

Creating Space for Sharing in the Writing Circle

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Jennifer, the teacher, sits on the floor of the classroom propped up against a short table in the center of the room. The soft hum of children talking fills the air. She is listening attentively to a heated discussion about the characteristics of *Pokémon*, a television series that two boys had been watching. Alex tells Eddie that it is his story and that if he wants to give his character extra powers he can because he is the author. Eddie replies, "Yeah, you're the author but Pokemon can't fly like that."

Walking past the computer station near the back of the room, Sofia, a young girl from Bosnia, is reading aloud from the Dr. Seuss book *Green Eggs and Ham*. She sees me (Frank) watching her and looks up from her reading for a moment to smile and wave. Slowly, she passes by, continuing to read aloud from the book, "That Sam, I am. That Sam, I am. I do not like that Sam, I am."

Behind me, two more boys sit at "the illustrating table." They are drawing with markers, practicing their illustrations for an upcoming picture book they are publishing. As he rummages through the plastic box of markers, José tells Billy that none of the black markers are working. Upset, he goes back to pawing through the box in order to find one black marker with some life left in it.

After about forty-five minutes, Jennifer calls out, "OK! Let's wrap it up!" Students slowly get up and start milling around in front of the writing cubbies, putting some of their papers into their cubby drawers. Other students keep their papers in their hands and walk to the front of the room, finding places on the perimeter of a rectangular piece of carpet that has been placed on the floor. After a few minutes, the children are seated and talking quietly as they wait for someone to start the next activity. Jennifer calls over to one boy standing near the wastebasket, "Chris, let's go! We are waiting for you."

Chris throws some papers into the basket as he replies, "I'm coming!" He squeezes between two boys who grumble as they make room for the newcomer.

Jennifer, looking over at the writer's sign-up sheet, says, "OK. José you're up next."

José, looking startled, replies, "That must have been from a long time ago, I don't remember signing up, I don't have anything I want to read today."

Jennifer says, "All right," and looks back at the sign up sheet, "Melissa, you're up next."

The class giggles because Melissa is already standing up holding her papers. Jennifer turns to see her and says, "Oh, I guess you are ready. Good for you." The class

laughs quietly as Melissa waits for the group to settle before she begins to speak. She smiles and looks around at the group from over the top of the wrinkled papers she holds firmly in her hand. Slowly, in a steady voice, she tells the group, "Well, this story is about dogs. I am reading this because I need more ideas."

The children are sitting quietly, looking at Melissa. They are sitting in what has come to be known as the "writer's circle." Melissa looks away from the group and back down at her paper as she begins to read her story aloud to the group.

"There are all kinds of dogs like a Chow, and a Golden Retriever and a Labrador, or a Poodle or a Sheepdog or a Chihuahua and Dalmatian...Bulldog...Pit bull...Husky. Dogs like to chew on my shoes and many objects. Dogs bury bones. Some dogs have long tails and some dogs have short tails. Puppies are cute but when they get bigger they can make a mess. Only the girl dogs have babies."

When she finishes, she stares quietly at the class and a smile slowly spreads across her face as the children begin to applaud. She looks around the circle to see if anyone has raised his or her hand. One girl has raised her hand and Melissa calls out her name, "McKenzie."

McKenzie says, "You should put in commas."

From the other side of the circle Vince yells out, "You don't know if she put in commas or not."

Jennifer gives him a stern look and he quickly stops and raises his hand, but Melissa is listening to McKenzie.

McKenzie begins again, "Jennifer told me how to put in commas last week, I can show you."

Jennifer says, "OK, wait a second." She stands up and walks over to the white board just outside the circle of children. She pulls it over so that most of the children can see it, and she tells Melissa to read her story exactly the way she wrote it. Some of the children turn around so they can see the board.

Jennifer writes what Melissa dictates to her on the white board with a blue marker. When Melissa finishes, Jennifer asks McKenzie to come up to the white board. The other students sit quietly and watch as McKenzie takes a red marker and begins to make changes to the sentence, putting in several commas and taking out some *and a's* and a few *or a's*. When she finishes making the changes to the series of words, she adds an "and a" before the name of the last dog.

Jennifer stands up and asks Melissa to read the sentence on the white board with the changes that McKenzie has made. Melissa reads it out loud and begins to nod her head, seeming to indicate that she understands and approves of the changes.

