playful banter often occurred between the students and me. During one conference, I suggested

to Student A that she might want to find a way to keep her ideas organized in her margins despite

the fact that she had resisted using graphic organizers in the past. I told her, "Well, I mean, you

can just jot down the words. You don't have to actually put your story in a graphic organizer if

that bothers you—if it's too much structure" (2nd Conference, p. 2). She lightheartedly replied,

"Too much structure is bad for the soul." On another occasion, she and I riffed on the idea that

brainstorming could be abbreviated as BS, and we agreed that nothing could be worse than being

stuck in a conference full of it (3rd Conference, pp. 1-2).

During another conference, Student B and I were discussing how to create believable

characters in fiction. The student had told me that she felt like something was missing, and after

reading short sections together, I thought that her characters, which happened to be hippie goats, might have been overly simplified in their emotions instead of full of flaws with which her human readership could relate. We began to brainstorm ways that the characters could reflect human emotion to create deeper connections with her readers. The following interaction was both humorous and related to the student's real-life experience, and I include it as it provides insight into the lighthearted atmosphere of the conferences.

> Teacher: Okay, let's look at that and one page before. You came up here because you thought something might be missing.
>
> Student B: Mmhmm.
>
> Teacher: Um, you've done a really good rough draft. Where do you see something where something—a reader might get lost, or where is something you think somebody might need more direction? Anything like that.
>
> Student B: I don't know.
>
> Teacher: Can I tell you—okay, let me see if I got this one. One that I thought of (pointing to text while reading) is, "He stops because he saw a humongous peace man with the longest dreads he had ever seen." Like, was it because of the dreadlocks that he stopped?
>
> Student B: Yeah.
>
> Teacher: Okay, I didn't know that. How could you describe that so that I know that he's stopping because he saw the dreads?
>
> Student B: I don't know.
>
> Teacher: Not quite sure? Okay, let's think of experiences from your life. Have your ever seen something that made you stop and stare?

Student B: Yeah.

Teacher: What? I mean, we've all done it right?

Student B: Like when I was at the pool, this guy didn't have a belly button.

Teacher: He didn't have a belly button?

Student B: No.

Teacher: What did he have?

Student B: Nothing.

Teacher: He had no belly button?

Student B: No.

Teacher: Aliens might have been his parents?

Student B: Yeah (laughing).

Teacher: Okay, perfect. Well, this is going to be really good then. So, you stopped and stared at a person who had no belly button?

Student B: Yeah.

Teacher: Now, did you try to—like did you just go up and go, "Oh my gosh!" or did you like try to keep it so that he didn't know? Like, how did you do it?

Student B: Yeah, I tried to keep it like if he didn't know.

Teacher: What did you do? Do you have to kind to like kind of glance?

Student B: Kind of like far, and I was just like, "Eww."

Teacher: Okay, so you walked away from him but still stared?

Student B: Yeah.

Teacher: Maybe the hippie goat could do the same thing. (4ᵗʰ Conference, pp. 2-4).

We continued to brainstorm for a few more minutes, and Student B continued to smile and laugh throughout the conference as we discussed ways to make her characters more emotionally engaging.

The atmosphere of the conferences was often lighthearted and playful, but it was also thoughtful and respectful. Most students seemed comfortable conferencing about their writing even when it contained mature themes, and the students were allowed to discuss issues that were important to them. The students seemed confident in the idea that the conference setting was one of safety and mutual respect, and this type of tone was maintained as the students and I discussed their writing.

Summary of Findings

The content writing conferences in my sixth-grade classroom followed a predictable pattern in which students identified an issue they wished to discuss, in which the students and I examined this issue from multiple angles and approaches, and in which the students and I made goals for future writing and conferencing.

Of greater importance, I also found that embedded within the interactions between teacher and students, there were three main issues affecting the effectiveness of writing content conferences. First, I found that while the teacher does play a key role, one of authority and relative expertise, the conferences were student-directed rather than dominated by the teacher. Second, I found that the students took the conferences seriously by coming prepared with an objective, by taking marginal notes, and by considering a real audience. Third, I found that the atmosphere of the conferences was dependent upon the student buy-in and student attitudes, and by the teacher's willingness to allow students to take risks in an environment where the students felt validated and safe.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Calkins (1985) admitted to the difficulty of identifying why process writing and writing content conferences were effective means of instruction:

> I do not have "hard data" about why some teachers succeeded in recruiting children's other selves. But I do have informed hunches. I believe, and our data suggest, that children learn to interact with their emerging texts when classroom environments and teacher-child conferences are structured in ways which help writers assume responsibility and ownership of their craft. (p. 193)

