“Talking is the fire hydrant in the front yard, and writing is the faucet upstairs—once the first is opened, it takes pressure off the second.” – Robert Frost

For many educators, implementing valuable discussion and communication within writing instruction can be cumbersome, frustrating and overwhelming. The list of circumstances that often lead to less than ideal implementation of class discussions is endless. Unmanageable class sizes, archaic furniture, limited space, unhealthy student relationships, classroom management issues, sprawling ability levels and time constraints make up just a fraction of the possible roadblocks teachers face when planning meaningful discussion opportunities. With all of the potential obstacles teachers face while incorporating discussion in writing instruction, it is often difficult to envision the actual impact oral communication has on student learning and how it can be effectively utilized within writing instruction.

To address the direct correlation between oral communication and writing, it is important to first understand the connection between discussion and learning. While considering the relationship between talking and learning, it comes as no surprise that “the readiest way of working on understanding is often through talk” (Mercer, 2008, p. 4). With this common notion validated, the question of why oral communication promotes learning should be addressed.

Educators are often accused of using effective teaching practices because they work, but never reflecting on why they work. Regardless of the validity of this accusation, there is much to be said for considering the why question when making decisions about instructional methods. In Exploring Talk in School: Inspired by the Works of Douglas Barnes, Neil Mercer (2008) explains why talking supports learning: “[T]he flexibility of speech makes it easy for us to try out new ways of arranging what we know, and easy also to change them if they seem inadequate” (p. 4). According to Mercer’s explanation of Douglas Barnes’ ideas, talking allows you to take risks with learning, and then also enables you to modify your ideas after you’ve sorted things out through conversation. This explanation of how talking reinforces the processes of learning creates a distinct pathway to the understanding of how talking can support the processes of writing. After all, the act of investigating arrangements of information and changing these arrangements as necessary is crucial to the writing process. Prewriting allows writers to generate new ideas, organize prior knowledge, and take the first “leap,” then revision encourages the writer to make changes and alterations to his or her writing after reconsidering original ideas.

The author examines learning philosophies and theory-based activities to offer insight into the effect discussion has on learning and writing.
On the journey to solidify the connections between oral communication and writing, it is impossible to ignore the idea that the function of writing is to serve as a mechanism for more systematically and permanently recording oral communications. D.R. Olson (2010) expands upon this idea of writing as an organized, accessible, permanent record of conversations and internal dialog in *From Utterance to Text* when he mentions that, “[t]he faculty of language stands at the center of our conception of mankind; speech makes us human and literacy makes us civilized” (p. 257). As Olson suggests, the relationship between speaking and writing is not only a relationship of accessibility, but it can also introduce social complexities.

Adding to the depth of this relationship investigation, further attention to the methodic relationship between speaking and writing is emphasized by the idea that socially complex situations may result when verbal language and written language are intertwined. As Olson goes on, “[i]t is therefore both interesting and important to consider what, if anything, is distinctive about written language and to consider the consequences of literacy for the bias it may impart both to our culture and to people’s psychological processes” (p. 257). Although Olson’s ideas may dig a little bit deeper than the mere relationship between talking and writing, they are important ideas none-the-less. After all, after identifying the fact that each of us learns, communicates, reads and writes within a larger social/cultural context, it only seems logical to then identify the relationship between writing and the potential bias it communicates about cultures and thinking. So, does this then mean that writing should function as a vehicle to convey cultural communications and thought processes?

Considering the implications that speaking and writing have a functional and social relationship, I find myself thinking about my experiences with my students in my classroom. So often as an English educator, I ask my students to think and write creatively. I encourage them to, “write about whatever you want!” and I rejoice in the idea of giving them the freedom to write about their own topics and experiences. After all, allowing them to reflect on and communicate about their own personal stories provides them with opportunities to engage in a dialogue with other storytellers in their broader contexts, right? When I ask my students to think and write in this way, I frequently find students frustrated about the task of coming up with their own stories. Considering the frequent struggle many students express in the early stages of writing, it is somewhat surprising how often I am able to pull amazing, rich, and detailed stories from these “idea-less” writers by igniting the storyteller within. It is truly incredible to watch students transform situations of disengagement to moments of excited vibrancy as a result of a simple request: “Tell me a story.”