Jennifer turns to the group and says, "Can anyone tell Melissa why this sounds better?" Armand raises his hand and Jennifer calls on him.

Armand says, "It sounds better 'cause there aren't so many *ands*."

At this point, Jennifer says that Armand is right and talks about this idea with the class. She goes on to explain about how commas are used with words in a series. When she is done explaining this concept, she turns to McKenzie and tells her, "You remembered this from the time we spent working on it together. Good job." McKenzie smiles.

Melissa says, "I think I understand what to do now. I'll work it some more when we have writing tomorrow."

Jennifer says, "Great! That's all we have time for today. Line up for recess please."

The children quickly jump up and form a line at the door, grabbing playground balls and jump ropes as they file out of the room.

The purpose of the preceding vignette is to help the reader vicariously experience the classroom environment that existed in a primary, multiage classroom in an inner-city elementary school in the southwest United States. It was within this classroom context that we focused our observations and discussions on the talk and interactions that occurred during the writing circle.

Jennifer and Rebecca, both teachers in a multiage classroom setting, supported what may be described as a student-centered, whole language orientation (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991). Students were involved in choosing their writing topics (Atwell, 1998), assumed responsibility for the direction of their writing projects (Calkins, 1994), and chose stories to publish (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988). The teachers focused on a process approach to writing (Graves, 1983), and learning was viewed as a social, constructive process (Vygotsky, 1978). In these two classrooms, writing instruction was organized into a workshop approach (Atwell, 1998), allowing students to choose their writing topics and proceed through the writing process to eventually publish their pieces of writing. At the end of these writing workshop time blocks, students gathered in the writing circle to share their writing and receive feedback for their efforts.

Frank was the Title I teacher in this elementary school, where the Title I position had been reorganized to allow him to work in classrooms as a “collaborative consultant” (Jaeger, 1996, p. 622), rather than working in a pull-out model with individual students. Frank was able to spend at least an hour a day observing these writing circles. As classroom teachers, we believe that our own observations and reflections should be the basis of our decisions concerning curriculum. Because of this, we spent time collecting observations and discussing our notes in order to make decisions concerning the structure and processes of our writing circles. Questions arose about the purpose of having students share their writing in the writing circle, the effects of these oral interactions on the student’s writing, and the effects of various teacher interventions.

In this chapter we attempt to reveal some of the insights we have constructed about the nature of teacher-student interactions in the writing circle. We will focus on the oral interactions between teacher and student, and between students, realizing of course that these interactions involve more than just words to convey meaning. How things are said, one’s body language, classroom context, and mannerisms carry meaning as well as the oral transcripts. Our goal is to provide classroom teachers with an understanding of the ways in which teachers can use the oral interactions during writing circle to support individual students’ writing processes.

The Writing Circle

Theoretical Foundations

Writing circle has been referred to as *share circle*, *author's chair*, or *publisher's chair* depending on the researcher or author doing the writing. This activity has been alleged to support students' writing, foster interactions among student writers, create classroom community, allow teachers an opportunity to demonstrate writing techniques, and provide the necessary response for writers to improve their writing (Calkins, 1994). This sharing in writing circle is primarily oral in nature—a student reads his or her piece aloud and other students respond orally.

Writer's workshop was first developed as a model that mirrored the way "real" writers progressed through a piece of writing (Graves, 1983). This model was then redesigned to support teachers' structure of the writing process in the elementary writing classroom. One of the key components is the need for writers to share their writing and to receive feedback on their efforts. This sharing of student writing is done primarily through talk. It is this talk that is the foundation for supporting students' learning and sharing in the writing circle.

Assessing the Writing Circle

Due to the contextual nature of the oral interactions during a writing circle, more formalized methods of assessment, such as standardized tests, are not consistent with our needs as classroom teachers and our purposes for understanding these interactions. Because of the limitations of these standardized assessments, we looked to more authentic means of assessing students' development as writers and the oral interactions that supported this development. As classroom teachers we used observations, anecdotal records, and occasional audio recordings to gather information to inform our practice.