The purpose of my study was to identify the components of effective writing content conferences. Having used the workshop format for a number of years as an educator in the elementary setting, I felt that the writing projects by students in my class were authentic creations in which the students maintained ownership. I felt uncomfortable, however, working solely under informed hunches. Prior to this study, I was unable to identify *why* student writing seemed to be improving. I was not sure how students could maintain creative integrity over their writing if I was an active participant in the process. I was not fully aware of the intricacies and structural norms that guided my content conferences. In an effort to clarify this for myself and for fellow educators and researchers interested in the process of writing and writing content conferences, I sought to provide specific examples of what effective conferencing looked like. I also hoped to find specific examples in which students were able to maintain ownership of their writing.

Analysis of the data revealed that the content conferences in my classroom followed a predictable pattern. Graves (1983) suggested conferences follow a conventional format so that students would be prepared for the ensuing dialogues. Conferences held in my classroom

typically began with open-ended invitations made by the teacher. Students were prepared to discuss an issue that had to do with the content of their writing. I also found, however, although students were prepared to discuss a specific issue during the conferences, I was not always able to identify the student objective with facility. I often found it necessary to ask follow-up questions and to ask the students to read portions of their writing to give me context. Once the objective or purpose had been identified and I understood why the student had come to conference, the students and I typically spent the majority of the remainder of the conference concentrating on one issue. When the students felt that their objectives in conferencing with me had been met, we would often end the conference by making goals for future writing and future conferencing situations. Examining the conferences in my classroom allowed me to identify the structure that served as parameters: Purpose, Examine the Main Issue, and Conclude the Conference.

Beyond the structural norms of the conference, the findings of this study identified aspects of the conference that allowed students to maintain ownership of their writing. They needed an environment that was safe, academically demanding, and applicable to their real lives. Freire (1983) said, "I have always insisted that words used in organizing a literacy program come from the word universe of the people who are learning, expressing their actual language, their anxieties, fears, demands, dreams" (p. 10). The conferences in my classroom were student-directed. For this reason the students approached the conferences and their writing purposefully and seriously. They knew their writing was going to be shared with a real audience, and this served as sustainable intrinsic motivation.

Students wanted to improve their writing because they felt like their writing was actually worth improving. While I was privileged to offer opinions and suggestions to develop students'

written pieces and affect future writing, I recognized that the students typically made modifications that they thought would help their readers. Students were at times defensive of their ideas (Bissex, 1981), but I found this to be more indicative of a desire for their writing to be better understood by their audience of peers. I often found myself appealing to students and their lived experiences, and I often asked what modifications students thought they should make before I would offer suggestions. In so doing, I often found it unnecessary to give many of my suggestions, as students already had an idea how to improve their writing and knew what types of changes they wanted to make in subsequent drafts.

Conferencing with my students in a safe, predictable, and structured environment allowed my students opportunities to express their lives. At some point, the improvements in writing became secondary to the improvements in the writers. The writing content conference served as a lens through which the students and I were allowed to momentarily view and participate in each other's lives, and the degree to which the conferences were effective greatly depended upon our collective willingness to validate each other's ideas.

In an educational world that is becoming increasingly rigid with educators struggling to keep up with the demands of frequent standardized testing, I fear that the joys, successes, and advances I saw in my writers will be lost in the shuffle. Without opportunities for authentic student-sponsored expression, formulaic writing with prescribed usages of language could become the norm. Conventions may be mastered, paragraph structure may be sound, and arguments may score well on fixed rubrics, but what if what we truly lose is the writers themselves? Are we more concerned that students know how to defend an argument, or that they are arguing about something worth defending? Will we become so concerned with having students identify the differences between similes and metaphors that we no longer pay attention

to why students choose to compare themselves to budding flowers and broken syringes in the first place? The saddest people are those who do not know they have stories to tell, and who will help students to find those stories, if not their teachers? Who will make teachers' stories meaningful, if not their students? The writing content conferences held in my sixth-grade classroom provided opportunities for my students and me to discuss issues that extended far beyond the mechanics and the conventions of student writing, and student growth in the conference setting was not confined to student writing.