The concept of storytelling is something that many people feel comfortable with. Understanding the value in storytelling has lead many educators to find ways to effectively utilize storytelling within their curriculum. One such educator, Kevin Cordi (1998), clearly discusses the benefits of storytelling in writing instruction when he mentions that, “[t]elling a story allows students to hear it aloud and therefore leads to the realization that the spoken word, especially their words, can be a wonderful tool to convey individual feelings. Writing a story helps students structure those words delicately so that voice is never forgotten” (p. 9). In essence, Cordi’s ideas that storytelling (or talking about story ideas) reduces the anxiety to write and emphasizes the power writing has as a tool to record individual voices reinforces the thought that talking is a way to develop skills, and highlight purposes for writing.

With the understanding of the relationship between oral communication and writing, it becomes time to critically consider the ways that oral communications can enrich student writing. When we reflect upon what is
expected of us as educators, it is hard to overlook the collaboration standard we infuse into our professional development. In these professional development experiences, we are often asked to formulate groups and have conversations about what we’re doing and how to make it better, but have any of us really stopped to consider the value in the actual conversation? How often do we start conversations and then “blindly” find a clear, effective path to a better truth than we had originally anticipated?

If we teach our students the importance of writing in a cyclical process, we should also be aware of the tools and materials that are used to advance through that process. Having meaningful conversations (either with a teacher, tutor, or peer) can be tremendously beneficial at any stage in the writing process. As an illustration of the ways conversation can support all stages of writing, consider the suggestion that, “Talk allows writers to bounce their ideas off an audience, which requires them to practice rhetorical skills as they adjust the ideas to the audience, and they thus develop the analytical and critical skills that are essential to drafting and revising” (McAndrew and Reigstad, 2001, p. 4). Taking these positive effects further reveals the potential that discussion has for reinforcement of other pertinent writing skills: identification of audience, modification of ideas according to audience, critical and analytical thought, and conceptualization of a writing process.

Many writers identify the key role outside feedback has in the production of clear, effective writing for a specific purpose and audience. While reflecting on the essential function of outside perspectives in the process of producing effective writing, consider the possibilities that oral communication could offer in this practice. Although the utilization of peer conferencing and peer review within the writing process is not a new thing, a focus on peer review activities that are more conversational (as opposed to systematic and written) may be slightly new. However new or old the idea is, the benefits of peer conferencing activities as a strictly verbal activity are striking.

To support this bold claim, I will initially offer a biased idea: I worked as a tutor in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Writing Center, so I have seen the perks of just talking about writing. To actually support this claim, I will briefly call attention to a driving pedagogy for Writing Centers which explains that peer tutors (or collaborators), “do not evaluate their students in any way because the tutor’s role is to help students, not to lecture at them or repeat information available from the teacher or textbook. Instead, tutors collaborate with writers in ways that facilitate the process of writers finding their own answers” (Harris, 2010). With the idea that Writing Center practices (which involve conversations between writers) help writers by encouraging these writers to discover their own writing answers, it would appear there is a compelling argument for the utilization of writing conversations to enrich student writing. In addition, the conversations that writers have about writing in these conferences go two ways. Not only does the writer in the conversation gain advantageous feedback about his or her writing, the collaborator (peer) is additionally provided with an opportunity to broaden his or her understandings of the complexities of writing by shaping appropriate writing feedback.

Armed with the inspiration these Writing Center practices provide, I set out to investigate the ways these ideas could be utilized within my classroom. I introduced my new thoughts about writing conferences to my Creative Writing class. In this class, there is a mix of juniors and seniors who have enrolled either as a means to reach their required graduation credits in English, or as a general elective. Although they were already familiar with the concept of writing conferences, they were only versed in the conferencing format that encourages a more systematic interaction. To address the differences between the more traditional style and the more organic style of writing conferences, I shared some of the
Writing Center practices that I had been exploring. Additionally, we engaged in a discussion about the ways natural conversation could affect writing (at any stage in the process). After reading about and viewing several conversation-oriented writing conferences, my students seemed ready to attempt these practices with their own writing. Although I am still observing and reflecting on the long-term impact this change has on student writing, I was immediately pleased to notice the improvement in authenticity of revision suggestions and application of ideas. Instead of focusing on a concrete list of general revision and editing items, students seemed more engaged in the process of talking about the individual writing pieces. This personalized conversation not only made the act of conferencing more engaging for students, it also seemed to prompt a more genuine process of revision. I have since eagerly replaced revision and editing checklists with suggested questions and talking points to guide student writing conferences.