Realizing that we needed a practical method of assessing the growth of individual students' writing, we struggled with developing a form or checklist that would allow us to gather information and facilitate the writing circle at the same time. We have used observational (anecdotal) record-keeping as an instrument for gathering information in our classrooms since we began teaching. As children were sharing their stories during the writing circle, Rebecca and Jennifer would keep a journal available for recording their thoughts and observations. Because Frank was not required to facilitate the discussions during the writing circle, he was able to take more elaborate notes and to observe the teacher's role in the writing circle more closely. We used these journal notes and observational data as a starting point for our discussions during our teacher dialogue groups. Reflecting on the information we gathered and sharing these thoughts in our discussions helped us to organize the writing circle and make

changes that supported the interactions among students and the development of their writing.

Assertions

Teacher-student interactions can be represented and analyzed in various ways. We chose to focus on the following assertions about teacher and student talk and the social interactions that took place in the writing circle. Our assertions are grouped into two categories: first, a focus on the teacher's talk and second, a focus on the student's talk.

Teacher Focus

1. The teacher uses the oral and written interactions during the writing circle to demonstrate the craft and mechanics of writing.
2. The teacher responds to the talk during the writing circle to facilitate the discussion in the actual writing circle itself.
3. The teacher uses the interactions, primarily oral in nature, during writing circle to help children understand the procedures of the writing workshop and the steps in the writing process.

Student Focus

1. Students refer to literature and other classroom "texts" when sharing and talking about their writing.
2. Students use talk during the writing circle to create their definitions of what it means to be a writer/author.
3. Students view the writing circle as an oral reading event as well as a writing event.
4. Student talk demonstrates noticeable differences between the type of talk concerning the actual content of the story and the talk that focused on the mechanics of the story.

Assertions Expanded: Teacher Focus

Teachers use the oral and written interactions during writing circle to demonstrate craft and mechanics of writing.

This assertion is based on the premise that teaching in writing workshop is more of a response to students' efforts than an activity preplanned and directed by the teacher. Teachers observe what happens in the writing circle and based on their knowledge of the writing process they intervene to directly explain, or bring to the student's conscious awareness, a writing concept. This is done primarily through oral conversation.

Students in writing workshop work on pieces of writing at their own level, at their own pace, and on topics they choose for themselves. Because of this, the teacher needs to understand the writing process itself, and the individual student's writing abilities, in order to decide when to intervene and when to stay out of the discussion. In the following excerpt from an interview with one of the teachers in the study, the teacher discusses her use of the interactions during the writing circle to support the teaching of a specific craft of writing.

Jennifer refers to the episode described in the opening vignette in discussing how she decides to intervene in the writing circle.

Another purpose I have [for intervening] is the idea that through the writing circle, students are able to share their ideas about what sounds like proper sentence structure or grammar. "Ain't" isn't a word, you can use the phrase "went on the elevator" instead of "goed [sic] on the elevator." So in a way they become more critical of each other in "that just didn't sound right." This falls in line with basically sentence structure, rules of grammar, but yet, it's not being taught directly, where at times it is. At times when there is an opportunity for me to interject, I'll say "OK, you noticed that something doesn't sound quite right and you seem to be struggling with ways to make it sound right, here's some ideas." In our language, when we have four names in a row, instead of saying "and Chelsea and Zachary and Nick and so and so," we just use commas to separate those and so that's when it becomes an opportunity for a minilesson to teach some of the rules of the [English] language, but that really only comes out when it's needed in the writer's circle. And that's a fine line for me as a teacher to walk as to when do I interject and impose the rules of the language and when do I allow them to discover and inquire with each other about "You know I goed on the elevator doesn't sound right" and even if they don't know what word does go in there, they know "I goed" doesn't sound right.

In this excerpt, Jennifer is making conscious decisions about when to intervene and when not to intervene. She is also trying to decide which grammar elements and elements of writing craft she wants to teach or bring to conscious attention. This is an example of the teacher using the writing circle to help children understand the structures of the English language and the craft of writing. It is a deliberate intervention on her part, based on her perceived needs of the children and her understanding of written language and the writing process.

The teacher and students in Jennifer's classroom are focusing on the conventions of talk that they know from being speakers of a specific English language dialect. Students and teacher are referring to the implicitly held understandings about the syntactic nature of oral language and how it connects to our written language. They are using this form of talk to support their writing.

Another quote from the same interview helps to explain why Jennifer chose to intervene with Melissa when she did.