Future Research

The writing content conference can be an effective format for teaching students how to write like real writers. The opportunity for a teacher to conference one-on-one with students cannot and should not be disregarded, as so much of what writing can offer can be fostered in such a setting. The format is structured and can follow a predictable pattern, but there is also room for autonomy and personal interpretation for teachers and students. This study identified components of effective conferences, but it was limited in scope and scale. I interpreted two in-depth case studies in a sixth-grade classroom, but do other teachers who use a workshop format conference in a similar way? As sixth-graders, my students had mastered conventions sufficiently well to be able to often write independently, but how does autonomy and personal interpretation balance with writers of other ages? Do other teachers begin with open-ended invitations that require students to identify the purpose of the conference? Do they concentrate on one main issue throughout the conference, or are multiple issues discussed? If so, are the conferences still effective? I found that most of my students approached their writing seriously and were prepared to conference, but to what degree is that typical, and if it is not, how can

teachers foster the type of independence students need to conference as equal participants who are self-directed?

Future research needs to examine what the effects of teacher suggestions are over time. For example, if a teacher repeatedly shows students how to brainstorm and find new ideas for stories, do students eventually carry out these creative tasks on their own without needing to be reminded? Also, if a teacher asks open-ended questions in an effort to help students participate in the conferences, do the students eventually begin to answer these questions before they are ever asked? Do the students use these same types of questions when they are conferencing with other students, or do other types of interactions occur when students conference one-on-one with peers?

Perhaps of greatest interest to current educators and researchers will be examining how workshop formats and writing content conferences affect student achievement in argumentative and informative writing. Standard 5 of the Common Core State Standards (2010) states that students must show proficiency in "planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach" (p. 43). While proponents of the writing workshop have historically concentrated on personal narratives, stories, and poetry, the new challenges may be to transform writing instruction and writing content conferences so that students can find themselves and their voices as they write about informational texts or as they argue persuasively.

Writing is a process, but year-end products seem to be taking precedence. There is a dangerous possibility that the steps forward in research and practice will be lost as paradigms shift yet again. We would do well to consider whether writing can truly remain student-directed if it is created in settings that are inherently more contrived and less authentic, such as those that surround standardized testing. I found that students in my class took their writing seriously as

they created it for an audience of peers, but will student writing be taken seriously when it is written for computer programs that are limited by algorithmic confines that have yet to replicate the nuances of human interaction? Will students want to conference if they feel like format and formula are more important than content and feeling? Of greatest concern is the idea that a classroom atmosphere that is conducive to genuine improvement, improvement that includes but is not limited to writing, seems all but impossible to create if students do not feel safe and encouraged to take risks. What risks will be taken, and who will feel safe taking them, if student writing is confined to prompts and percentages that negate the power of prose and poetry?

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 Collaborative.

Appendix A

Name:
Date:

Type 1 Field Notes

1. Briefly describe what happened in today's conference?

2. What goals were made for future writing?

3. How do you see your student's writing changing?

4. Overall, what do you think went best in today's conference?

If you have any other thoughts or feelings about the conference, please write them in the space below.

Appendix B

Coding Worksheet

Category	Description	Example
A-1	Calling teacher attention	Yeah, so I got stuck right here wondering what my character was going to say.
A-2 Acknowledge	A statement acknowledging previous statements	Mmhmm.
A-2 Clarify	A statement meant to clarify other statements	So, it's kind of like that show Criminal Minds.
A-2 Justify	A statement justifying choices and actions	Example
A-2 Pondering	A statement in which the teacher or student is buying time and thinking	Hmmm.
A-2 Brainstorm	A statement that shows the teacher or student is thinking of aloud	They *could* go check for bones and stuff.
B-1 Reading	The speaker reads what is written	This part where it says, "I know you're lonely, but…"
B-2 Summarize	The speaker summarizes what is written	This is my hook, and it just gets things started.
B-3 Read Type	The speaker reads and types simultaneously	
D	Talking to the computer	C'mon. Start working.
H	Positive Praise	I love this part of your story.
G	Introduction of conference	Ok, so, talk to me. You said you're writing a story. It's a murder mystery, right?
I-1 Quick Fix	The speaker initiates a quick fix of convention	Let's put a period there.
I-2 Teacher Suggestion	The teacher sets up a question, makes a suggestion, or points the student toward a big idea	How can we tie these two ideas together for our reader?
K	Interruptions	Ok group 1, that's your warning. Ok, where were we?
L Conventions	Interactions in the wrap up section discussing convention	Make sure to look for capitals and punctuation before we meet next time, ok?
L Content	Interactions in the wrap up	K, so let's have a conference

	section discussing content	soon then. Let's see what you get written in the next couple of days.
M	Humor (teacher or student initiated)	Is this too much structure for you? Structure is bad for the soul.
N	Undefined Outlier interaction	Was this someone close to you?
O	Undefined Outlier interaction	Did you hire this out to someone else?
P	Undefined Outlier interaction	I have no idea who's going to be the killer yet.
Q	Student epiphany	You know what would be cool?
W	Writing in the margins in response to teacher suggestion	