In addition to considering the student community of writers and verbal communicators, it is also important to consider the dynamic that student to teacher communications have with regard to writing development and writing instruction. During my undergraduate course work, I was introduced to a variety of instructional strategies. Many of these instructional strategies focus on constructive learning, student-centered activities, grammar in context, modeling, and effective responses to student work. Now, as I recall these instruction methods in connection with my findings for this inquiry, I have a new appreciation for *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences* by Donald A. McAndrew and Thomas J. Reigstad (2001). This text offers valuable insight into the implementation of writing conferences. Theoretically, by teaching my students how to have effective conversations about writing, and by utilizing the conferencing model to have conversations with my students about their writing, I can truly enrich my instruction and assessment of writing.

As support for the advantages of teacher conferences about student writing, Jim Burke (2008) offers the idea that, “[c]onferencing allows you to individualize instruction to better meet your students where they are and to help them get where they need to be” (p. 215). This makes perfect sense—instruction becomes more beneficial to a writer because that instruction is specifically catered to the individual needs of that particular writer. Instruction can thus be more meaningful and less one-size-fits-all.

Although Burke’s claim that conferencing allows you to create specific instruction on an individual level, it could still be argued that written comments provide the same sort of individualized attention. To further strengthen the argument for verbal conferences between teachers and student writers, Barbara E. Fassler Walvoord (1986) defends that oral conferencing is more beneficial than written commentary. Walvoord identifies that written commentary “has several disadvantages. The teacher cannot be sure comments are phrased so that the student understands them. And red ink makes for chilly communication. It does not allow for dialogue…it is more time consuming and cumbersome than offering the same suggestion orally” (p. 142). This seems to outline an instructional strategy that provides more developmentally effective feedback for students in an efficient manner. Now, how can we create these opportunities within our instruction and assessment?

Although the tangible suggestions for strategies and methods to enhance writing instruction and assessment were not as prevalent as those that suggest talking activities to enhance student writing, the information that does exist is substantial. These ideas are, for the most part, divided into one of two categories: actual strategies and general suggestions.
In the book *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers in All Disciplines*, Walvoord (1986) provides a decent repertoire of tangible activities for teachers to consider. She supports her suggestions by explaining that, “If you want to relate more personally to the student, if you want to join with the student in exploring a paper’s problems, if you want to profit from your ability to say more words in five minutes than you can write, then try another system of communicating with students about their writing—tapes, for example, or individual conferences” (p. 142). Again, going back to the idea of effective teaching where both student and teacher benefit, the use of recording devices in conjunction with one-on-one time proves to be a worthy instructional consideration.

When focusing on specific examples of strategies and methods that utilize talking as a means of enriching writing instruction and assessment, consideration of valid, general suggestions are also important. In addition to providing endless insight into the art of grammar instruction in her book *Grammar to Enrich and Enhance Writing*, Constance Weaver (2008) makes an excellent suggestion about writing conferences when she mentions that although, “talking with children is engaging, energizing, and exciting,...it’s important to keep the meetings short and to the point” (p. 67). This little reminder may be simple, but its validity is tremendous. Just like an overwhelming amount of ink on student writing can be counterproductive, a lengthy and poorly mediated conversation about student writing can be just as frustrating.

Using the guidance of this research and reflection, the following serves as a comprehensive compellation of potential strategies that would effectively utilize oral communication to enhance writing instruction and assessment: tape-recorded commentary and conferences, individual conferences with students at all stages of the writing process, conferences with pairs or small groups of writers at all stages of the writing process, and teacher-student conversations about instructional content to reinforce, reteach, and expand upon student development.

Although the infusion of discussions, oral communications and general talking within the classroom may generate stress within the teaching routine, a better understanding of the direct benefit to both student and teacher definitely creates a new awareness and appreciation for its place within writing instruction. With this developed consciousness of the rationale for talking in the classroom, look for relevant and natural places to open the communications lines.

References


Let Us Talk: Oral Communication to Enrich Student Writing and Writing Instruction


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