I chose that one [intervention or minilesson] with Melissa, because of where she is “at” in her development, she needs to know how to put commas in her stories. I might not expect someone else to understand how to use commas yet. I would expect them to have the “ands,” because that is where they are at [an individual child’s language or writing development]. But she [Melissa] has had enough exposure to commas and used commas in other places, that I felt that was something that she needed to come around to...and the other part of it was there are other children that are going through that “comma thing” right now and I thought that this would reinforce them. Sometimes, I am the one up there [in front of the group] showing them how it works on the white board, but knowing that McKenzie had just done that [worked on commas in a series of words], I thought it would be good to have one of Melissa’s peers explain that...and I wanted her [McKenzie] to verbalize it because I think it is important for the children to be able to explain themselves and to hear explanations from each other, because they are often times different or they connect in a different way to when I am speaking to them. So I just saw that as an opportunity to bring her in, but I chose to stop there because I knew that Melissa needed to be moving on to that [referring to commas in her writing] and there were enough others right now that have been “toying” with commas and I thought that was a good thing to go with.

Jennifer explains that interventions were done in the context of the writing circle and were a calculated response to the writing of the students. The classroom teacher has different expectations for each child and makes decisions about when to directly teach an aspect of writing and when not to intervene. The question is not about direct or indirect instruction, but about when to “directly” teach and when to let children come to the ideas on their own. These decisions are based on the teacher’s knowledge of the children in her class and her knowledge of the writing process.

The interventions in this study were primarily oral in nature and became a specific type of talk that the teachers used to promote writing and understanding of language conventions. This type of talk did not ordinarily take place in other settings during the day, but was primarily focused on the connections between written language and oral language conventions. The teachers used these opportunities to demonstrate to the whole group concepts or conventions that they chose to introduce. This type of teacher intervention was a response to a perceived need that the teachers identified and then acted on.

The teacher responds to the talk during the writing circle to facilitate the discussion in the actual writing circle itself.

This assertion originally came to our attention because of the continued use of the phrases, “I expect...” and “You know it is your responsibility to...” in interviews and field observations. It became quite clear that there were certain expectations for social interactions, for classroom behavior, and for the procedures used during the writing workshop—and during the writing circle in

particular—that the teachers in this study communicated to their students. These expectations were conveyed primarily through teacher talk and became another type of discourse that the teacher drew from to support student writing and classroom interactions. These expectations developed over the course of the year and the teachers seemed to be the principal enforcers of these expectations. The writing circle was the primary context for communicating these expectations.

For example, Jennifer and Rebecca expected their students to sit and listen to the speaker during the writing circle. In order to facilitate this expectation, the teachers would often intervene and explain what they felt the appropriate behavior should be during writing circle. These expectations were usually discussed in the context in which they appeared and were clearly and directly articulated to the students.

The teacher uses the interactions, primarily oral in nature, during writing circle to help children understand the procedures of the writing workshop and the steps in the writing process.

This assertion became apparent because of the constant referrals to what students were expected to do next after they shared their stories. On many occasions the teachers asked the students what they planned to do next with their piece, and advised them to go back later in the day, or the next day, and work on their piece of writing. Instead of explaining to each child individually what he or she needed to do next, these teachers would often use the context of the writing circle to intervene and explain what was expected. The teachers often called on individual students in the group to help explain to the other students what they should do next.

The following transcript from one of the writing circle discussions illustrates an interaction between the group and one individual student. In this transcript the student is not prepared as the group and the teacher expect. What ensues is an interesting example of the high level of expectations in this classroom.

Teacher (Jennifer): Billy isn't here today (reading from the writing circle sign-up list) so....Christopher, you're next.

Christopher: I lost mine.

Shane (to Christopher): Then what did you sign up for then?

Jennifer: Please raise your hand if you have something you want to say. (The group was starting to all talk at once to Christopher.)

Shane: I can see a lot of writing in your cubby....I see it! What is that?

Christopher stands and does not answer and looks down at his shoes. He seems reticent to look at anyone.

Jennifer (to Christopher and the group): Christopher, Shane is asking you a question.

Christopher pauses a long time and stares at the wall. It seems like he is trying to avoid Shane's question.

Shane: I am expecting an answer.

Jennifer: Christopher, answer him! Yes or no? Is that your story in your cubby?

Christopher (after a long pause): That's my old story. I lost my rewrite.

Five people raise their hands at the same time. Christopher calls on Vince.

Vince (to Christopher): Read your old story.

Christopher stands and shakes his head back and forth to indicate "no."

Jennifer (to Christopher): You may not shake your head at me. I am talking to you in words. Do you understand me? (Christopher nods.) Yes? OK, then answer me.

Christopher reluctantly pulls out the old story from his cubby and slowly unrolls it. Vince and Christopher talk back and forth.

Jennifer (to the group): Does anyone know what is happening here? (She calls on Amber who has raised her hand.)

Amber (to Christopher): He (Shane) wants you to go check the paper that McKenzie threw away in the trash and see if it has the same title (as the one Christopher is looking for).

At this point, Jennifer demands that Christopher stand up and call on people by name to tell him why they have a problem with his doing nothing in writing circle.

Christopher had obviously done no writing that day. Students have high expectations for the writer to be prepared and for the writing itself, but Jennifer has expectations that seem to be unique for each individual student. How she talks and what she expects from each child is different. There was a challenging tone to writing circle that day and for Christopher the activity was not much fun.

Afterward, the students had a discussion about their feelings and why they were upset with Christopher. They said that they gave him a lot of ideas the day before, and that he did not use any of them (ideas about how to fix the fact that he lost his paper). All the comments they made seemed to indicate that they were upset with him for wasting their time in writing circle.

At times there is a demanding nature to writing circle. The language used and the tone of voice can be quite challenging. I (Frank) remember being con-

cerned in my own room about making the author's chair so much of a "hot seat" that students do not want to sign up for it. The writing circle is intended to support writers in their writing. It seems that we walk a fine line between supporting students and challenging them.

Assertions Expanded: Student Focus

Students refer to literature and other classroom "texts" when sharing and talking about their writing.

This assertion became apparent from looking at the topics, structures, and titles of student writing and the talk that ensued around these pieces. There were striking similarities between formally published pieces—children's picture books, for example—and the students' own writing. Students borrowed ideas constantly and used the texts that were made available to them to support their writing. This concept has been called "intertextuality," and refers to the idea that all texts are understood or interpreted in relation to other experienced texts (Barthes, 1979).

During the writing circle, we noticed that when children were asked where they got their ideas for their stories, they often referred to the authors of the books that were read aloud and discussed in class. Not only were the topics similar, but the language and structure in these stories showed remarkable similarities. For example, students would often begin their stories with the opening, "Once Upon a Time..." or include specific characters like Rainbow Fish, Big Al, and Winnie the Pooh.

The following excerpt illustrates the talk that took place concerning one student's piece of writing. Tiffany, a 7-year-old girl in Rebecca's classroom, had signed up to read her piece of writing titled *The Very Small Lamb*. This was a story about a little lamb that was constantly being pushed around by the flock because of her size. Every time this happened the mother lamb would tell her that she loved her no matter her size. It had a section of the text that was repeated throughout the piece, "No matter how small you are, I'll still love you." The vignette illustrates the student's knowledge of one of the authors discussed in our classroom that she uses to support her style of writing and choice of language.

Tiffany finishes reading her story in the writing circle. Jessica, another student, asks her what it is that she needs help with today. Tiffany tells the students that she wants some help to add more ideas to her story and that she also wants ideas for an ending. Tiffany then calls on children to listen to their comments.

Emma describes the picture that Tiffany's writing creates in her head. She explains that she loses her picture because Tiffany has not finished the story. She suggests that Tiffany take more time and finish telling the class what happened to the lamb. Tiffany's response is short and to the point as she states, "He walked for awhile and then they went home. That's all I'll tell you for now."

Rebecca interjects and asks Emma to explain what gives her the “picture in her head.” Emma explains that it is the words that make her think about the green grass and the hot sun, and she felt sorry for the lamb. Tiffany smiles and nods in agreement. Rebecca turns to Tiffany and asks her how she chose the words to “paint such a picture.”

Tiffany explains, “First, I thought of the title. Then I thought of something really nice, and then just thought of nice words.”

Rebecca asks what she was thinking about when she was writing these words. She replies, “I was thinking of *Time for Bed* and *Koala Lou*. The repeating parts are from *Koala Lou* and the little lamb part is from *Time for Bed*.”

Another child speaks out saying, “It is kind of like *Koala Lou* because of the ‘No matter how small you are, I still love you’” [part].

During the weeks preceding this discussion in the writing circle, the class had been doing an author study on the writings of Mem Fox. The children had been involved in choosing the stories to read and developed an admiration for her stories. The children began to attend to specific components of her stories, like the repetition in *Koala Lou* and the illustrations in *Time for Bed*. Different children in the classroom, Tiffany in particular, used various author’s styles to support their writing. Tiffany drew from the writings of Mem Fox to support her story, borrowing specific structures and language from the author. This is an example of intertextuality.

The children were exposed to a wide variety of genres throughout the year, and became aware of different elements of each genre. Through class discussions and the creation of charts that listed components of a specific genre, the children were able to identify various types of stories when they were read and discussed. They were able to incorporate these specific elements into their writing. The following dialogue is an example of how the children used their knowledge of genres to incorporate specific elements of writing into their stories.

Emma was writing a story about a prince and princess. Her story began with “Once upon a time....” After reading her piece to the class, the following discussion took place:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| Rosa: | Your story sounded like a fairy tale. |
| Pete: | No because she needs magic and a bad guy. Fairy tales always have magic and bad guys. How about a dragon? |
| Emma: | I think it should be a person. |
| Devon: | Add the prince “fought” the bad guys. |
| Vern: | Put “the bad guys fight the evil.” |
| Emma: | I’ll add that. |
| Lydia: | The prince can get hurt. |

- Emma: He doesn't have to get hurt.
- Manuel: You could put "somebody was trying to get the princess."
- Devon: The bad guys were all dead. The prince was mad 'cause he didn't have anybody to fight.
- Emma: That doesn't happen.
- Tiffany: In a fairy tale there has to be a happy ending. You could put "the prince saves the princess from the bad guys or the dragon." Whatever.
- Manuel: What is the King and Queen's name?
- Emma: It doesn't matter. But maybe I'll add that.
- Ed: The princess should be called Emma and the prince called Larry.
- (Laughter breaks out. Larry is another child in the class.)
- Emma: OK. I like that.
- Devon: Are you going to add an ending?
- Emma: When I get there.
- Kent: It has to have an ending. All stories have an ending and it should be happy. Most fairy tales have happy endings. If you are writing a fairy tale you have to have a happy ending.
- Pete: Could the dragon scorch the princess?
- Emma: No. I won't put that. Besides, there is no dragon. It's an evil person.
- Manuel: There could be some magic powder.
- Emma: I'll think about that.
- Teacher (Rebecca): What is your plan? Are you going to use some of these ideas?
- Emma: My mouth is zipped. It's a secret. You have to wait until I publish.

Not only did students refer to specific pieces of literature, but their talk also focused on the specific elements of particular genres. Fairy tales were a genre that had been discussed at length and "charts" were created to contain ideas as they evolved over the course of the discussions. It became obvious that the literature being read in the class had an influence on the students' writing. The structures and style of the writing of various authors supported the efforts of students throughout the writing process.

Students use talk during the writing circle to create their definitions of what it means to be a writer/author.

The talk in writing circle often focused on children describing their perspective about being a writer. The definition of a writer was not given to the students by the teacher, rather it was constructed over the course of the year through the children's talk. Even though there were common threads that ran through the various definitions each child created, each child also had an individual perspective about authorship. It was talk—the actual student discourse—that played a prominent role in developing the student's sense of being a writer.

The first month of school seems to be the appropriate time to talk about "What is a writer?" and "What does a writer do?" However, these questions continue to be revisited throughout the children's journey of creating and sharing stories. Children come to the writing circle with a novice understanding of what it means to be a writer and this understanding becomes more sophisticated as the year progresses. Through the talk during the writer's circle, the students re-defined their understandings of what it means to be a writer and what writers do. The following transcript is used to illustrate this assertion.

- Katy (stands up): I need more ideas. (It is Katy's turn today to read her story aloud to the class. She begins by calling on students with their hands raised for comments and ideas.)
- Jed: There's a lot of details! [referring to her story]
- Katy: What are details?
- Jed: They tell a lot and make you a good person.
- Teacher (Jennifer) (interrupting): A good person or a good writer?
- Jed: A good writer.
- Teacher: So what does it [a good writer] look like?
- Jed: They write good because... (pauses) it's like if somebody... (wrinkles forehead and stops).
- Teacher: How do you learn to write?
- Class (in unison): By a teacher.
- Jed: By someone who's already written.
- Zane: By your mind. Like your brain's figuring it out, you can look at the alphabet to figure out the letter of the sound.
- Shane: What if you're writing a word and you don't know what comes next?
- Rachel: Maybe you can...

- Shane: You can learn it out of a book.
- Jed: Like Shakespeare!
- Shane: Well I was thinking about the book Jennifer (teacher) read yesterday, *Amber on the Mountain*.
- Jed: But that one had a lot of experienced writers. Young writers have to think more than old writers because they've [old writers] done it so long.
- Shane: They're professionals.
- Teacher: So how do you get to be a professional writer?
- Jed: You have to practice and practice and practice.
- Shane: Until you know every letter in every word or copy it out of a book.
- Tony: Or by just sounding it out.
- Teacher: Do we always know every word or copy it?
- Shane: No, I was just thinking of...you know the blue book we use? (points to large blue dictionary on the library bookshelves)
- Rachel: The dictionary?
- Shane: Yeah.

The discussion then faded and Jennifer asked, "Would it help us when we get stuck if we had a chart of What a Writer Does?" The class agreed that they should write their ideas and display the chart on the classroom wall. The following items were listed on the chart that day:

What a Writer Does

- Sounds out words
- Uses the alphabet
- Uses the dictionary
- Asks friends
- Uses other books/stories
- Uses the library and student "research"
- Gets ideas from things you know a lot about

As shown in this example, there were many times when the student talk would take a direction other than the one intended by the student author. It was during these "detours" that the group was able to share its opinions and ideas from personal or shared experiences of what a writer does. In this sense, talk

was used to share and develop understanding about the nature of writing and being a writer. Jennifer noticed that the students often focused on an element of writing; in this example it was Jed's idea of detail that led the class to a deeper discussion of writing. Although the teacher interjected and posed the question "What does a good writer look like," the students were in charge of constructing their definition through talk. At the beginning of the year, the children were prepared with a commonly heard answer concerning how you learn to write. They would answer, "A teacher." Through these discussions students came to realize that not only did teachers support students as writers, but the students themselves supported and affected each other's definition of what it means to be a writer. As the year progressed, the children referred to themselves more as writers, however, references to "becoming a writer" or "professional writer" continued to come up in their discussions.

Students viewed the writing circle as an oral reading event as well as a writing event.

Our focus on the writing circle as primarily a writing event shifted during the interviews conducted with our students. The students referred again and again to their concerns about reading their writing pieces aloud. They discussed their preparations for their upcoming turn in the writing circle when they would get to read their pieces of writing aloud. Although we focused on the writing circle as primarily a writing event, the children also viewed the writing circle as an oral reading event, often preparing at length for their presentations. Students would gather together to offer each other advice about reading aloud and give each other suggestions during the actual reading. It became obvious that reading their stories aloud with confidence and fluency was an important expectation of the group during the writing circle.

In order to get a better understanding of what the children perceived as the function of the writing circle, we held a discussion during one particular writing circle in which Frank asked Jennifer's class questions about their role in the writing circle.

Frank began with the question, "Why do you sign up for writing circle?" The responses varied from issues about the specific content of the piece of writing to the procedures of the writing process. Though the interview contained responses that referred to other items, the following refer to the assertion that the writing circle is also a reading "event." One student replied, "It [reading to the class] helps you to read your story better, keep on reading," while another said, "Everyone helps you to learn to read and write."

Another question Frank asked was, "What does it feel like when you are the writer who is sharing?" One child responded, "I get nervous when I read," and another said, "Nervous, there are a lot of people when you are reading, they are watching you." Still another replied, "Nervous, when people can't hear me

and they tell me to speak louder." We found that many of the responses related to the reading aloud of the piece, not the piece of writing being shared.

This interview revealed a perspective that we had not focused on, namely, the writing circle as an oral reading event. The focus of our project had been the student talk about writing during the writer's circle, but this interview along with student comments made during the daily classroom discussions such as, "You need to practice reading before you come to the circle again" or "You need to use a playground voice when you read so we can understand what you are saying," broadened our understanding of the student's perspective concerning the writing circle.

Students were expected to read fluently if they were sharing their stories during the writing circle. The class seemed almost unwilling to help with the piece of writing if the author could not read it well enough to be understood. Some students would spend an entire week practicing reading their story in order to prepare for sharing during the writer's circle. These observations forced us to consider the implications of the writing circle being an oral performance as much as a writing event.

Student talk demonstrates noticeable differences between the type of talk concerning the actual content of the story, and the talk that focused on the mechanics of the story.

During the writing circle, the talk concerning a child's piece of writing would usually focus on either the content of the story or the how the story was written. In the beginning of the year, students would often ask for ideas about what else to include in their stories. As the year progressed, the focus of the talk shifted from the content of the story to the mechanics of the story, when students perceived a discrepancy between what the child wanted to say and how it was written or told. The discussions shifted between the content and the mechanics depending on the person sharing the piece of writing, the writer's level of expertise, and the group's expectations for that writer.

The following example illustrates how the grammatical errors in a piece of writing kept the students from being able to focus on the content of the story during the discussion in the writing circle. The discussion never got to what Larry asked from the group because students were focused on the grammatical inconsistencies apparent to them in his piece of writing.

Larry read a story titled *Our Class*, about what people in the classroom do when they are at school. Before Larry read the story, one student asked, "What are we listening for?" We continue with the transcript at the point where Larry is answering that student's question.

Larry (responding to the student's question): An ending. (Larry reads his story.)

Jack: What are you reading?

- Larry: *Our School*. I need an ending!
- Tiffany: How about "School is where I like to be."
- Larry: That's closer.
- Ed: "I like school."
- Larry: (nods and smiles)
- Kent: You said....Read that first part again.
- Larry (rereads from his story): "Kyle go to lunch."
- Kent: That doesn't sound right. It should be "He GOES to lunch, not he GO." It's the same for "Mrs. Willey GOES to lunch."
- Larry: I get it.
- Manuel: When you said, "Manuel go to the playground" it doesn't make sense.
- Emma: It should be "Manuel GOES to the playground."
- Larry: OK. I'll fix it!
- Teacher (Rebecca): It sounds like you need to fix some things before we can help you with your ending. Let's talk about something for a moment. (Larry sits down, somewhat frustrated.)

Larry grew frustrated with the discussion after he realized his mistake concerning verb usage. As obvious from the transcript, he never received the help he asked for. The class could not help with his ending because they were hung up on the grammatical inconsistencies in his piece of writing. Rebecca allowed the discussion to proceed hoping that it would provide an opportunity to demonstrate the proper grammatical structure for his piece.

Following the discussion during the writing circle mentioned above, Rebecca took the opportunity to teach a minilesson to the entire class about the use of verbs in a story. She also discussed how to make a story sound like it happened in the past, present, or future by changing verb tense. This was not a planned lesson. It came about as a response to the interactions that occurred in the writing circle.

Final Thoughts

The writing circle offers both students and teachers the opportunity to interact with each other about their writing, support each other as writers, and receive feedback for their efforts. The writing circle is also an opportunity for teachers to listen to the voices of the student writers in their class, and use the

information gained through listening and careful observations to teach the elements and craft of writing, procedures for the writing workshop, and how to successfully interact within the writing circle itself. The teaching that occurs in the writing circle occurs in an authentic social context that is supported by the interactions between students and teachers.

Though students did not refer to "talk" using that term, talk became synonymous with sharing. For the students, talking became the primary vehicle for sharing and responding to a classmate's writing. Talk was the medium of teaching and learning, and it changed as the context and the participants changed.

Just as reading and writing are now seen by us as inseparable, talking is the third component involved in this interaction. Reading and writing are not silent events. Talk is the medium we use to share our ideas, concerns, and expectations about our development as literate human beings.

We (the teachers) became better listeners as we focused on the interactions during our writing circle. We also came to know our children better and felt more confident in our abilities to support their writing. We worked hard to create a safe and supportive environment where children could grow as writers, yet we still maintained high expectations for our students, challenging them at times to try harder and accept more responsibility for their learning.

We realized our original perspective and purposes for the writing circle had changed. We came to understand that the children needed to be intimately involved in the decisions made about the writing workshop, as we created space for their talk and their writing. The students in our classes held high expectations for themselves as writers, and these expectations were shared in the writing circle. We came to understand that there is more to these interactions than the sharing of pieces of writing. Students shared their lives, their experiences, and their understandings while they created a vision of what it means to be a writer.

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